

weaving a stronger spell: Christ in the city?



a three part series for Benedictus for the season of creation 2024

Sermon 1 "human kind cannot bear very much reality"

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READING: EZEKIEL 1 NKJV

Go, go, go said the bird: human kind
Cannot bear very much reality.

Four Quartets
T. S. Eliot

My title for this series 'weaving a stronger spell' is inspired by a quote from C S Lewis' address 'the weight of glory', where he writes:

"Do you think I am trying to weave a spell? Perhaps I am; but remember your fairy tales. Spells are used for breaking enchantments as well as for inducing them. And you and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness which has been laid upon us for nearly a hundred years."

I preached a sermon on the Yarra River or the Birrarung back in June and a few months later one of the kids sent me a recorded message that delighted me and went – verbatim:

“Auntie Celia what does swimming in the river have to do with theology”.

These three sermons are an attempt to answer that.

I had been living in the centre where every day I could roam around in the wild before dawn.

And I found it to be enchanted, lit up with the presence of God.

And I feared the city.

It felt like concrete and traffic and unfreedom and I thought living here would kill my soul.

In December 2023 I returned to Melbourne’s inner East for three weeks and became stuck here for tedious back and mattress related reasons.

There is no desert but here I can roam around in Yarra Bend Park at dawn and I have become fascinated by the river’s surface.

It flows bronze and burnished like a mirror.

Ripples and bubbles rise from things unseen.

The water obscures, but it also displays.

Wind appears as ruffled bronze or blue or silver.

Tree trunks shimmer and dance.

Raindrops become endlessly expanding and disappearing circles, and this morning each hit flashed light like stars sparkling across the water.

The sun is amber on the reflected tree tops, or chopped into bright white diamonds or walks beside me as a glowing disc.

Sometimes I see the moon in the water when I can’t see it in the sky.

Fallen wattle forms sheets of shifting gold that slowly move downstream.

Sometimes I hear a gentle roar and I know, now, it is a hot air balloon rising– and it may be filling the horizon behind me, or about to appear on the opposite bank, and I look for the bright colour and fire moving across the water.

The surface connects things that are separate in the regular world – fish leap through branches and a darter emerges from a cloud bank.

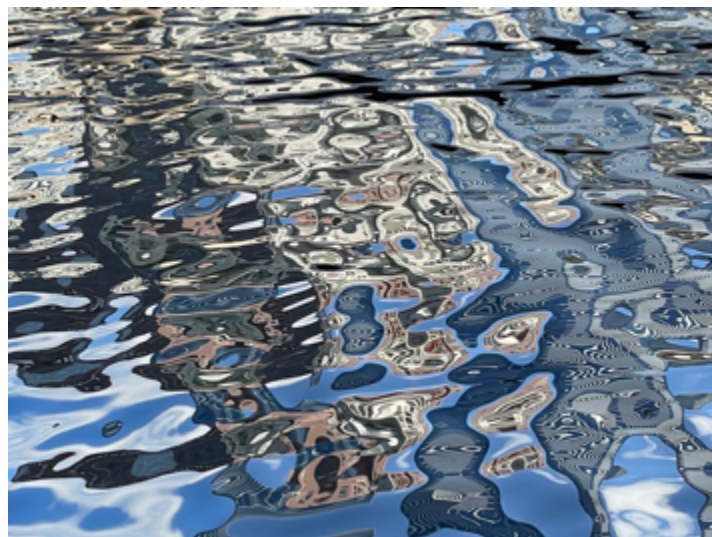
I listen to Psalm 65 – which contains the line ‘the river of God is full of water’ - at a particular place and recently realised at that precise location – and only there – I can see a heart in the

water formed by the conjoined reflections of four trees that stand quite separate on the opposite bank.



Some months into my time here I had to go to the CBD proper to an internal office reached by a claustrophobic can of a lift, so combined it with a visit to the closest part of the river and found myself in Birrarung Marr (River of Mists) – a park just East of the CBD.

In one way of looking at it this part of the river –polluted by all the development it has flowed through, surrounded by concrete and close to its end - is barren and dirty.



But here it transforms the relentlessly straight lines of the buildings – Auden called skyscrapers fallen angels when he encountered them in New York - into something swirling and lovely.

