

Exodus 35:30

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 25 January 2004

Preacher: Donald Macleod

[0 : 00] Let's turn now again to Exodus 35 and the words of verse 30. Exodus 35 and verse 30.

Then Moses said to the Israelites, See, the Lord has chosen Mishalil, son of Boone, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts, to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood and to engage in all kinds of artistic craftsmanship.

Now, there's a long history of conflict between the church and the arts, or so at least is the common perception.

The church, in fact, has often inspired art and often too been its patron. But there's no doubt that in modern Scotland, there's a perception that the church has been opposed to the arts, and that Calvinism is responsible for our failure to develop in this particular area.

There is some measure of truth in this perception, and false, I suppose, on both sides. The church has often been suspicious of the arts.

[1 : 56] The church has made the imagination its place sometimes in its own life and its own worship. And the church has sometimes denied the arts freedom to operate with any kind of integrity.

The arts, on their part, have often made almost idolatrous claims to exist, apart from God's own jurisdiction, as if art existed for art's own sake, answerable to none but to itself.

The arts have often been blasphemous, atheistic, and sensual, and opposed directly to the truth as it is in Jesus.

And so has been a very uneasy relationship between the church and the arts. And I want tonight to turn for a moment to these men, the Messalil and the Holyub, because, in many ways, represent God's own perspective on this area of human endeavor.

I want to notice, first of all, what these men actually did. We're told that they had ability, they had intelligence, they were designers, and they were craftsmen.

[3 : 42] They represent, therefore, the so-called practical arts. They were able to conceive, ornamentation, objects of beauty.

They were able to design those objects of beauty. And they had the dexterity and the skill to produce them in reality.

So, they were not simply crafts with the end of the line, but they were also men with imagination.

They were designers as well as the craftsmen.

But, they represent, I suggest, more than the so-called practical arts. They represent, too, the fine arts.

Now, that's not a distinction the Bible makes. And, in its own way, it's quite true, but it is made. But, these men, I suggest, were not simply representing those who were able to work in gold and silver and bronze and stone and wooden fabrics and able to embroider and to ornament and decorate.

[5 : 18] They represent the whole spectrum of the aesthetic and of the artistic. All those who work in the fine arts as well as in the practical arts.

It's hard to define that distinction, harder still to know what art itself actually is. Art, at the most fundamental level, is concerned with form.

art, it's concerned with ornamentation, it's concerned with beauty. It is an appeal to the sensuous in the sense that art always appeals to the senses.

in other words, it appeals to our sight, to our hearing, perhaps to our sense of touch in the case of fabrics, and also in the case of some forms of arts such as culinary arts, to our very taste itself.

Milton drew a distinction between the sensual and the sensuous. Because the sensual was the erotic and the bacchanalian.

[6 : 49] And art was not necessarily associated with these. But art is always sensuous in that always its appeal is to our taste in the broad sense of our visual taste or our auditory taste.

These two primarily. And so we have art in the sense of painting and sculpture addressed to the sense of sight.

We have music addressed to our sense of hearing and poetry also falling into that realm. and art always inclined not only to see the truth and sometimes to see disturbing truth and fearsome truth and ugly truth but to enclose or to clothe that truth or its omission of that truth in appropriate sensuous forms.

because at some levels the artistic is not always beautiful. For example in glorious paintings of war there is horror and tragedy and pain and yet there is beauty in the sense that the form the expression is appropriate to the truth that the artist wants to convey.

And so I've taken these men out for presenting all those with the imagination to conceive and with a skill to design and with a skill to actually produce by craftsmanship objects whether in the visual sphere or in the sphere of hearing which strike us as pleasant.

[9 : 08] And I go back to that to paradise itself. We're told in Genesis 2 that when God planted Eden he filled that garden with trees which were pleasant to the eyes and that was their only justification.

They weren't good for food. They weren't good for fuel or if they were we aren't all so. But they were beautiful.

They were pleasant to see and in God's judgment that has its all justification. an object of art may need no justification but that it is pleasant to the eyes.

No defense but that it's beautiful. My second concern is this how important these men were to God and how careful he is to register his appreciation of their value.

It's intriguing that those men were named because this book is economical names and yet it names these two men.

[10 : 39] They weren't kings. They weren't warriors. they weren't great theologians. They weren't scientists. They weren't prophets or priests or statesmen and yet their names are recorded not only in the book of life but also in the book of history.

There's a thinking parallel to that in the same book. And way back in chapter 2 I think it is the names of Hebrew midwives are also recorded Shepra and Pua those two women who saved countless Hebrew children.

And the names of those women are recorded because of God's admiration for the work that they did. And so here those two men who were artists who were craftsmen their names are recorded because their names matter to God.

And maybe that's because more fundamentally art itself matters to God. We saw that in planting Eden God was so concerned to fill it with trees which were beautiful.

