

Believing is Seeing (OTA2 2020)

Who has seen the wind? Neither you nor I but when the trees bow down their heads, the wind is passing by.

(Christina Rossetti)

We had a great Chemistry teacher, Mr Carney. We loved him because, more often than not, something would go wrong with his demonstrations. He was our version of Les Dawson on the piano or Tommy Cooper doing his magic tricks, but in his case it wasn't intended. Somehow or other his efforts weren't up to illustrating the scientific knowledge he was trying to impart. We were not able to see what he wanted us to see, and we had to rely on his word rather than his actions if we were to answer our exam questions successfully. But we also learned something else; that things aren't always as they seem.

Speaking of which, you might have seen the photograph on the TV screen as you entered church.



In it there are two parents, a child, a priest and an altar server, standing at a font. If you were asked what's going on you might reply: "a baptism". But despite the evidence, you would be wrong, because that picture was taken for inclusion in a fundraising booklet. It was a staged photo. The priest was called Fr Howe, the parents, Allan and Vera Montgomery, and the baby's name is Peter. You might say that the first service I performed on behalf of the Church was a fraud!

We have a saying "Seeing is Believing" because we rely heavily on our senses to give us accurate information, and for the most part we can rely on the evidence provided. But not always. Furthermore, our senses are

incapable of providing the complete picture. Take for example these words of Christina Rossetti:

*“Who has seen the wind? Neither you nor I
but when the trees bow down their heads,
the wind is passing by.”*

Perhaps we can ponder this as we consider today's gospel which from the outset, is full of references to seeing. John sees Jesus approaching and urges everyone else to “Look”, but in doing this he invites them to recognise Jesus as something more than their eyes can behold. He explains that he has already seen signs that Jesus is deserving of the title Lamb of God, he tells the crowd how he saw the Holy Spirit descend on him in the form of a dove. He concludes his remarks by describing himself as a witness (in other words – a reliable source of information).

The truth that the language of faith seeks to convey does not ignore the truths that our senses perceive or our minds discover through reason, but they do rely on wider resources, such as stories, images, visions, personal encounters with the numinous, and collective sacramental moments. And we trust the wisdom of generations who have already pondered on these things and passed them on within our religious traditions.

The Catholic imagination in particular relies on seeing with the eyes of faith. The Catholic memory is more like an art gallery than a library; images speak to us as much as words. Indeed, it could be said that for Catholics “Believing is Seeing”; seeing the world in ways that reveal God’s presence not only when we are in church, but each time we encounter beauty, goodness and love in action.