

THE RAINBOW PROMISE OF HOPE

THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

Just when we thought things were getting sorted, everything has been turned upside down again.

This is disturbing, frightening, worrying – there's no doubt about it – but it is not without hope.

Each year at Epiphany, I normally offer to you three things: an image, a poem and a piece of music to reflect on for the New Year.

We've been told to keep services short ... so today, I want to offer you just one thing – an image.



'The Rainbow Swash'

The image is an artwork by Sister Corita Kent, often called the 'pop-art nun' who transformed a disused gas cylinder into a joyous riot of rainbow colour and an affirmation of hope.

A member of the Convent of the Immaculate Heart in California, Sr Corita became famous across America for her bold art work which challenged how we see the world and how the world sees God. This is one of her most famous works, which took an object of industrial decline and made it a joyful symbol of God's faithfulness. It's commonly called 'The Rainbow Swash' and can still be seen just outside Boston.

The rainbow is a universal symbol whose meaning continues to evolve – from Biblical faithfulness, to equality and diversity, and most recently into gratitude – but in every case it speaks of the joy that springs from hope of a world renewed and transformed – turned upside down and different from how things are.

Sister Corita was once of those people who turned everything on its head.

A Catholic nun and a social radical. A peace activist and a pop artist.

People have called her 'the joyous revolutionary' and she once said:

'I am not brave enough to not pay my income tax and risk going to jail. But I can say rather freely what I want to say with my art'.

As an artist she used every day phrases in her work that also spoke critically about social issues, and juxtaposed advertising slogans with religious language and imagery. She took the phrase 'Enriched Bread' from some packaging and incorporated this with text from Saint John's Gospel about Christ as the Bread of Life. Most famously (and controversially) she used an advert for Californian Tomatoes described as 'The Juiciest Tomatoes of All' to create a word portrait of the Virgin Mary as 'The juiciest Mother of All' ... Her Bishop was not amused ...



As she came to prominence across America, her relationships with the Church became increasingly tense and led to her decision in 1968 to leave her order. What was it that made her such a threat to some people? I think one can see what it was in her installation entitled 'Power up'. Across the top of a traditional Altar the words 'POWER UP' are emblazoned in rainbow colours. What was familiar and unthreatening has become new and uncertain - its inner power released. Our normal theological understanding of what goes on at the Eucharist is suddenly enhanced and subverted at the same time. This is unnerving, dangerous.



What Sr Corita's art testifies to is the unsettling energy of God who is always leading us onwards and outwards from our limited understandings of the Divine, and at the same time, to the everlasting comfort and promise of his love.

At Christmas we celebrate the birth of the Messiah as a weak and feeble child was the opposite of what anyone expected, and turned the world on its head.

At Epiphany when the Magi kneel before the Cradle, a revolution is taking place.

The whole world is brought into the covenant of God's grace, and everything we thought we knew about God is swept away. In its place, is a vibrant life, that dances with colour across a sad and weary world.

In the Baptism of Christ today we hear the words that come from heaven:
'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased'.

They are words both of hope and promise.

They were words spoken to Christ, but as sharers in his Baptism we can understand them as also being spoken to us.

They tell us that whatever happens we are God's beloved, his children whom he loves - for despite dereliction and death the rainbow promise of God's love is a hope that cannot be taken away.

I hope that this image, this work of art, may be a sign of that promise at this difficult time.

May God bless us all in this year of Our Lord 2021.



