

## READING AT WORK – WHAT’VE ARTS GOT TO DO WITH IT? - WITH ARTS MISSION

**Monday, 30 April 2018**

*The Arts Mission team and friends joined Reading At Work for an evening to look at the calling on believers who work in creative or performing arts.*

*This essay is based on that evening’s talk and a summary of the discussion – with a few further details to reflect local developments.*

Arts professionals in the UK can find the going tough. Many migrate to where the work is. In Germany most decent-sized cities boast a bunch of salaried posts in the opera house, orchestras, theatre, choirs, festival and broadcast station. Spare a prayer for those who stay here to work freelance. And what if they believe in Jesus? How much work in the culture we see all around could they find acceptable? Narrow is the career path... But if our culture is dirty and dark under the prevailing zeitgeist surely believers, being salt and light, can change it.

Historically the church picked up the tab for arts. The lion share of art and artefacts in many museums is sacred, as is much of the canon of Renaissance and Baroque music. The church influenced culture, not only by the demand for new work to keep up with daily worship, but by having a say in the creative brief. In Europe the Council of Trent in the mid 1500s wanted to clean up the liturgy and challenged composers not to use tunes of saecular origin, and to ensure musical settings were simple enough for the mass to be intelligible. Out with sumptuous, chromatic polyphony that obscured the text - in with homophony, chordal clarity so the words could be heard.

In England barely a century after the Reformation when monasteries were dissolved and dismantled, the Puritans arrived wrecking and whitewashing any vestiges of potential idolatry. While no-one of faith would argue with the second or any other commandment, how many godly masterpieces might have been thrown out with the spiritual bathwater? Is there even today a hangover of residual suspicion towards the arts in church?

Yet God is The Creator. We are made in His image and therefore creative.

God himself commissioned artists to make Him a sanctuary in order to dwell among men. In Exodus 31:1-5 we read: “The LORD said to Moses, "See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, for work in every craft.”

The Lord gave Moses and Bezalel precise and detailed specifications. To equip Bezalel to carry out the work, he was “filled with” the Holy Spirit more than a millennium before the Holy Spirit filled the disciples. Until Jesus rose from the dead, the Holy Spirit merely *rested*

*upon* people for a short time, and for a purpose, such as to bring a word of prophesy. But God says of Bezalel “I have *filled* him with the Spirit of God”.

Before Bezalel can *make* the home of God he needs to *be* a home of God.

We read that Bezalel is called “by name”. What’s in a name? In Hebrew scripture names nearly always mean something. The alphabet was derived from pictographs. Looking deeper into sentences and words in scripture helps to discern how they sounded and resounded to early Hebrew hearers. The power of God-breathed words in scripture to act on many levels should come as no surprise. After all Jesus is The Word. Names often spell out or hint at identity and destiny. Translated to the vernacular, names become less of a list, more of a story.

Bezalel means Shadow - or Image - of God, from *tsal* or *tsalel* meaning shadow/ likeness, and *El*, the final syllable, meaning God. (Christ John Otto from Belonging House USA in his book [Bezalel](#)<sup>1</sup> also digs into the significance of the artist’s name and links to Gen 1: 27 “the image of God”, in Hebrew *B’tselem Elohim*.) *El* is short for *ayil*, meaning ram. (So when Hebrews hear God they get a picture of a ram ... (*ayil* is from a primitive root, *uwl*, meaning to twist, conveying the image of twisty ram’s horns).

Bezalel’s father is Uri, meaning Fiery, from *uwr* meaning fire or light, from a primitive root *owr*, meaning to be or become light, or to shine. Uri is the son of Hur, which has a double meaning - both Hole and White Cloth (especially Linen). The dual image of a hole or pit and white linen may, to an enquiring believer, flash up an inkling that these could be a picture of Jesus’ empty tomb. (If that sounds too much of a leap, hold the thought for later). Bezalel is of the tribe of Judah, meaning Praised. Judah is Jesus’ tribe. So Hebrews heard: “I have called by name *Image of God*, son of *Fiery*, son of *Hole / White linen*, of the tribe of *Praised*.”