We know that in deciding his universe God was concerned for beauty and gave us not a useful world or a utilitarian world or inadequate world but a world of unsurpassable beauty.

[12 : 35] in psalm 8 David stands beneath the night sky enthralled by its beauty by the sense of distance by the sense of proportion or disproportion by its light by its shades by its shadows eyes the heavens God's glory do declare the creation shows what a great artist God is.

The Bible itself does the same thing because the Bible too has its own great artistic moments.

I don't say that all those writers of the Bible are themselves great artists but there is great art in the Bible and it's quite wrong to argue that God is not just in the form of a word or in the form of a sermon because we see God giving us in Genesis 1 for example the most magnificent and the most intricate literary art.

We see that too in Isaiah so much of that memorable poetry. We see the book of Psalms again those great unsurpassable lyrics in which the Spirit of God plays all the melodies of the human soul. We see it in the teaching of Jesus himself. So many of those aphorisms and sayings have passed into the world currency of language, those unforgettable parables, the structures of the Gospels of Mark and Matthew and Luke and John.

[14 : 41] And all the imagery of the revelation of Saint John again, how powerful and unforgettable it is, the lamb in the center of the throne with its throat cut, this tremendous mixture of almost Madonna art and Goya art in all the brutality of Calvary and yet all the beauty of the lamb and the paradox of the lamb or the lion of the tribe of Judah.

And so God in creation says to us art matters. God in naming these men says art matters. God in giving us this word and giving us that word in special artistic form says that art matters. And God involves them in his worship. And God brings craftsmanship and God brings art here into such close contact with that worship itself because the mandate is to work on the tabernacle. And the tabernacle is not simply an object of utility over which God lets him stand and say that will do it good enough.

But instead God wants its proportions its designs its fabrics its colors its ornamentation God is concerned about all these things.

[16 : 25] Now art and worship is a very risky subject because so often art has got in the way of worship and worship is not primarily an aesthetic experience.

We don't come to church for a sensuous experience to see a lovely building or to hear lovely music. And yet God is saying to us that we can't dismiss the sensuous the impact on our sight or upon our hearing even in the worship itself.

The art here was entirely appropriate to form a worship that prevailed at the time. It was the temple of a nomadic people.

It was the altar of a sacrificial system and the art was appropriate to that. And later on when they settled they built a temple which was itself so breathtakingly ornamented but which we can't duplicate in the Christian era because it was a temple designed for sacrifice and for animal ritual. Today we have a different kind of worship in spirit and in truth. We have a liturgy of the word of God a liturgy of listening and yet there too the aesthetic matters.

[18 : 23] Our buildings must be appropriate to the particles of New Testament worship as a worship of the word of God and as a worship of listening.

The Psalms we sing in their original language such great poetry. They must also approximate that great poetry in translation.

It is not enough that the translation be literalistically accurate. It must also strive to capture something of the beauty of the poetry itself.

And poetry is the most elusive thing. It is always more than meaning. It's a combination of meaning and sound and suggestiveness incredibly hard to pin down and to encapsulate.

But the words we use, the music we sing, the form of the lyrics and their songs, the buildings we worship in, it is important that we bear in mind the lesson of God's concern here, so that in as far as possible and practicable, the very form of our worship should please our own senses because God was concerned that that should be the case with regard to his tabernacle and that's why God raised up these men.

[20 : 10] And so God thought highly of them and he thought highly of their craft and he thinks highly of the whole artistic venture of the human race.

And then we see this. We see the source of their artistic skill. They were filled with the Spirit of God. And all their skill came from that source, came from the Spirit of God. God. And I think again there is a fundamental lesson here.

That the Holy Spirit is concerned with the sensuous as well as with the spiritual. And he is the source of this particular dimension of human existence.

It's not as the Spirit thinks that this area is beneath them. on his alien tomb. It is indeed amazing that this Spirit too hovered over the waters of creation and by whose energy this universe came into being.

[21 : 31] This Spirit who led the Lord Jesus. This Spirit who regenerates the human soul. That he is also interested in our craftsmanship and in our artistic mission and our artistic skill.

And the great truth is that all those skills come from him. The skill of the potter, the skill of the silversmith or the goldsmith, the skill of the fabric designer, of the architect, of the builder, all these skills come from God.

As does the skill of the musical composer, the cellist, the violinist, the sculptor, the painter, the novelist, the poet.

The astonishing ability of great literature, not only to imitate nature, but to create its own world related to the swan and to truth, and yet itself an independent world created by the artistic imagination.

Now, of course, it's true that so often those supremely endowed artistically have been contemptuous of the God who gave them the gift.

[23 : 19] We know that music began among the Cainites, those rebels against God the way back in Genesis 4, they were the first to invent music.

And so often, great art has flourished not among the sons of God, but among the children of men. But that doesn't detract from the fact that the gift itself comes from God.

And it doesn't mean for a moment that those who are God should also be great artists. And there have been such great artists who have been Christians, men like Bach and men like Milton, men like John Bunyan, men perhaps like Shakespeare too.

