

Doing it yourself

With God among the paintbrushes

Chris Cullen

AS A SMALL BOY CERTAIN INITIALS were an intimate part of my life, as I suspect they were, and probably still are, in the lives of many *Way* readers. At the top of every exercise our Jesuit teachers got us to write AMDG – in the hope, no doubt, that sooner or later everything we did would be dedicated, consciously or unconsciously, ‘to the greater glory of God’.

Those were the days before mnemonics and acronyms were discovered. Now, of course, they infest every moment of our lives. One of the earliest, at least on this side of the Atlantic, was ‘DIY’ – which, before the religio-acronymologists amongst you get to work, has got nothing (or at least nothing immediately obvious) to do with ‘Deus’ or ‘Yahweh’. It stands, of course, for ‘Do-It-Yourself’ – the art of making complicated building and mending jobs look good with the minimum of professional assistance.

Put like that, and with or without the acronym, there is nothing particularly mysterious about ‘doing it yourself’. For centuries people have had to do all sorts of mundane tasks for themselves, from painting houses to repairing machinery, and – more recently – digging into the nether regions of their computer software. This article does not, however, presume to make some sort of spiritual commentary on the often rather banal patching and mending of the complete beginner. These thoughts are called forth by the general title the editors have chosen for this issue – ‘spirituality at home’. Home-making is a lot more subtle and sophisticated than it used to be. But it’s also more distant and demanding. Like so much in our modern world, it’s less under our control. We *think* we can ‘do-it-ourselves’, that the distinction between professional and amateur is a thing of the past. In practice, of course, nothing is so simple.

The ‘do-it-yourself’ phenomenon

Begun in the 60s as part of the new freedom and leisure culture, DIY has almost become a substitute religion – and not just because so many people spend their Sundays papering the spare room, fixing the door-

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handles, or painting the downstairs bathroom. It has its gurus – those energetic young men (and women) who regularly appear on our TV sets telling us how to renovate dowdy rooms and dilapidated villas. It has its sacred sites, great cathedral-like warehouses full of tools and building materials, dominating massive out-of-town shopping malls. It has its hallowed texts, handbooks, manuals – and even CD-ROMS – now freely available beyond the select band of initiates. It has a selection of myths and legends, parables and moral tales, warnings to the unwary and sage advice to the novice. Above all, it has developed a tradition of rites and rituals, liturgies and holy lore, all sorts of arcane techniques for preparing, priming, polishing, sanding, finishing, making good – and simply making do. And like all major industries DIY leads to a certain sectarianism, with allegiances being cultivated to this and that company.

A bit over the top, perhaps? But not much. There are plenty of substitute religions in our postmodern world. Devotion to one's own achievement is just the most obvious. At one level there is no harm in this – in fact a lot to be commended. We can all think of examples of some sort of spiritual value we have discovered in doing something for and by ourselves, something we never dreamed possible. It might be running a marathon, or learning how to paint, or starting up your own business.

I remember the sense of pride when I built a cupboard when we were first married – though goodness knows it was a mess. But it made me realize that I had a talent which could be developed. It must have come from somewhere. God-given, no doubt. More than twenty years ago I built another cupboard in the house where I am writing this article. It's still intact and presentable. Maybe I have learned something, perhaps adding some degree of competence to what God started differently. I wonder if this could be some sort of prayer in itself, giving back to God what he has given to me?

Coping with consumer culture

But let that thought rest for the moment. I first want to stay with the analogy of religion. At another level, like various unthinking myths and rituals which pepper our lives, doing-things-ourselves can become an end in itself. What are we to make of the current craze for 'makeovers'? I have often wondered why, for a significant number of people, refurbishing rooms, throwing out perfectly good fittings, changing colour-schemes almost as easily as one changes one's underclothes, are all so central to their lives. Another aspect of the consumer culture,

perhaps. It can, of course, be enormously fulfilling to get one's surroundings 'just right'. I remember the man who lived not far from my parents some years ago. He built his own house. It took him years and in the end it was quite unique and very special. It also stood out against the estate of boringly similar houses which surrounded it. Nowadays, with the amount of packaged materials and fittings available, we can all do it ourselves. But usually the result will be much the same, a variation on a few themes, usually replicas of some long-distant architectural style. It's not as if we ever manage to create anything really different and exciting.