Bezalel’s colleague was also called by God by name - Oholiab, meaning ‘*Father’s Tent*’ (so another home of God): *ab* means Father, *ohel* means Tent (from *ahal*, a primitive root meaning to be clear or shine, seen from a distance).

The tabernacle prefigured the temple that prefigured us as God’s dwelling place. Prefiguring the tabernacle was the tent of meeting, *ohel mo’ed* in Hebrew. *Mo’ed* means an appointed time, ie, a fixed time or season.

Names matter, it would seem from the Word, as do places and appointed times.

There is more in the Bible on the genealogy of craftsmen and quite a lot on their appointed places. For example, in 1 Chronicles 4:14 - “Seraiah (whose name means Jehovah is ruler) begot Joab (meaning Jehovah is father), “the father of *Ge Harashim*” (the Valley of Craftsmen), “for they were craftsmen”. They were not simply a family; they had a place with their name on it. They, like Bezalel, were of the tribe of Judah. Joab’s father’s father was Kenaz, the brother of Caleb who went with Joshua into the promised land.

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<sup>1</sup> *Bezalel: Redeeming a Renegade Creation* by Christ John Otto, Publ. 2015, Belonging House Creative. (Part of Christ John Otto’s series, *Throne in the Earth: The Ark, The Arts, and the Word Made Flesh Book 1*).

Fast forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and ask, what works has God prepared beforehand for today's Bezalels and Oholiab, now that all born again artists and artisans can be filled with the Holy Spirit, each one a father's tent or *oholiab*. One prophecy to ponder might be Zechariah's vision of four horns that had scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem. "Then the Lord showed me four craftsmen." Zechariah asked the Lord what the craftsmen are coming to do. The Lord replied, "the craftsmen are coming to terrify them, to cast out the horns of the nations that lifted up their horn against the land of Judah to scatter it." (Zech 1:18-21)

Terrifying nations might not be the first attribute you would expect to see on the CV of a craftsman. But Jesus was born to a carpenter's family. He is our pattern. And since God filled Bezalel with the Holy Spirit in order to make something on earth designed from a pattern seen in heaven, we can infer that God will continue to use Spirit-filled artists to produce work designed in heaven with power from on high to accomplish what He wills.

The word from God to Moses about building the sanctuary was for the whole people, not only for Bezalel, Oholiab and other skilled craftsmen who had parts to play. It was the entire congregation who supplied the materials Moses mentioned, for the building of the sanctuary, curtains, covers and Holy garments, and for the work and the service of the tabernacle. We know from Exodus 36 that people brought such an abundant supply, the craftsmen had to tell them to stop. There was too much.

Does today's church hear a call from God to go to the ends of the earth – or across the street – with heaven-sent modes of expressing who God is and what He has done? We translate the Bible into multiple languages, but where is the crucial truth in mainstream media and contemporary culture for those not ready to open a Bible or step into a church or talk to a Christian? Is the church ready to pray for culture change? Or to pay for it? What if high calibre arts were integral to the panoply of mission and evangelism?

First though, the church needs to engage strategically to raise up world class artists of faith. Some wonderful new artworks have been commissioned for major cathedrals from non-Christians. Of course, God can use anyone, but imagine the power of the work if the artists were Spirit-filled? For some prayer pointers, check out the [Hollywood Prayer Network](#).

God is stirring up labourers to the harvest in many spheres of influence, including the arts, working in unified movements beyond church boundaries (what Sam Metcalf<sup>2</sup> from Christian Resource Ministries calls sodality rather than modality church, ie pioneer missional ministries rather than settler local church structures). One international example gathering momentum in the UK is [Movement Day UK](#) (MDUK). One of its leaders, Roger Sutton, dubs this a "friendship-based unity"<sup>3</sup> movement seeking to co-ordinate a more strategic joined-up approach to blessing people. Many attended MDUK's event in London in autumn 2017 where leaders from churches and those working in business, arts, health, politics, local government, media, education and more gathered.