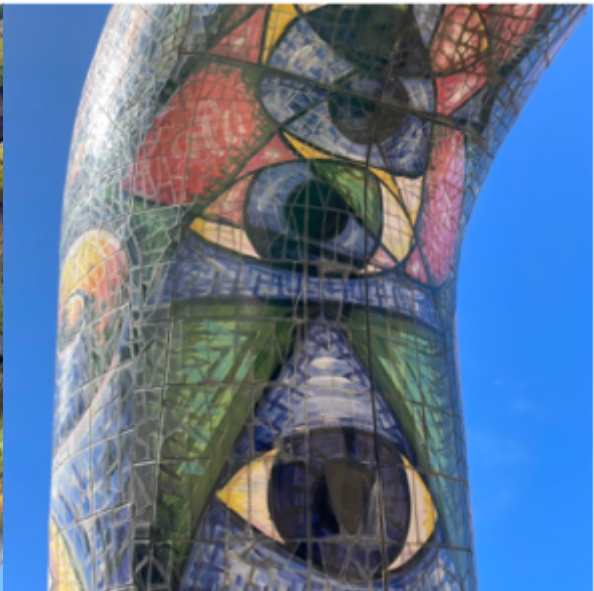
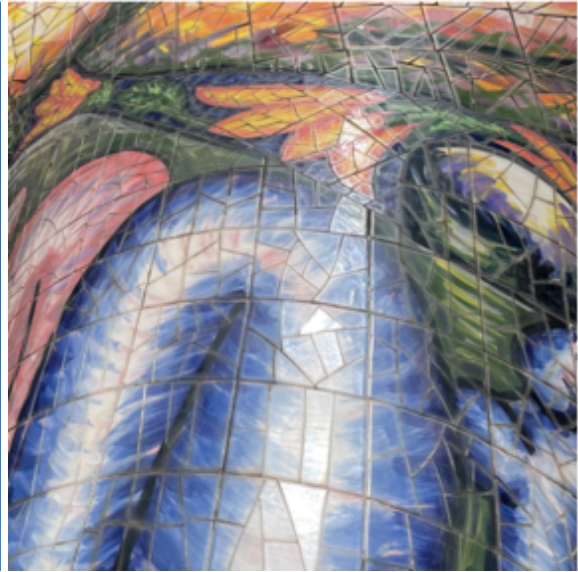
At Birrarung Marr I also found this:



It is by Deborah Halpern and is called 'Angel'.



It sparkles in the light and I think it could be a cherubim.



Scripturally cherubim first appear East of Eden - a walled garden with a river running out - standing guard with flashing swords to prevent Adam and Eve returning to the fullness of the presence of God.

And they appear again at the start of Ezekiel in today's reading.

Ezekiel was, in theory, a priest.

At age 30 he was due to start his service at Solomon's temple.

There priests, and only priests, could enter from the court into the holy place, cedar walls carved with cherubim, trees and flowers overlaid with gold, lit up by the flicker of the golden candlesticks and the glow from the fire on the altar of incense.

But Ezekiel was taken by King Nebuchadnezzar to exile in Babylon so we meet him instead outdoors by a foreign river.

What he sees here makes no sense in any number of ways as we can tell by his endearing struggle to put words on it.

For starters this is the heavenly throne room of God which belongs indoors and far away, in the temple in Jerusalem.

Also these creatures are hard to – well – pin down.

Ezekiel doesn't name them here.

He sees them again and only then identifies them as cherubim, and his description in Chapter 10 doesn't quite match this one.

John saw them hundreds of years later and what he says about them in Revelation 4 is slightly different again.

And no wonder.

They are not reducible to words, or a static image – their feet sparkle bronze, they radiate light, they have too many wings and an abundance of faces and hands somehow.

They are not a metaphor, they are blazingly real.

They explode all our ways of knowing - if you could capture a cherubim and dissect it everything would be lost and nothing would be gained – science is a useless paradigm for cherubim.

The wheels are covered in eyes here – Ezekiel realises the cherubim themselves are covered in eyes in Chapter 10.

They see more than are seen.

They are something like the strength of all creation – the strongest wild creature, the strongest domestic creature, the strongest flying creature and man.

But despite their manifest power they are not, as it were individuals - they are all four the same.

Nor do they choose where to go - they are entirely submitted to the will of God – and all four travel together.

As if four dragonflies were to fly their quick geometric paths in complete unison.

Strength for us can be associated with independence and choice, to being an original self.

But the cherubim are bound - , to each other, to the wheels – whatever they are – and to the will of the God who is over them.

