

God's Work of Art

Josiah Wedgwood lived in the eighteenth century at the height of the industrial revolution and became a famous potter and designer of fine china. He also eagerly embraced the spirit of inventiveness of the era, wholeheartedly and with a passion, adopting the latest means of production and distribution to ensure that his customers were satisfied. He is also credited with being the inventor of modern marketing. He pioneered direct mail, money back guarantees, travelling salesmen, free delivery, illustrated catalogues, even buy one get one free.

Wedgwood was also a great inventor and designer of highly-prized tableware and ornamental china. He developed the famous blue and white jasper ware which is extremely popular to this day and still carries the Wedgwood imprint. Even in his own day, his tableware was exported around the world and was sought after by royalty and the super-rich across the globe. Needless to say, with such great artistic gifts and all his entrepreneurial skills, Wedgwood himself became one of the wealthiest men in the country. But he was also a deeply committed Christian who fought hard for the abolition of slavery, and a philanthropist who gave generously to good causes.

The story is told that one day an extremely wealthy client from the colonies came to see Wedgwood and insisted on being shown around his factory. As the climax to his visit he wanted to see the most expensive dining set that Wedgwood produced with a view to buying it. Wedgwood took the client to the display cases to show him but was becoming increasingly angry with the man who had spoken in loud profanities throughout his tour of the factory in the hearing of the teenage apprentices who were at work there.

Wedgwood took the man to the glass case where the most expensive and refined porcelain tableware was set out in lavish display. The man's eyes opened wide. "Goddammit", the man said, "this is the damned finest work of art. What price do you ask for it?" At which point something snapped inside Wedgwood. He strode behind the display case and with one mighty thrust pushed it to the ground smashing the case and every priceless piece of china in it. The client was horror-struck and, once he had recovered

himself, asked what on earth Wedgwood thought he was doing. “Yes, I have destroyed a priceless, precious work of art but this is as nothing compared with the minds of my young workers whose innocence you have destroyed by your foul language and your uncouth manners. They are God’s work of art; their souls are beyond price and their characters as pure as snow. I can make another porcelain dinner service but nothing can ever restore what you have destroyed. Leave my property this instant and God have mercy on your soul!”

Wedgwood honoured and respected the dignity and intrinsic worth of each member of his workforce many of whom he had lifted out of poverty and to whom he not only gave a fair wage but humane working conditions, clean water and decent housing for their families. As a staunch evangelical Christian he also had as much care for their souls as for their physical well-being and to have them corrupted by the foul language and imperious manners of his visitor offended the deepest part of his being.

Every human being is of infinite value and immeasurable worth. Once we can really accept that - really accept it - it can change the whole way we deal with and relate to others. Through fear and defensiveness people can often come across as aggressive and difficult but, in dealing with them, if we can grasp the deeper truth that God loves them with a boundless and unquenchable love we can begin to see them in a different light. We are able to see beyond the defensive exterior to the gleam of God’s presence within them. When we respect and defer to that reality we can often engage them at the level of their being where God’s Spirit is at work, allowing them to respond from that inner truth and become more the people God wills them to be.

The author of today’s reading from the Letter to the Ephesians calls us ‘*God’s work of art*’. Each of us has a beauty and a dignity as God’s children. Sometimes we only see our failings and we are slow and embarrassed to accept that we many wonderful qualities and gifts and talents we have never noticed. God notices but in any event, He loves us unconditionally, no matter what and only sees in us the image of His beloved Son; He loves us for who we are regardless. He loves us with an unimaginable love. As the reading assures us God loves us so much that ‘*when we were dead through our sins, he brought us to life with Christ*’ and, as the Gospel reminds us, in those beautiful words that sum up the whole of God’s message to us, ‘*God loved*

the world so much that He gave His only Son so that everyone who believes in Him may not be lost but may have eternal life'. This is the message that makes today *Laetare* Sunday, a Sunday to rejoice that God loves us so much and has saved us and longs for us to be with Him and share His life in all its amazing fullness. And, yes, that means you!