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<sup>2</sup> *Beyond The Local Church: How Apostolic Movements Can Change The World* by Sam Metcalf. Publ. IVP Books IL, USA 2015

<sup>3</sup> *A Gathering Momentum* Ed. Roger Sutton. Publ. Instant Apostle 2017

MDUK's Arts Track sessions were facilitated by industry leaders such as Chief Operating Officer of the British Fashion Council and London Fashion Week, Simon Ward. Movement Day's Arts Track leader, artist and curator Lesley Sutton, also directs [Passionart](#) in Manchester. Passionart's aim is "to recover beauty at the heart of our communities through collective acts of creativity".

Movement Day conversations continue in many towns and cities worldwide, sharing stories of how God has moved. Where believers town or city-wide have joined as one to pray (2 Chron: 14), to seek God for His strategies, and to act with Him and each other in unity, they see the outflow of blessings - the poor are fed, the sick are healed and the crime rate decimated. All glory to His name.

We see another example of what God is doing through the arts via the wider church in [Wedgwood Circle](#) in the USA, where a group of philanthropists and cultural influencers seek to promote the creation of good, true, beautiful art in mainstream culture. They're named to reference Josiah Wedgwood (of the English pottery family and an ardent abolitionist) whose mission was "doing well, while doing good." Wedgwood Circle believe "creativity and imagination reflect the very nature of God, and that people of faith have a responsibility to be creators and patrons of the world's finest art and entertainment."

In its first decade, Wedgwood Circle invested c. US\$ 18m in arts projects and artists exemplifying significant potential for cultural influence. They recognise individual artists of faith might need support to succeed in the mainstream. So, for example, they provide a week-long retreat for promising fiction writers of faith, to meet and work with accomplished authors and industry leaders, to work on their craft, receive mentorship and to rest.

In the North East of England, the community of Bishop Auckland, and indeed its economy, have been completely transformed by [The Auckland Project](#). One strand is a theatrical epic, *Kynren*, with a cast and crew of 1,500 telling 2,000 years of England's history. The Christian philanthropist Jonathan Ruffer, told [BBC Radio 4's Front Row](#) the project was "a God thing". Their vision is "To transform Auckland Castle into a faith, art and heritage destination of international significance, reinvigorating the town of Bishop Auckland and the wider area through social and economic regeneration". The project is opening a new Spanish Gallery, with as a centrepiece, the "Blessings of Jacob" by Spanish master, Zurbaran. These paintings have hung in Auckland Castle for 250 years and their purchase by Ruffer in 2010 hold them in perpetuity for the local people – also making Auckland through this new home for Spanish art, a world visitor destination. The economy is being further transformed by a creative business pod providing workshop, studio and retail space, as well as support and mentoring, for creative and artisan companies from across County Durham.

But what is God calling for in Reading? Last year churches across Reading joined in 10 Days of Prayer in a tent in Forbury Gardens, the space where the Abbey and town join. Like-minded believers gathered around a cross and worshiped and prayed, remembering 2 Chron 14: "If my people which are called by my name shall humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land". Local artists of faith were closely involved in organising the

event and community art group [Compassionate Creative](#) “co-created” with the Holy Spirit an installation at the centre of the tent, incorporating a large cross.

The ruins of Reading Abbey are about to be revealed after years of closure for restoration. This is of global interest, not just to Christians. The story of the abbey’s ongoing excavation has been followed by media including *The New York Times*, as the dig may yield the remains of Henry 1. One of the town’s professional theatre companies *Reading Between The Lines (RBL)* commissioned a series of new plays about Henry and his descendants by Beth Flintoff. Their first production included a penitent Henry 1 proclaiming that he would build an abbey in a place where two rivers meet called ‘Redding’. It would be the largest in the land - “a house of miracles... where people will come and be healed”.

We look for restoration of God’s living stones to see this come to pass. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

Continued development around Reading Abbey ruins in the future could potentially offer a unique opportunity to help tell Reading’s story to the world – and to co-create with God in its next chapter.

