

Opening Address:

**David Jones: Art – Word – Creative Deed**

**Sr. Rose Rolling, O.P.**

Browsing through an old copy of the Guardian a few weeks ago, to my surprise I came across a book review of the biography *David Jones: Engraver, Soldier, Painter, Poet* by Thomas Dilworth, one of the leading interpreters of Jones. The reviewer comments that Dilworth's book is a major biography of a minor figure, although he goes on to suggest that Jones is "minor by mistake"<sup>1</sup> – our mistake that is, in having overlooked such a significant talent for so long.

When we began curating this project, Fr Dominic and I had an intuition that David Jones was something of a hidden gem, both in the art world and in Catholic culture. It was this intuition that prompted us to think further about all the hidden gems, the 'minor prophets', that grace our lives and our Dominican Order, and to give them a space to shine and to speak. The result is this exhibition, which includes not only the genius of Jones but also the creative work of our Dominican brethren and friends associated with the Blackfriars community.

David Jones was a British artist and poet, and a lay Dominican, for short time part of the Guild of St Dominic and St Joseph in Ditchling, Sussex. The Guild was – like our priory here at Blackfriars – a formation community, although the formation was in the arts and towards the lay Christian vocation of creating a civilisation of love and a culture of life within the world. The mission statement of the Ditchling Guild, the purpose of their formation, was towards being "men rich in virtue studying beautifulness living in peace in their houses". While this vision was corroded by the abusive behaviour of one community member, Eric Gill, let us remember that there have always been Judases in the Christian community and that the ultimate victory of evil is when it leads us to give up on our ideals. The nobility of the original vision at Ditchling – to live together in harmony – still holds good, and it is the first task laid forth in the Rule of St Augustine, which is the foundation of our Dominican life.

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Power. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/29/david-jones-thomas-dilworth-review-engraver-soldier-painter-poet>

Belonging to an intentional community – like Ditchling, or Blackfriars, or the universal Church, is a response to grace, primarily the grace of baptism. The Catholic Church teaches that every baptised Christian is endowed with the dignity of sharing in Christ’s threefold office of priest, prophet and king. It may sound cliché to say that we’re all prophets, yet it is the faith of the Church that all Christians are in fact called upon to act prophetically. What does this mean then, what does it look like? Well, the role of the prophet is to proclaim the truth of Christ in word and deed.

To the Israelites a ‘word’ was more than a sound conveying meaning; it could also be a powerful creative deed<sup>2</sup>. By standing before the art displayed here, the ‘creative deeds’ of our Blackfriars community, we open ourselves to receiving a word from God mediated through others. The joy and potency of art is that transcends the limitations of time, space and language to become a cross-generational, cross-cultural dialogue.

This is partly what makes art such an exciting medium of preaching and one so fitting to our spirituality. The Dominican preaching tradition necessarily includes openness to dialogue: one of the treasured stories of our Order is of St Dominic spending the whole night in conversation with an innkeeper in Toulouse, a conversation which through its charity of manner and clarity of truth won over the inn-keeper to the Christian faith.

Art is a gateway to encounter. Like St Dominic, we need to be open to entering into dialogue with others, even when it is challenging. Art gets people talking, and it also gets us talking with our own deep selves – Do I like it? What does it remind me of? What does it mean? Art can make us uncomfortable; it can beg the questions that underly our authentic selves, selves submerged by the superficial. It can allow truth to surface.

The Dominican friar Felicissimo Martinez says that “truth is the motto of the Order – not its defence (as often understood), rather its perception”. Much to our grief as preachers of the Word, it is a reality that words today are cheapened by their daily deluge and our ears are often hard of hearing. Art has a way of getting behind our resistance; in an image-conscious culture, our eyes remain open, searching, and it is the eyes that are considered the windows to the soul. I want to suggest that prophecy is about vision, about seeing and perceiving, which is the passage to truth.

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<sup>2</sup> Maria Boulding OSB

Art gives a window both into the subjective perception of the artist and to the deeper level of reality of things as they appear in the world. Artists call us to attention, attentiveness, to the world around us. Much of art depicts the ordinary and everyday things of life – the natural world, our houses and their contents, a couple walking in the woods. What is often missed and clouded in the greyness of everyday life is highlighted by the artist, and somehow, when we find the time and mental energy to truly look at it, we can find it extraordinary and beautiful.

Perhaps part of the prophetic witness of today is precisely the rediscovery of the ordinary – to go deeper rather than going wider, to opt out of chasing novelty, innovation, experience, as trophies propelling towards the ever-new thing. Jones' poetry, for example, is certainly not an experience of instant gratification, nor does it lend itself to being surgically picked away at with the critical mind. You need to sit with it, spend time, let it reach your depths. This entry into mystery and silence, into being comfortable with the unknown, is what it means to live attentively, contemplatively, a quality shared by the artist and Christian alike. Yet we live in a tachycardiac culture; our pulse is unhealthily fast. This arrhythmia of soul is making us ill, physically, mentally, spiritually. Fixing our gaze, not obsessively but intentionally, is the first step out of blurred vision and towards healing, allowing our sight to perceive reality properly.

There are multitudes of men and women today who have no vision, no eternal pursuit, who can see no meaning in their lives. They are in a state of profound spiritual poverty and hopelessness. Some of you may be familiar with the character Tyler Durden, from the movie *Fight Club* – I'd argue one of the prophetic movies of our times. One insight that struck me and stayed with me from the film was Tyler's perception that today, we have "no purpose or place. We have no Great War. No Great Depression. Our Great War is a spiritual war... our Great Depression is our lives". My own generation, the Millennials, are sometimes referred to as a 'lost generation', afflicted precisely by this sense of ultimate rootlessness, literally and spiritually. As the Dominican friars Vincent de Couesnongle points out, there can be no hope without a new vision. Pursuing God means we have an end, a purpose, and that purpose is the vision of God.

The last time we heard about a lost youth so emphatically was David Jones' own post-war generation. Jones shared in the experience common to a man of his era: he fought in the First

World War, in the battle of the Somme, and afterwards bore the wounds of lifelong post-traumatic stress disorder. Many of his peers, wounded physically and spiritually, fell victim to nihilism or hedonism after their experience of the war. In our own day too, we may be inclined to despair at what we are handing on to our children. What do our contemporary art galleries say about us as a people? What do they say about our vision? How can Christians contribute, respond and at times challenge, the cultural climate?

What separated Jones from many of his contemporaries was his vision, a vision in which he recognised the Christian call to beatitude, to happiness, which is found ultimately in God. As Christians, as Dominicans, we also have a rich and crucially, a living heritage, and this gives us hope for the future. Supernatural hope is a quality that marked Jones' outlook too. His life was marked by pain – PTSD, the loneliness of lifelong singleness and childlessness, frequent poverty – and he could have surrendered to the nihilism, pessimism and hedonism of the post-war mood, but he did not. He immersed himself in Christ, in the mystery of his suffering and death and clung to the promise of the Resurrection, a word he proclaimed through the silent sermon of his art. Not the forthright evangelical preaching of a St John the Baptist figure but the saint next door, who's quiet fidelity and steadfast hope is the leaven of the community, the ones enabling us to fulfil the original vision of becoming "men and women rich in virtue studying beautifulness living in peace in their houses". This is the tradition in which David Jones and the contemporary artists here live: these are our minor prophets.