More insidiously, however, that 'yourself' element can become obsessively inward-looking. If there is any spiritual motivation, it is that of self-improvement through tinkering with the immediate environment. I may not be able to do anything about the world outside, but at least I can get this bit here under control. No doubt there is something in each of us which needs to feel we are in charge, that we can establish borders, mark our territory, define who we are against the world beyond. Certainly we gain a certain self-confidence and inner strength from marking our personal landscape. But what about other values? Other-help rather than self-help? And is there any place for God in this new religion?

Of course, I overstate the case, painting the scene – if you will forgive the metaphor – in black and white terms. If we're honest, most of us are reluctant repairers of the old and even more unwilling designers of the new. We have houses and we have responsibilities. We are neither completely hopeless with screwdriver and paintbrush nor ruthlessly determined to build our own place. There are certain things we have to do just to stop the roof leaking – or to avoid the expense of always calling in the often unavailable builder or plumber. But the presence of God in what seem at first sight to be mundane chores never really occurs. Hardly surprising, perhaps. Many household tasks – changing tap-washers, mending fuses, putting up shelves – are about as spiritually inspiring as listening to the shipping forecast. All too easily, when the bathroom has to be retiled or the ceiling washed down, we while away the time deliberately distracted by the cricket commentary or some distant muzak on the radio. No inkling of prayer or meditation there.

The carpenter's son

On the other hand, prayer is not just a matter of reciting formulae, or even mantras. To return to that earlier point, it's also about recognizing

and valuing who we are before the God who created us. Maybe, then, if we are going to find God in the paintbrushes, we need to think about the spiritual value of the act of creation, of building something with our hands. Jesus, after all, was brought up in a carpenter's home. 'Is not this the carpenter's son?' they asked when he returned to his own country, amazed that an ordinary local boy could display such wisdom. He might not have had the help of packaged materials and flat-pack self-assembly kits but he must have known a thing or two about how to turn basic materials – and some very average men and women – into something valuable and significant.

It's easy to forget that Jesus was a real human being. If he followed Joseph's trade, then he was something of a craftsman. But he must also have done very ordinary things, making and mending in order to maintain a home. I remember the experience of visiting Nazareth during a pilgrimage to the Holy Land which my wife and I made during the last year. It was more than the conventional pilgrimage, taking in the usual sites in the Holy Land. We were also making a pilgrimage of our own, to Egypt, where we wanted to find my father-in-law's grave on the banks of the Suez canal. 'Home' was very much on our minds – in more senses than one.

Jesus' home town, not so many miles from the Sea of Galilee, now boasts a population divided three ways, between Christian Arabs, an equal number of Muslims and a minority of Jews. Nazareth today is scruffy and grimy. It is easy to appreciate how Nathanael could have cynically observed, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' The centrepiece of our visit was the Church of the Annunciation – more a basilica, in fact three, each on top of the previous one. The present building is a masterpiece of modern architecture.

But my most poignant memory of Nazareth lies elsewhere. After paying our respects to the big church, we walked out into the city, along a street towards a third-century synagogue, itself built on the foundations of an earlier building. Quite possibly Jesus preached there. Certainly he knew the stones of the place. As with so much of what we observed in this country – the places and the sights such as the Sea of Galilee and the ruins of Roman occupation – it made a powerful impression.

More astonishing and unlikely was the fact that the street we were walking down was lined with carpenters' workshops. Not shops selling tourist-tat, as at Cana where – surprise, surprise – they were selling flagons of wine. No, here were real cottage industries, small factories, two or three people making furniture, or door-frames, or turning wood

for chair legs. This we could see through doorways and windows. And this two thousand years after he must have worked here. Even a crude DIYer like me couldn't avoid feeling at one with a man who would have worked in a shop just like these – and probably at some point created a cupboard. I suspect his lasted longer than mine. But then he would have taken longer over making it in the first place.

