

Blog post by Karl Newman

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Through the Wardrobe Door: Why Art, Story and Beauty Matter to Faith

There are some places where I feel more aware of God's presence than others and oddly enough, it is not always in church! Sometimes it is my art studio. Sometimes it is an art gallery and once it was standing beneath a canopy of colour and light inside Antoni Gaudi's Sagrada Família in Barcelona, watching sunlight pour through stained glass, bathing us all in glorious colour like liquid fire.

These places feel holy to me. Not because they are always quiet or explicitly "religious," but because they open up something inside me. They create space for wonder, reflection and mystery. They invite me to pay attention.

And perhaps that is one of the deepest differences between religion and faith.

Religion often seeks certainty. It likes definitions, boundaries, systems and answers. Faith, however, invites investigation. Faith is willing to live with questions. It opens conversations rather than closing them down.

Making art is an act of faith precisely because it resists premature certainty.

The Blank Canvas and the Wilderness

Every painting begins with a blank canvas. A wilderness. An open, silent space filled with endless possibilities. The first mark matters because it breaks the paralysis of perfectionism. Before the painting can become good, it first has to exist. That feels deeply spiritual to me.

The prophet Isaiah writes:

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; Make straight in the desert A highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough places smooth; The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, And all flesh shall see it together.'"

The creative process often feels exactly like this.

You begin in the wilderness. You make a mark. You prepare a way through uncertainty. Rough places become smooth over time. Crooked things slowly straighten themselves out through practice, persistence and attention.

God speaks in the wilderness and so we have to venture into the wilderness to hear Him. Not after everything is polished and complete, but often before anything makes

sense at all. Creativity requires trust. You move forward without fully knowing where the work will lead. Faith works like that too.

Stories That Open Worlds

I have long believed that stories and metaphors are essential to spiritual life. Stories do something arguments cannot. They expand us. They open new spaces and possibilities. They refuse to rush toward conclusions.

As a child of a Swedish mother and English father, this is why the worlds of the Moomins and The Chronicles of Narnia matter so deeply to me.

Narnia provided an imaginative landscape within which I first began to understand the Gospel. Not as a rigid doctrinal system, but as a living reality filled with beauty, danger, adventure, sacrifice and hope.

Through those stories, heaven never felt distant. It felt close at hand — a step through the back of a wardrobe, beyond an archway of trees, or hidden behind the rough wooden door of an old stable. The genius of these stories is that they leave room for mystery. They do not flatten spiritual experience into neat explanations. They invite us to wander, to wonder and to discover. That matters because mystery is not the enemy of faith. Mystery is often where faith begins.

The artist Francis Bacon once said:

“The job of the artist is always to deepen the mystery.”

And perhaps that is also true of the Church.

Language Beyond Words

Psalms 19 says:

“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge.”

The psalmist is expanding the basis upon which we understand God, creation and reality itself. Nature speaks. Beauty speaks. Light speaks.

This is a profoundly humbling idea because it reminds us that God is not confined to sermons, doctrines or religious performance. Creation itself is communicating constantly.

Art participates in this wider language. Colour, texture, shadow, movement and form communicate truths that words alone cannot carry. Art touches us, blesses us and unsettles us in ways that bypass intellectual defences. Art speaks directly to our souls.

The church services that happen within The Sagrada Familia, Gaudí's masterpiece, the hymns, prayers, sermons and readings, are beautiful and important. But even when all of these activities stop, and the crowds disperse, the building itself continues praise to God simply by existing.

Paint as Metaphor

As an artist and more specifically, a painter, it seems to me that paint itself can be seen as a metaphor. The 2025 John Moores Painting Prize winner Ally Fallon said:

"There is something about paint that can't be said in any other way."

That sentence could almost function as a theology of art. Paint communicates beyond explanation.

Georges Braque wrote:

"There is only one valuable thing in art: the thing you cannot explain."

Art matters precisely because it escapes easy definition.

Stephen Farthing, speaking about his Miracle paintings, said:

"I have come to the conclusion that what makes an event or indeed a painting 'miraculous' is our inability to explain it in any other way than saying 'this is what I saw.'"