Another word for bound is connected.

Or – the delightful word used to describe the joining of the cherubims’ wings one to another:

chabar: to unite, be joined, to tie a magic knot or spell, to charm

Chabar is also used to describe the joining of the tabernacle curtains, and Zion built as a ‘city compact together’ in Psalm 122.

This is not a magic spell for the elevation of self.

This is a magic that weaves things together.

Much is seen Ezekiel’s vision, too much thought Saint Jerome who opined it should not be read by people under 30.

But it is the sort of seeing that makes us realise what we can’t see.

Which is how it is to approach God down here.

Ezekiel’s descriptions – such as they are – taper off when it comes to God himself.

He describes ‘a likeness with the appearance of a man’ and mentions amber, fire, brightness, a rainbow, brightness again and ends with ‘this was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God’.

Ezekiel’s vision has some of the pattern of the desert tabernacle.

Everyone could see the court outside with the bronze alter and the bronze basin made by melting down the mirrors of the women.

But the most glorious part – the most holy place with the golden cherubim covering the mercy seat over the ark – is the most hidden.

Only the high priest can enter the veil - and then only once a year, with clouds above and incense below obscuring his vision.

It could be this hiddenness is a sort of trick to hide the fact that, actually, there is nothing at the heart of it all.

I recently read Charlotte Wood’s *Stone Yard Devotional* which describes a woman spending time at an Australian monastery.

It is beautifully written but I wondered at the feeling of a sort of cool absence at its heart.

For me the contemplative life circles around this blazing presence which should be terrifying
except it isn't because it is absolute love.

But we 'see through a glass darkly' because – as T. S. Eliot says – human kind cannot bear
very much reality.

Or from Nietzsche:

We have Art
in order that we may not perish from Truth.

Or – in the blunt terms spoken to Moses – we are unable to see the face of God and live.

Back to Ezekiel 1 and all this is, as it always is, for God to communicate with us.

He speaks at the end of the chapter in a voice that sounds like rushing waters.

And what of our own time?

The bronze feet, the cloud, the fire, the figure like a man, the radiant light, the voice like
rushing waters...these are markers of John's vision of Christ walking among the churches in
Revelation 1.

This makes sense – Christ is the connection between heaven and earth.

And yet it doesn't at all.

How can this man Jesus entirely visible - stooping down to wash the dirt off his disciples' feet
in John 13 say - be in any sense what Ezekiel fails to fully glimpse here.

And – as if that weren't enough - what does it mean that this same Christ comes and lives in
us? As Paul puts it.

And what of the river itself?

I think a lot about the connections between all these.

The river's surface – like the cherubim – like Christ-- is both like creation and not like
creation, a bridge and a barrier, it hides and reveals.

Listening to Scripture by it is like stepping into a film for me - the words become
commentary to the cinematography that is the world around.

Is the river art? Is it a particular language of God in its place?

I don't think it is right to say the river is Christ but does he choose to be clothed in it perhaps?

Or do you say – adapting Ezekiel – by the river I am given a glimpse of an appearance of the likeness of the glory of God – and leave it at that?

The cherubim are in one sense – and one sense only - 'straightforward'.

God moves – and so they move - in straight lines in ordinal directions.

Mostly things down here are a bit less – direct.

The river curves and so do we as we meander beside it.

And our presence matters - for the part of creation that is most like God – that is made in the image of God is – astonishingly – us.

I saw a bloke walking up from the river a week ago– black beanie, dark parka, earphones in, head down – nothing out of the ordinary except as he breathed out in the cold his breath was gold mist in the rising sun.

Sometimes I think of our lives down here as a sort of embroidery with bronze, silver and gold thread in the dark.

Little stitches- loops and twists and curls.



And there are days when God rises on us, his rays travelling straight and fast, and we are given a glimpse of our small part in what Denise Levertov calls

‘ a vast unfolding design lit by a risen sun’

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And now a song that came to me when I was by the river that John Coleman and I are turning into a piece:

shimmering

Birdsong shimmering
Heavy water shimmering
Dawn comes shimmering

Praise you God above
Praise you lord of light
Praise you holy one

alleluia
alleluia
alleluia (x2)

Pale bark rippling
Duck wings shimmering
Blossom catching light

alleluia
alleluia
alleluia (x2)

Birdsong shimmering
Heavy water shimmering
Dawn comes shimmering
to me