Remembering God's gift

Beyond such conventionally pious reflections, that uncanny link joining up the centuries made me think about the way God keeps coming back into our lives and giving us a bit of a jolt. In the modern state of Israel, Nazareth is in many ways a forgotten town, a northern outpost with a minority Jewish population. If it were not for the explicit connection with Jesus it would be no more remarkable than many another Palestinian settlement. But on that day it spoke to me of two very different cultures. Not those separated by two thousand years, but two very different conceptions of the way God becomes present to us.

The energies which have gone into building the state of Israel have, of course, displaced Palestinians with all the resulting uprisings, bombings and repression which do not need to be rehearsed here. It struck me that in many ways Israelis are the ultimate DIYers. They have had to build their state themselves, in the face of overwhelming odds. They have always been concerned to better themselves, to build their own homes and anchor their settlements in what for them is the Promised Land. This is particularly apparent in the West Bank where neat Israeli dwellings dominate the landscape. The problem, of course, is that in so many ways they act, they 'do it themselves', to the exclusion of another community who also seek to create a home. Palestinian Arabs, caught up in centuries of poverty and neglect, are now entrapped in a different form of exploitation. Such a DIY can clearly corrupt.

It may be thoroughly simplistic, but I have a suspicion that the destructive divisions between Jew and Muslim which infest so many of the forgotten corners of the Holy Land result from too much of the wrong sort of religion, from the forgetfulness of God, and from the human arrogance which results. I am not suggesting that there is some inherent distinction between an idealistic faith, built round themes of Exodus and Exile, which inspires self-reliance, and a laissez-faire fatalism which remains content with the 'will of Allah'. My thought has to do with the God revealed in this man Jesus of Nazareth. Is there

not a cruel irony in an experienced carpenter going to his death carrying two rough lumps of wood? With his latent training did he momentarily identify the type of wood? Did he look critically at the crudeness of the cross itself? The master-craftsman submitting to the instant effort of some local hack?

God is present in creation – and in *our* creative works – but not always in the way we think. If you ask the average DIYer for an image of God, you might well find God likened to the manager of the enormous industry which supplies all the carefully produced materials – and the tools, and the instructions, and the delivery systems, and the helplines. Or, more practically, maybe God is more like the helpful little jobbing builder round the corner who gets you out of a mess when the whole thing has gone horribly wrong. But God is not the ultimate supply chain, benignly providing for all our needs and making us feel good about our poor efforts. Nor is prayer and spirituality a mechanical routine which we can plug into as if it's a matter of wiring up some sort of heavenly ring-main. Prayer is a constant attention to the small things, a confidence such as Jesus showed, that even – perhaps especially – when things go wrong, God is there too labouring to bring the world to birth. It's best to be a little humble about one's own abilities and more generous with regard to one's reliance on others, and on God.

Whenever we make something with our hands – however mundane – it is in some mysterious way an act of co-operation with the work of God. It sometimes seems a miracle to have 'got it right'. But there is always a feeling of real pleasure in finishing a job. Without that sense of delight, it can become yet another task which is supposed to be its own justification, and which therefore supposedly justifies us, makes us 'someone', saves us from being obliterated by the great morass of the world. One of the mantras which the DIY gospel blares out is 'You can do it if you B&Q it' – an advertising slogan of one of the more gigantic of the great godlike home decoration conglomerates. I have often felt that all this does is encourage false expectations, a sort of modern Pelagianism, where we soak up the fatal conviction that we can make it all by our little selves. My personal counter-mantra is that if it cannot be done in ten minutes, then call someone in. Of course, very little ever gets done in ten minutes. But at least it acts as a sort of escape mechanism, enabling me to have a go but to be realistic and to accept that there may just occasionally, somewhere, some time, be a need for a professional. Someone else's help need not make us feel inadequate, any more than God's grace should make us feel less human.