Following this talk, we heard news that the, [Theatre and Arts Reading \(TAR\) CIC](#) a local forum of arts and business communities, has got the go-ahead to access Reading Prison in order to carry out a feasibility study, funded by Arts Council England, towards its proposal to create a world class arts centre there. It aims to embrace the history of the site and to “stay true to the historical significance of Reading Abbey”.

[Reading’s Culture and Heritage Strategy 2015-2030](#) vision is: “By 2030, Reading will be recognised as a centre of creativity with a reputation for cultural and heritage excellence at a regional, national and international level with increased engagement across the town.”

The executive summary comments: “Realising the vision will require everyone involved in the cultural life of Reading to work together.” The church in Reading, housed in some of the town’s landmark heritage sites, could play a key role in collaborating with the community and helping to breathe life into our town towards a more vibrant culture.

Since tonight’s event is hosted by the workplace prayer group ministry Reading At Work, it seems appropriate to look at a worker-led arts enterprise that sought to change culture – and as our theme is unity, let us look at the Unity Theatre (1937-1986).

Funded by trades unions, it grew out of the workers’ theatre movement, big in Soviet Russia. Unity’s artistic merit soon raised it far above ‘*agitprop*’ or propaganda, offering excellent drama with actors like Alfie Bass, a young Michael Gambon, and writers such as Arnold Wesker and Sean O’Casey. Their first life member was H G Wells. Unity Theatre became a centre for all the arts, including a publishing house - Left Book Club, pioneered in 1936 by Victor Gollancz, published hundreds of titles including George Orwell’s *Road To Wigan Pier*.

Performing on the backs of lorries, at factory gates, Unity's productions went to where people were. They saw themselves as rooted in the tradition of medieval Mystery Plays which had toured the countryside on carts. The medieval trades guilds had each taken responsibility for funding a section of the Bible drama (a genre banned after the Reformation).

Unity's dramas were about fighting for freedom and social realism. They soon outgrew the touring lorries and needed a theatre, so acquired the use of an old Methodist chapel. It was rented to them by a sympathetic vicar related to Dad's Army actor the late John Le Mesurier. (Today's sympathetic vicars with under-utilised spaces might well find arts faith enterprises eager to move in and use them, to their mutual benefit.)

At Unity many trades people worked night and day at no charge to convert that disused chapel into the Workers' Theatre, ready to open on a foggy night in November 1937. One of the performers was African-American singer and actor, Paul Robeson. The audience gave him a five-minute standing ovation when he walked onto the stage. He sang half a dozen spirituals and spoke of the Biblical references as parables of the struggles of black people (his father was a preacher in New Jersey). When asked why he turned down starring roles at Drury Lane and other West End venues to appear at the Unity, which he did, like everyone else, for nothing, his response was, "My father was a slave. Can I forget that?" He also said, "The artist must take sides. He must elect to fight for freedom or slavery."

Robeson sang just over the road from here at Reading Town Hall in 1960, at a concert arranged by the Reading and District Association for Peace. Audience members still talk about it. What if the Reading and district people of the Prince of Peace got together to invite one of the world's leading concert singers to perform here today. Artists with a passion for God to set captives free, create days to remember and talk about long afterwards.

How is it that the arts have an impact like no other area of operation? Here's perhaps why:

- In these darker days when codes of conduct curb freedom to speak, the arts can offer a 'lingua franca' in ways that can chime or resonate. Parables were Jesus' mode of conveying truth (Ps 78:2 and Matt 13:35 "I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world.")
- Arts can speak implicitly to those with an antipathy towards Christianity, getting under the wire of prejudice, by-passing mindsets.
- Arts can be a conduit to communicate ineffable God through the ineffable.
- Spirit-led arts touch emotions, evoking a visceral or heart response. A good movie can make you laugh or cry.
- The arts are a spiritual activity eliciting a spiritual reaction – awareness of a spiritual reality is a necessary prequel to faith.
- Beauty attracts. God draws people through beauty.
- God-breathed arts can be intercessory or healing. Growing clinical evidence shows that the arts can be healing. People can express pain or passion articulating through creativity what is too complex or difficult to simply say.