Whose faith was in God, whose art was inspired by their own Christian faith and whose very unconsciousness of their artisans was part of its greatness and its grandeur.

and source in this in many ways the ultimate endorsement of art that it is traceable to the Holy Spirit as its source.

[24 : 46] But the one who adorned the life of Jesus with holiness is the source too of the music of the profligate debauchy Mozart and the modern world with all its paradoxical art trying to maybe reverse in some ways what art actually is and almost maximizing horror and yet at the same time telling us terrible truths about the urban existence of the working population of Glasgow or life in a drug dominated culture or it depicts an ugly world and yet it does so with truth.

So let me engage in some reflections. In light of what I think this passage is saying art craftsmanship is an awful calling and is indeed a noble calling for a Christian and one in which some of you may be involved or may hope to be involved us crafts women craftsmen musicians painters sculptors novelists poets I don't know but suppose we go down this road what is Christian art and what would a Christian artist be like what would characterize what should characterize such a person now it's not simply that such a person would deal with biblical themes and describe or re-depict or re-enact stories from the

Bible you notice that these men are and they don't create tapestries that retell the story of the crossing of the Red Sea or the ten plagues their art which is the art of Jehovah is not Jehovahistic in the sense that it retells the Bible story in another form art may do that art may deeply tell the crucifixion in music or in painting or literature or poetry it may repeat such things but there are other more fundamental concerns and I want to enumerate some of them first of all the Christian artist will work in freedom will insist that he or she is not bound by the conventions of society or indeed dictated to by the church itself art has to be free society the spiritual power the political power the church the state may feel tremendously threatened by great art but art must not let itself be bound the artist must claim her legitimate freedom art also must be marked by integrity by utter honesty some of you may know the novels of

Chai and Potok novels of the life of a Jew in New York and the hero Ashur Lev is a budding artist becomes a great artist and when his mother sees the art she says to Mo Ashur Ashur Ashur she said paint pretty pictures and Ashur said but I don't see pretty pictures mama and so his great masterpiece is a study of the crucifixion seen through the eyes of a Jew the Messiah of the going of the Gentiles depicted in the supreme work of art art I'm sure that pretty pictures sell

I'm sure we want pretty pictures and sometimes prettiness is great great art but art must depict what it sees with utter honesty and integrity it must in its novels its poetry its music it must say what it sees and what it hears and it must say what it feels just as preachers must tell it as they see it and tell it as they feel it and not pretend to be seeing something differently or to be feeling something differently we have to be free we have to be contemporary we have to be where we are seeing what we see so art is free and art has its own integrity and art has humility art knows that it does not exist for its own sake here the artists work under

[31 : 41] God's own erection knowing itself answerable to God as as every other area of human life one of the great motifs of Genesis 1 is the phrase and God saw that it was good and in the last analysis God is the supreme and the final judge of all art of every short story every novel every poem every painting every musical recital God sees God hears God judges and that means that art is subject not only to aesthetic judgments as to whether it is beautiful or pleasant to the eye or to the ear although those are important judgments but also to a moral and a theological judgment because all art eventually has a message and all art is saying something not always in words but still saying something and what it says must be judged as well as how it says it so art must be free art must have integrity humility art must have humility and then there is this fascinating detail of a story here that they had the ability to teach others to pass on their skill they didn't insist on protecting their own artistic capital but they were concerned to pass on to others what they themselves had learned so

that others might build upon their foundation upon their legacy and upon their tradition there are so few

Christians and it's tempting I suppose to live between the two worlds so that we are neither fully Christian nor fully artist and I suggest and it is mere suggestion that salvation lies in the synthesis that we are fully both so that our faith does not impoverish our art and our art does not impoverish our faith but we live in freedom in genuine humility in both of those great domains and finally this that word that Paul speaks in Ephesians you are

God's workmanship you are God's craftsmanship you are indeed literally God's poem God's poem God looking through as the apostle and his own children at the lives of his own people and saying those lives are works of art and of course part of the glory of that is that there is this kind of cooperation so that God himself is the author of you as poem you as poem and you are the author by God's grace of you as poem so

I'm asking I'm in all lives craftsmanship I'm saying look at the wonder of what God is doing creating producing this poem and the wonder of it that God looks and it is very good and the hope at last that God will say it's perfect now Coleridge said that the idea in style was that one would not feel that one wanted to alter a single word in the sentence when God finishes the poem you was poem no angel in heaven would want anything different

God will present us faultless in the presence of his glory with exceeding joy each one of you a perfect work of art divine art because you are conformed to the image of a son and so don't be afraid to go into the world of the earth and holy don't think it's only for the mozarts and the hemingways that it's for them too it's also for those who are consciously filled with the spirit of God and that God has filled you with those new artistic musical literary then give thanks for them and develop and express them to the very maximum of their divine potential