

## ***The Greatest Poverty is the Loss of Imagination***

Just the other morning I heard this quote on the radio: “The greatest poverty is the loss of imagination”. The author of these words is a singer, and unfortunately I don’t recall her name or know exactly what she had in mind, but it set me thinking about the power and role of the imagination and particularly about the religious imagination and its place in our religious and faith story.

Imagination is about possibility. Albert Einstein said that “Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world”. Artists, philosophers, scientists all draw upon the imagination and it is the driving force behind the great inventions and forward-leaps of humanity. The word ‘imagine’ can be traced back to the mid fourteenth century and is linked to the Old French, ‘imaginer’ and the Latin ‘imaginari’ - ‘to form a mental picture of’. It is also linked to the term ‘imago’ – image. When we ‘imagine’, we create a world which does not yet exist in the world of the senses, but which we conceive and conceptualize. The imagination thus opens up possibilities. It is rather like extending the horizon. The way things are is not all there is to say, it is not the end of the story. All of us use our imagination constantly: we dream of what could be, what we desire, what we long for. We see ourselves in future situations.

Our imagination can get us out of an impasse or a dark spot. When we feel closed in, a healthy imagination will kick in and show us a way out. There is a type of therapy called Brief Therapy or Solution Focused Therapy, and imagination plays a crucial role in this form of treatment. A limited amount of talking about troubling issues or problems takes place, and then we are asked to imagine how it would be if we were to be at peace, content. We imagine being happy and content and what that actually looks like, and then we are asked to work towards making changes so that this will become our reality. We often think of imagination as day-dreaming or fantasy, and this in itself is healthy and can be inspirational, as long as we don’t use it as a form of escapism. To *live* in a fantasy world is certainly not psychologically or emotionally healthy, however, our daydreams and healthy fantasies can be a catalyst for change and can certainly be inspiring as we conceive of possibilities.

Imagination plays a vital role in our religious life. Jesus himself made great use of the imagination in his stories or parables and in all his teachings. In fact, Sacred Scripture, the entire Bible, is a book of the imagination. The Bible invites us into a world as it could be, as it can be. It is not a book crammed full of ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’. It tells a story of a world that is possible and that we can in fact make real, here and now. Jesus spoke of this world as the Kingdom of God. He used image and metaphor to speak of this world, this Kingdom, or reign of God. It is like a mustard seed, he said. Goodness and love, from small beginnings, like that tiniest of seeds, the mustard seed, can grow to become a place of life, within which we can live

and move and have our being, just as the mustard tree, as it grows, will give shelter and a home to the birds who nest there. It is like a woman who has lost a coin, but will not rest content in that loss, and so she sweeps and searches and clears out her house until she finds it. The possibility becomes reality. Seek and you will find, knock and the door will be opened. We imagine the finding and the opening. It is possible. The Kingdom of God is among you, he said, in your relationships, in how you forgive and love one another, in how you show hospitality to all. It is a new world, a world where the imaginable can become real, and the imagined possibility of this world sometimes invited his listeners into places they had hitherto not been.

This imagined world is a world without the boundaries of cultural and religious practices that limit love and hospitality and forgiveness. Think of the radical forgiveness and welcome of the father as his lost son returned, the son who had spurned him, taken his money and squandered it. This father did not remain caught in the confines of what was a right and proper response for a wealthy landowner of his time when faced with the poor choices and humiliation inflicted on him by his younger son. Rather, Jesus takes his listeners into a new world, a world of other possibilities, and right there in this imagined world, we come face to face with God's love for us, God's forgiveness of us. His stories are an invitation to his listeners to a radically God-centred way of thinking. Stop limiting God and confining God within the boundaries of your old well-worn ways, he is saying. As we listen to Jesus' words and are drawn into those mental pictures, there with him we imagine this new world, and we are invited to begin to make the choices we need to make it real.

Jesus inspired those first century Jewish listeners with his imagination and these stories continue to inspire us today. They shake our complacency. It is not business as usual; we *can* conceive of something radically different. Jesus's parables took the accepted worldviews and perspectives of his day, blew them apart, and allowed new images and possibilities to take root. As can happen with all works of the imagination, some people just couldn't cope with this at the time and they ran for cover, they turned away. It was all too strange and unknown. But this is where the religious imagination becomes a wonderful, challenging teacher. We all know how precious it is to have people in our lives who draw us beyond our own limitations and confines. I often look back with much fondness and gratitude to those who gently, through a word here and there, or through one of those wonderful in-depth conversations we are sometimes privileged to have, or through the example of their own lives, have shown me a beautiful world of depth and meaning and have fired my imagination, leading me on to desire this and to make those necessary choices for it.

Imagination is vital for justice. Without the possibility and the conceiving of something better, we might just rest complacently in the ills and evil of some of our situations. And I think this is where conscience and imagination are intimately linked. Our Catholic teaching about

conscience is that it is a God-given faculty. Within each of us is a deep-felt sense-ability to right and wrong. Of course this gets muddied and murky at times and sometimes appears to have disappeared altogether! However, we believe it is there, and I think the so-called story of the 'Fall' in Genesis chapter three, speaks of this. Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the forbidden tree and as they did so, their eyes were opened and they 'knew good and evil'. This is part of our human nature, we do know good from evil. Our imagination enables us to conceptualize goodness, to conceive of realities and a world where goodness reigns. It leads us to imagine something other, something better than what we may find both around us and within us at times. Our conceiving of what can be will not let us rest with the lack of goodness. And so conscience and imagination, hand in hand, lead us on.

