

**Juliet Benner, *Contemplative Vision: A Guide to Christian Art and Prayer* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2011) ISBN 978-0-8308-3544-7, paperback, 180 pages. A book in the IVP *formatio, tradition, experience & transformation* series.**

Benner is a qualified and experienced spiritual director. She has led spiritual retreats in Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, Denmark, Norway and across the US; not to mention her home country of Canada. She is also a trained visual artist. This means her outward eye is conditioned to see things most people don't normally see. Like Sister Wendy the quirky nun whose television series on interpreting art ran on television for several years – Benner has the ability to perceive meaning out of what is otherwise a blank canvas. For many years she was a docent in an art gallery, teaching people how to look at and interpret pieces of classical art.

In addition to these noteworthy credentials, Benner is also something of a contemplative. She suggests there is a strong connection between Christian spirituality and the inward eye of faith. As a spiritual director she understands her task to be that of teaching people how to see God in all things. In order to do this, she uses Christian art to awaken the eye of faith into action. In the context of a quiet, unhurried and supervised explorations of her spiritual retreats, she appropriates the sensory representations of Christian arts to enable her charges to go deeper in their spiritual lives. In effect she reverses the "stripping of the altars" which occurred in the Reformation, by returning the lost symbols of sign, image and artwork from the margins back to the centre of religious experience. It is through these symbolic means that the mystery of God is brought to awareness.

Benner argues that the vaulted ceilings, flying buttress architecture and stained-glass windows of churches and cathedrals were a living representation of the Christian gospel for a largely illiterate Mediaeval audience. She also argues that in our 21st century consumer society, people trained in the materialist worldview are largely illiterate in matters of the soul. While television and the internet are not often seen as ready-made partners for the spiritual life, they largely function in the same way that the soul does – through pictures and stories. When they are appropriated into the spiritual life, these pictures and stories become prompts and symbolic representations of God's quest to find his lost and reprobate creations; and our journey home towards God who is our true life and light.

*Contemplative Vision* is a book that sparkles. Using the headings 'listening', 'looking' and 'responding' – Benner leads readers through a series of 13 visions of Christ. Using the concept of transformed awareness, transformed vision, and transformed living, the book acts as a retreat in its own right. Benner sets the scene for you to take your own personal retreat in the pages of the book by advising readers to read slowly and contemplatively, to make your reading and contemplation an act of prayer, to read the biblical text slowly, and to turn your attention to the paintings that correspond with each of the exploratory chapters in the book. Benner is a master of noticing things; both in the pieces of art explored in the text (13 high-quality colour reproductions of the artwork she refers to can be found in the middle of the book between pages 96 – 97), and in the spiritual life generally.

As I read through the book I found myself paying attention to my own inner life. This surprised me because most books I read tend to engage the mind. While not ignoring the mind, Benner has an ability to cause us to 'attend' to the heart. Following Augustine and Scheler – for whom the "order of the heart" was primary – Benner enables us to take the journey inward. In the busyness of our 24/7 lives, Benner calls us to immerse ourselves in the spiritual journey to which Christ has called us by his invitation to "Come, follow me!" Although we might suspect that the focal point of the book is art for art's sake; that is not the case. The focus is on the eye, with art the agent provocateur. Yet the ear is not forgotten, because in each of the 13 case studies the artworks she selects carefully focus on a passage of Scripture.

Contemplative Vision is therefore not another Sister Wendy's Journey to Rome – instead it is actually a Bible study using the multiple dimensions of both the visual and the memorised aural dimensions of the biblical text. As one reads through the book, there is a sense of being immersed in the grand history of Christian spirituality. The historicity of the biblical text and the classical nature of the artworks themselves cause the reader to be steeped in Christian spiritual tradition as well as the Christian spiritual story. Further, individual Western Christians find themselves being addressed by Jesus in a personal way – and yet are able to escape their own personal 'limits' by being invited into a drama which is infinitely larger than their own passing lives.

Taking just one of the 13 chapters as an exemplar of Benner's ability to act as a skilful spiritual and artistic guide; let me introduce you to Nicholas Poussin's painting entitled 'The Adoration of the Shepherds' (chapter 5, pages 68-77), painted sometime between 1633-4. Already you might be able to ascertain that this is a picture which recounts the story of Jesus' birth from Luke 2:8-20. Benner invites us to peer into Poussin's painting, taking particular notice of the actors depicted in the frieze-like moment (the cherubs above, the adoring family itself, and the weather-beaten shepherds). In each case, their eyes are fixed on the Christ-child. Even the donkey has its eyes trained on Jesus. Benner notes that the shepherds ignore the angelic visitors and the angelic hosts, maintaining their vision of Jesus. Despite their earlier fear and terror, the shepherds – to their surprise – have found a place in God's presence with no hint of social exclusion, class inferiority or divine rejection. Immanuel has come to them, and indeed he comes to us – not simply every Christmas – but here, now, in the moment that clasps us to our humanity.

The genius of Benner's work is – I believe – its ability to reach beyond the ink-on-page flatness of the book in our hands, to involve us in the broader scope of salvation history and to cause us to pay attention to the purposes of God for our own lives. True to her calling, Benner both points us to the artwork before us, but more than that – to the divine realities towards which the paintings point. She is a "docent in the house of wonder" (to borrow Michael Jenkins' title.<sup>[1]</sup> Along with the angels and shepherds, we are invited to pause and wonder, to stop and worship!

All this is of fundamental importance to the task of spiritual leadership in the 21st century, when so much of the role of pastoral leadership is captured by management, leadership, oversight and vision-casting on the part of pastoral leaders. Would it not be so much more compelling, fruitful – even enjoyable – if we were together with our people, able to sit at Jesus' feet and to see him in his glory high and lifted up? Benner reminds us that before Isaiah was commissioned to his prophetic task (Isaiah 6) – he was required to see God. Before the disciples were commissioned with their apostolic office – it was of utmost importance that they were to see Jesus' glory at the transfiguration. And if our congregations are once again to grow and thrive and truly be the people of God in the world, it is of the greatest necessity that they "fix their eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfect of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). And lastly, if our ministry leaders are to be effective in mission and leading others

into a deep and authentic walk with Christ – we ourselves must learn how to drink deeply of Christ through the mystery of contemplative vision.

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[1] Michael Jenkins. 'Docents in the House of Wonder: pastoral leadership, spiritual transformation, and the sacred Other', *Journal of Religious Leadership*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (Fall 2002), 1-20.

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