

GOD IN THE ARTS

Editor: Editor: The Rev Michael Burgess (Parish Pump, UK) looks at the painting 'St Francis in Ecstasy' by Giovanni Bellini. now housed in the Frick Collection in New York and shown below. You can find out more about this painting by Googling the title.



Become what you behold

Archbishop Rowan Williams once compared prayer to sunbathing when he said that you don't get a better tan by screwing up your eyes and concentrating. The important thing is to turn up and sit there. It is the same with prayer: turn up and then life will begin to change. 'You simply have to be there where the light can get at you.' That moment of turning to God's light is celebrated in this painting of 'St Francis in Ecstasy' by Giovanni Bellini. In early October we gave thanks to God for one of the most popular and much loved saints of the Church. There are many stories, some legend, some fact, that tell of St Francis' love and goodness to all creation. He poured out that love in his hymn of praise, 'The Canticle of the Sun.'

He also composed a meditation on the Lord's Prayer in which he wrote, 'Thy kingdom come that thou mayest reign in us by thy grace.' To many

of his followers and contemporaries it did seem that the kingdom of God's grace had come to reign in St Francis, so that he seemed himself to be clothed with the sun. The joy and peace of God's glory shone through his life. To those around, this life of deep communion with God seemed to transfigure his body. It was also a deep communion with his crucified Lord and Saviour for he received the marks of the stigmata, the marks of the passion, on his own person.

That moment is captured in this painting by Bellini. He came from a family of Renaissance artists in Venice and was taught by his father, Jacopo. This work dates from 1480 and is one of the earliest paintings of oil on wood. With this new technique Bellini went on to create some of the most beautiful paintings of the western world. Here the saint has stepped out into the dawn of a new day. There are no sandals on his feet for, like Moses, he is standing on holy ground to greet his brother the sun. For he is looking up not just to the light of the morning, he is looking up to the light of God's glory. His arms are stretched out as his eyes look to the heaven above.

In the painting St Francis is surrounded by many things that are symbolic of the Christian life: the donkey is a sign of humility and obedience; the laurel tree leaning in at the side is the wood of the cross; a skull on the desk is a sign of death; the stream marks water and life; and peeping through the wall we can spot a little rabbit eyeing the saint up and down. The marks of the stigmata are very subtle as we look for them for Bellini is stressing this moment of ecstasy as a moment of transfiguration. Both the saint and the setting are bathed in glory and light.

When he received the stigmata on Mount Alverna, St Francis prayed for two things: first, that he would know as far as possible the pain our Lord suffered for humanity, and secondly, that he would know the love which moved him to bear it. The glory of that love worked in the saint to transform and transfigure him, so that even in his last years, when his health was broken and his eyes blinded by disease, the love and glory shone out to those around. This painting marks the dawn of that new stage in the life of St Francis. He walks into the light of a new day. Like

the saint we begin each new day with thanksgiving and trust as we look out onto the world. We see the light scattering the darkness of the night and hear God calling us, as he called St Francis, to become what we behold.