

New Year Message 2015

The importance of the arts in contemporary culture

Happy New Year to you all!

As we look forward to the coming year, what may God be saying to us as musicians and artists and is there a role we can play to help the people we meet to discover more about faith?

God is bringing about a resurgence of the arts today in parts of the Christian community – but what does this mean and how can it impact our culture today?

The old ways don't work any more



Sharing faith in 2015 is very different to what it was even 30-40 years ago. Methods that worked well in the past (especially words-based evangelism) aren't having anything like the impact they had in years past. When Billy Graham came to Britain several years ago, he frequently declared 'the Bible says...' and that brought great authority to what he shared and many came to faith. If those words are used now, the majority of non-believers will say 'so what?' and dismiss the message behind that declaration.

It is very interesting to read the comments people make when anything about faith appears on the internet. These comments show that many see religion as 'fairy stories from a less enlightened age' or even as the reason behind all of the world's problems. Many now completely reject faith and lump all religions together as a problem rather than having anything useful to say. There is a very militant and vociferous secularist agenda holding sway. It is not uncommon to hear people expressing the view that faith should barely be tolerated - some going as far as saying it should be eliminated altogether!

Songs without Words

So how do we 'speak' to such a strongly faith-rejecting society?

I believe that we need to capture people's hearts with the presence of God in a way that they can't deny. The arts are perfect for this. They have the power, if anointed by God's Spirit, to get under the radar of people's preconceived ideas of church and their prejudice against anything to do with religion. The church needs to see that the arts are at the

forefront of how God wants to reach out into the world today. Words are important, but shouldn't usually be the prime way of sharing faith – at least initially.

Here's a well-known quote attributed to St Francis of Assisi:

Preach the gospel, and if necessary, use words.

The quote may not actually be from St Francis - but it makes a very good point!

Creativity first!



God revealed Himself as a creator even before He revealed Himself as a God of love, healing, forgiveness etc. Just look again at the story Genesis 1 & 2.

The first person God filled with His Spirit was an artisan, Bezalel (see Exodus 31). At least a third of the Bible uses creative ways of communicating: prophecy, music, art, poetry - much more than prose! Even Jesus didn't use plain speech a lot of the time, but used parables. The evangelical church has tended to try to appeal mainly to the mind - God has many other ways of communicating than reason alone and the Bible is full of examples of this.

How far we have fallen

The church used to lead the world in terms of the arts. Almost all great art - painting, music etc., came from the church. The reformation changed all that and the arts became regarded in some parts of the church as idolatrous. The secular world eventually stepped into the vacuum and is now vastly more creative in terms of the arts than the church.

Christians are gradually waking up to what it has lost - but there's a huge amount of ground to catch up on. Unfortunately much that is coming out of the church in terms of arts is not going to have much of an impact on our contemporary culture. Pictures of waterfalls, flowers and sunsets are very beautiful and definitely have their place – and God can use them, but they're hardly going to shape culture! 'Christian' music is similar. It again has its place, and it is good to see the resurgence of worship (and intercession) in recent years. However if it is attempting to match the quality of what the world is producing, it lamentably fails in most cases.

Outside – not inside



Much of what we do still remains within church doors. The clear message to us as Christians and musicians is that we need to get out of the church building and meet people where they are!

I believe God is looking for very high quality, Spirit infused arts and artists - music/visual art/dance etc. that will stand up to scrutiny in a world which now believes it has a monopoly on the arts and that the church has nothing to say. We also need risk takers who can, with the inspiration of God's Spirit, find creative new ways to bring something that is not only very high quality and captivating - but also full of the presence of God. We have the potential capacity through the arts to bring Kingdom values that are desperately needed today: beauty, hope etc. etc. to a world that is fed quite the opposite by many art forms that celebrate anything but a Christian world-view or Christian values.



Epiphany playing Sound Portraits in the National Portrait Gallery Sept 2014

The challenge

So here's the challenge as we move into this New Year... What is God saying to you and are you willing to take risks with the gifts God has given you? Will you explore the creativity that God has placed inside of you and ask how you can impact the world around you with the beauty, truth and hope of God's Kingdom?

- Richard Williamson, Jan 2015