Of course we know that the imagination can be used to conceive all sorts of evil possibilities too. And here too, if we look at our biblical stories we will find numerous examples of the possibilities for 'death' and destruction in our world, in relationships and within ourselves. These stories present to us the possibilities of our wrong choices when we do not let that inbuilt sense of the good lead us. One story Jesus told that comes to mind and functions in this way is that of Lazarus (not Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, but another character also named Lazarus). Now the story Jesus told was that Lazarus was a very rich man. He didn't care at all for those who were poor and begged at the gate of his mansion for the crumbs from his well-laden table. He dined and feasted and indulged in all 'good' things. When he died, he went to that 'place' of suffering and torture, that place of eternal separation from goodness. And there he called upon God and begged God to send someone to warn his family, to get them to change so they would not end up there too. But God responded to Lazarus by pointing out that they have Moses and the prophets, and that is warning enough. Between Lazarus and his choice of self-indulgence and neglect of those begging at his gate, is an unbridgeable gulf. And Lazarus created that gulf himself.

In this powerful imaginative story we see possibilities: the choice between life and death. Moses and the prophets themselves presented the possibility of a world of goodness, a world in which life is chosen, and God's way reigns. And this story of Lazarus shows the consequences of a refusal to engage with that religious imagination. Just think of the impact such a story would have had on those first century listeners. The religious imagination would have been fired with the possibility of a life, both temporal and eternal, immersed in the heart of the Divine or, alternatively, cut off from it. And so it continues to invite us today into those possibilities.

Our Scriptures are full of such stories and possibility. It is an invitational Book! It is a guide, a map, which presents us with the contours of the possibility of Divine life, in all the fullness of its possibility here and now, and to come. As we get caught up in this work of the imagination, the

conceiving of a world in which God 'reigns', we are invited to fill in the details ourselves. The religious imagination must bear fruit in the concrete 'how' and 'where' of our own lives.

It is impossible to reflect on the religious imagination without turning to our Catholic understanding and experience of the Eucharist. It is there, in the Eucharist, that all the richness of the religious life is offered to us. We approach the Eucharist in faith. As we hold out our hands with that 'amen' on our lips, we believe, we trust, that we are entering into a reality that transcends the senses. Beneath, within, through what appears to be bread and wine, we say 'yes' to this Reality - the self-giving of Love in all its fullness. The Eucharistic prayer tells this story. It fires our imagination! We are caught up in the grand sweep of God's reaching out to humanity, and in a few brief minutes as that story unfolds and is spoken from the altar, we are drawn into it:

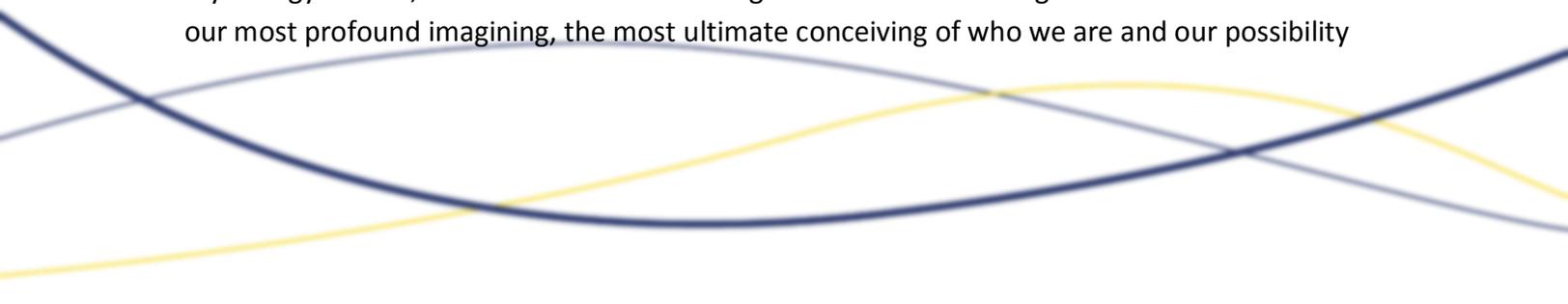
Holy, holy, holy Lord,  
God of power and might,  
Heaven and earth are full of your glory,  
Hosanna in the highest!

The Eucharistic prayer is about remembering. It is the collective memory of our religious story, and it is also about imagination and possibility. Look what's possible, it seems to say! You too can become part of this – it is offered to you and for you - you too are called into its power and transformative love. We end with that great doxology, song of praise:

Through him, and with him, and in him,  
O God almighty Father,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
all glory and honour is yours,  
for ever and ever!

And then we take ourselves there: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed". Is this not a powerfully inviting work of the imagination! We will not stay as we are, we will not remain stuck in the confines of our own minds and hearts and actions, but, in utter faith, we affirm that *this* is now our future, the possibility offered to us becomes our reality. Take it with you as you leave, within you and among you.

We could not conceive of religious reality, religious truth, without the imagination. We certainly would be poorer without it. We ourselves are the 'imago Dei'. As our Genesis mythology tells us, we are made in God's image. We have something 'of God' about us. This is our most profound imagining, the most ultimate conceiving of who we are and our possibility



for endless love, light and goodness. It is the possibility we need to awaken to each morning and reflect upon each night. Have I indeed lived the religious imagination today?

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