So is there an approach to DIY which really does remember that the act of creation is always God's creation – that, in the end, all our human efforts derive from God and must, ultimately, be returned to God? I have no 'spirituality of DIY' to offer beyond the rather obvious reflection that any work of creation, even something as ordinary as making a cupboard, is a *co-operation*, building on what God has given. On the other hand, I can think of a number of points which do have some connection with the great themes of the spiritual life.

Preparing

First, there is the raw material. Anyone who has ever tried to restore or refurbish an old building knows what it is like to confront the sin of the past. I mean, of course, that ghastly experience of finding that the previous occupants painted over the old wallpaper or managed to encase the screws on that old cupboard under several coats of heavy-duty gloss. It would be so nice if everything was neat and orderly: the surfaces already clean, the materials just the right size, nothing broken or missing from the package. But it never is. And why is it that there is always one screw which won't come out, or – worse – won't go in?

God's work of creation, if we are to believe the Genesis account, was accounted 'good' – but the history of salvation reminds us that it was always in need of constant attention. The DIYer trying to make the home a little brighter and more efficient is only battling against the constant encroachment of decay. No doubt God could have made the world like an ordered machine. He didn't. Jesus of Nazareth teaches us through his ordinariness to face the everyday reality of sin and with the grace of God to make it good. Again and again.

Reading

Most DIYers are passionate about getting the job done as quickly and painlessly as possible. We take one look at the task in hand, pick up the tools and the materials with scarcely a second thought and attack the task with gusto. Like those who refuse to ask the way even when hopelessly lost in an alien environment, we tend to rely on experiment alone. At some point, however, even the most pathologically independent DIYer has to give way to the maxim which should be carved in stone in some prominent part of every home: 'When all else fails, read the instructions'.

The creation story in Genesis is so familiar that we forget that it is really a statement of faith, a creed. It's the story of a people who were

exiled, far from home, and had to re-establish their sense of identity. It told them about the nature of a God who gave them something special and would never desert them. But the story is easily forgotten, just as the people often strayed from the Covenant. As the prophets constantly reminded the people, the story has to be told again. God's instructions are fairly simple (unlike the gobbledygook in many a self-assembly pack) but they do have to be studied. It sometimes helps to sit back and take time before assuming that we can do-it-ourselves unaided.

Enjoying

Once the surfaces have been cleaned and the mistakes of past generations smoothed away, we can get on with the business of enjoying finishing the job. There is clearly something to be said for recognizing in the most ordinary of human activities, and the rhythms and routines which they encourage, a contentment, a certain mood of tranquillity perhaps, which comes as the 'finished product' begins to emerge.

What price nirvana by mindfulness-of-one-hand-painting? Perhaps not. But, while I would not want to suggest ways of praying to the movement of the paintbrush, I do think, once again, that the sheer ordinariness of everyday tasks brings its own rewards. Craftsmen such as I saw in Nazareth and crude DIYers like myself are not distinguished by skill alone but by the patience with which tasks are approached. We don't know whether Jesus was a good carpenter or just spent more and more time in the local synagogue learning another trade, but we do know that he became the greatest of teachers. Thirty years or so of a 'hidden life' which remains something of a mystery: he took his time to let his knowledge of the Father become natural to him and increasingly clear to others. It does take time to get any creative work 'just right'.

Rejoicing

The last act of God's creation was the Sabbath, a day of rest, God's final gift to his people. There is work, and there is rest. The work of creation and redemption goes on; God is always dragging us out of the messes we get ourselves into. But God also teaches us how to relax and enjoy his gifts. Perhaps if we simply sat back and took a little more delight in what we have managed to do, even the botched job which doesn't quite match the picture on the packing, we would be a little more content. Which is only to say that there is a spiritual value in any task if it's done to the best of our ability. It does not have to be schoolboy Latin exercises which deserve to be headed AMDG.

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