- Prophetic artists make the invisible visible: artists interpret what is ‘seen’ in the heavenlies, to the church and to the world, making known mystery through revelation.
- Story-tellers help us understand ourselves, our world. Artists search for essence, find voice, capture the nub of identity.

How are God-led artists different?

The world views artists in terms of celebrity. However, the Word teaches us to die to self to be a fit dwelling place for God. If we want to change the culture, artists need to be counter-cultural and stay low.

And you can’t get much lower than caterpillars. Look to the caterpillar you arty-type! The youngest gather close for safety on the leaves that are larval fodder. They grow, shed skins, grow, shed skins, and form smaller groups. The Holy Spirit highlighted John Woolmer’s book, *The Grand Surprise: Butterflies and the Kingdom of God* in the 24 hours before tonight’s meeting. Woolmer likens the life cycle of a butterfly to the miracle of being born again. While praying about whether the names of Bezalel and his forefathers were truly significant to artists, this book seemed to jump off a shelf and open to a close-up photo of an empty white chrysalis. Woolmer notes its resemblance to the empty tomb and the folded white linen of John 20. Finding this yesterday seemed to give credence to an inkling that the name of Bezalel’s grandfather, Hur, meaning both hole and also white linen could suggest a hidden picture, prophetic of the resurrection.

This confirmation seems to crystallise further a sense of Bezalel’s divine destiny and identity, his purpose in making a home for God: Bezalel (Shadow or Image of *God*), son of Uri (Fiery - *Holy Spirit*), son of Hur - ‘hole’ / ‘white linen’ (signs of *Jesus’* tomb). What a prophetic patrimony for God’s first appointed artist – a triune hat-trick!

With God dwelling in and co-creating with artists, what could not be accomplished by prayer leading to discernment of His strategies, with the whole church working together to release the creatives, smooth their way, and underpin in prayer. Bearing in mind that the Lord told Zechariah that the craftsmen are coming to terrify the nations (Zech1:18-21) artists need to be well trained, versed, disciplined, equipped, aiming at their goal.

The ‘Dam Buster’ pilots flew in formation, highly trained and close teams, knowing their positions, flying low all the way, sights fixed on the targets, holding steady, unflinching in the flak – releasing a quirky but inspired bouncing bomb. No-one knew if it would work: developed in a laboratory under cover of a suburban park and trialled at the seaside, they flew in faith. It was costly in lives lost: 42% of the 133 souls on that night’s mission did not return. But this single precision raid had a high strategic impact in the course of WWII.

Let us pray for and come alongside the artists, that they would be gifted, anointed, trained and disciplined, close to God, knowing their calling, staying low all the way; that they would have a strategic impact to influence culture, to break strongholds and let His love and healing flood in; and that there would be a great harvest ingathered at the latter rains, as the Lord pours out His Spirit on all flesh - that many would be drawn to the one true living

God through the beauty of holiness in heaven-sent arts, discovering His true identity, and their own.

We long to see the ways that God will use His artists here in Reading.

Glory to Him.

### **QUESTIONS (discussion and answers from audience)**

Q. Love the idea of doing something creative. How do you bring in your Christian creative approach to the mainstream?

A. A friend was opening a performing arts academy and had intended putting the word Christian in the title but sensed the Holy Spirit showing him that it would be a deterrent to some; the word 'Christian' was not needed. Without it, they'd simply be attracted by the beauty of holiness.

Arthur Burke, a visiting speaker during The Call in Reading in 2002 discerned that Reading has a 'redemptive gift' of hospitality. Hospitality and food is a part of our culture. Invite people to cultural events, preferably ones originated by believers. Offer a meal afterwards to have time to get to know each other and talk about what they have just experienced.

