

BOOK REVIEW

Chris E.W. Green, *All Things Beautiful: An Aesthetic Christology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021), pp. 211. ISBN 978-1481315586

doi:[10.1017/S1740355323000402](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1740355323000402)

All Things Beautiful: An Aesthetic Christology sets out to be both experimental and constructive. It is informed by Green's conviction that theology, art and spirituality are joined in a particular way in the liturgy. As a creative work, this weaves together the reading of Scripture alongside readings from artistic works, including film, poetry, icons, novels, sculptures and more. As an experimental work, it takes us through the rhythms, themes and seasons of the liturgical year, witnessing to beginnings and endings, theological confession and aesthetic expression. Green himself describes this as 'spirited, searching conversation' which assumes a 'revelatory and instructive' kinship between art, theology and liturgy (p. 169).

As a result, this does not read like an academic monograph on Christology; but nor is it a set of practical liturgical reflections. Rather it is a thoughtful tapestry which takes us to, and holds us in, the places of intersection between faith and art. As such, it requires slow and patient reading, more akin to a devotional exercise, but the effort is worthwhile. It is absolutely rooted in the person of Christ's life, death and resurrection. It sees the human compulsion to create or respond to creativity as part of God's purposes and goodness. It names the ways in which faith and imagination, creativity and 'meaning-making' become sites of the Spirit's presence.

Each chapter begins with some short vignettes for reflection, before delving into a primary piece of art – be that film, novel, essay or poem. Framed by the liturgical season, which Green says affirms that 'God's life with us is storied', he uses art to explicate, explore, expand and exemplify an aspect of Christology (p. 3). For example, by drawing on Terence Malick's film *The Tree of Life*, Green offers a reflection on Christmas which witnesses healing and redemption of the incarnation – holding together God's glory and a vulnerable intimacy of flesh.

The titles of each chapter are pregnant with possibility: 'Painting a True Christ' for Advent, 'God's Scars' for Ash Wednesday, 'The End of All Endings' for Easter, for example. In Ordinary Time, we are invited to ponder 'More than Many Sparrows'. Rather than summarize each chapter, I pause at this season. Green notes that 'ordinary' moves us from the dramatic events of Christ's birth, life, death, resurrection as the 'Spirit-baptized, Spirit-baptizing redeemer of all things' to a time of interruption where we are reminded that 'God's work is not limited to dramatic events' (p. 153).

From Martin Buber's essay on Job, to his reflections on Jesus' words about the strange comfort of sparrows in the face of division, to a concluding poem by Deborah Digges ('Vesper Sparrows'), we are encouraged to learn in Ordinary Time 'to live as Christ did: never confusing prosperity for blessing or scarcity for penalty; content with whatever God has given; desperate in the face of calamity and injustice;

mourning, but not as those who have no hope; confident that God's hiddenness is for our God' (p. 166). Green does not turn from smallness but helps us see grace in fragility.

In conclusion, I would highlight the ecumenical threads running through this book, in the range of voices Green draws upon from Roman Catholic to Protestant, Orthodox and Anglican (and his own denominational commitment to Pentecostalism). As well as inhabiting the 'storied' character of liturgical time – and the way in which we are formed through it as Christian disciples – he also articulates a theological anthropology which honours the creative side of human nature in relation to the divine. Green is culturally critical where necessary, and we should acknowledge that those reference points are more recognizable to a Western cultural context.

However, as an encouragement to a rigorous and devotional, liturgical and imaginative approach to doctrine, it is a book which might inspire others in spiritual practice and academic discourse. Green concludes that both Christology and art can surprise us, leave us wondering, enable us to glimpse the infinite and, also, disturb us. Good art and good theology 'draw our attention to the reality of the story of Jesus in such a way that we sense something of his incomprehensible otherness as well as his immeasurable goodness, permitting us to brush up against the eccentricity of God' (p. 174).

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