Q. My background is church, my gifting is primarily from a teaching perspective. God is now challenging me to move beyond this, into the world of corporate business, not so comfortable. But I am also an artist, and I do know the power of stories, parables and pictures. God opened a door to work with a high-profile corporate as a consultancy – God gave a picture and metaphor before the interview for this work – I was able to share this in response to a question and got the contract. This is a new field of work and so I need to rely on God to ask for insight about their corporate identity as an organisation. I believe I am being put into that business situation as a storyteller.

A. There is a missional project planned for Reading that is very much about restoring a sense of original identity through prayer ministry to help discern how God made each person to be, and through expressing this in a creative form.

Q. Are there examples of artistic outreach?

A. A great example would be [New Life Art Ministries](#) – it sets up creative schools worldwide, bringing arts training mixed with prayer, to touch the lives of women, young people and children in desperate circumstances, even rescuing some from slavery. Another is [Springs of Hope Foundation](#) in Kurdistan helping Yezidi refugees traumatised by war, seeking to live change, sharing life, giving all-round support including therapeutic arts. The Yezidi find tolerance and patience amidst art and music and drama, peace in their 'Rainbow Zone' house, and hope in painting their reality.

Q. Testimony – of giving away one piece of art a day. Whilst walking the dog, I took along a picture I had painted and had the opportunity to talk to another dog walker, knowing the picture was for her. God’s prompting was confirmed when the lady received the picture and, in tears, shared why it spoke to her heart.

A. Simple: listen to God and do what he says. New Wine summer camp used to have an arts pavilion where artists came together all week to listen to God and make work as He guided. These were exhibited on the final day when it was open to all at New Wine. Visitors were moved. Some fed back that a particular work, poem or piece of music spoke eloquently and specifically to them personally.

Q. Not everyone realises that you can have a conversation with God, and that he responds. The fantastic element here is that God is co-creating with the artist. This is more fun than church sometimes makes out Christianity to be.

A. The annual South of Reading Churches Fun day in Whitley is a big open-air event to give people a chance to mix, make new friends and break down barriers. It includes community arts activities. Around 5,000 people attend. An artist came to lead the community in the creation of a beautiful giant artwork, which many people took part in making. The team would love to see it on display, perhaps wrapped around a bus going up and down Northumberland Avenue, so that people could look at it and say ‘I was part of that. I helped make that’.

Q. The prophetic hearing from God is a clear common theme. Do a lot of creatives find themselves more in tune with the Holy Spirit than others?

A. Perhaps creatives tend to be dreamers, and so may be more open to hearing from God in this way. But all of God’s children are creative; and creativity can be shared with the community.

A. I would never have thought of myself as creative. On my first trip to Israel, I saw the Mount of Olives and wanted to capture it in a mosaic, so decided to do something big, really because I had a big patch of wall in my stairwell that I wanted to fill. I made a picture of the Mount and the old city of Jerusalem. It took seven years to complete and I never thought of God talking to me through it. I went through a phase of not hearing from God – whilst a friend was seriously ill – yet in working on the mosaic, I just knew that somehow I had to depict the second coming in the overall image, but I was not clear on how to do this. My husband challenged me to complete the work. It was only afterwards that I realised how God spoke through the work of making it. Whilst doing this, I got involved in a charity that meant annual trips to Israel, so the images included in the mosaic evolved over a few years. God was guiding this throughout, and speaking through that creative process. God gave the name for the mosaic *“Surely I am coming quickly.” Amen. Even so, come, Lord Jesus! Rev 22 v. 20.* In conclusion, I could not have produced this mosaic without him. ([See more here](#)).

A. It’s about being available for God.

A. Society puts people in boxes. From working with engineers, mathematicians and physicists and I see there is an interaction with the Holy Spirit - they can be prophetic too. We should not box people into creatives and non-creatives; finding a solution to a problem in that sphere is just as creative as drawing a picture.

A. People can speak prophecy even if they do not realise it; some may not even be believers. Only some work out that it is in fact prophecy from God.

A. I write poetry but often do not feel it is good enough to share. At one session at church, I did so, and one lady was so touched that had to leave the space; she came back later and confirmed how much it meant to her. We need to be more confident – perfection is not needed, it just needs to be good enough.

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