That is how revelation often works. Not through airtight argument, but through encounter; "This is what I saw, this is what I experienced, this changed me."

Opening yourself up to creativity reveals something about yourself. It changes you.

Art as "Speaking in Tongues"

In Ian Morgan Cron's book *Chasing Francis*, he reflects on beauty and art as signposts pointing toward God. That idea resonates deeply with me.

Art can feel like speaking in tongues.

Paint, colour, light and darkness communicate at a level beneath ordinary speech. They carry emotional and spiritual weight without always needing translation. Colour is its own reward.

That is why I sometimes struggle with the way churches approach the arts. Many churches are built around performance and presentation. Music naturally dominates because it fits the format: a stage, microphones, projected lyrics.

Visual art often has to fight for space and attention. But what if we reimagined things? What if instead of squeezing paintings into the church foyer beside the biscuit table, we hired an art gallery, curated an exhibition and invited the church into that space?

What if Christians learned again how to look rather than merely consume? What if silence, contemplation and imagination became forms of worship too?

Curiosity is Holy

Many artists and musicians have said the same thing in different ways: make the work for yourself, not for your audience.

Rachel Whiteread, David Bowie, Neil Young and Rick Rubin all return to this idea.

Make work that satisfies your curiosity, not more of the same. Push boundaries.

Allow difficulty and complexity that forces the viewer to lean in and participate.

Rick Rubin, in his remarkable book *The Creative Act*, repeatedly emphasises that the artist's point of view matters more than external approval. If you as the artist love the work, then it already possesses value. Whether other people like it is ultimately beyond your control.

That feels spiritually important too. Everything becomes an offering to God. And if you are making an offering to God, you do not obsess over the budget. It becomes devotional.

The work is made through your filter and encountered through somebody else's filter. Even if both people love the same artwork, they may love it for completely different reasons.

That mystery is beautiful and curiosity matters more than passion. Passion can burn out but curiosity keeps searching. It listens, pays attention and remains open to surprise. And perhaps that openness is one of the ways we step through the wardrobe door, into the wilderness to learn to hear the voice of God.

Prophets, Priests and the Creative Tension

In his recent book *Everything Belongs*, Richard Rohr describes a spiritual pattern of Order, Disorder and Reorder. An initial structure gives stability and coherence. Then comes disruption, confusion and wilderness. If we stay present within the tension long enough, a deeper and transformed order eventually emerges.

Religious institutions often become attached to the first stage: order. Prophets and artists, however, frequently move within disorder. They ask uncomfortable questions. They expose blind spots and challenge collective assumptions. That does not make them enemies of the Church. It makes them necessary.

A church run entirely by prophets would remain in chaos, whereas a church run entirely by priests stagnates. We need both.

Artists within church communities often find themselves living near the edge — not outside the community, but close to its boundaries. That tension matters because the answers often exist in the spaces between us.

It is a strangely cubist idea; multiple viewpoints held together within one canvas, stretching this way and that.

Even the Trinity contains tension and relationship: Father, Son and Spirit — distinct yet united. The place of greatest safety for a small child is often lying between its parents. Life happens in the relational spaces and new possibilities emerge there.

Any time we think we fully understand reality, our world becomes smaller. Art resists that reduction and faith should resist it too.

Through the Wardrobe Door

One of the dangers of overly rigid religion is that it mistakes definitions for reality itself.

Georges Braque wrote:

“To define a thing is to substitute the definition for the thing itself.”

That sentence feels spiritually important. Sometimes we become so attached to our explanations about God that we stop encountering God altogether. Stories help prevent this. Metaphors help prevent this and art helps prevent this. They keep the world open.

Jesus himself constantly taught through story, image and metaphor: seeds, vineyards, pearls, banquets, shepherds and wandering sons. He rarely handed people abstract theological systems. Instead, he invited them into imaginative worlds where truth could be discovered slowly. Faith needs that imaginative landscape.

We need room for wonder, for ambiguity, for beauty and holy surprise.

The Kingdom of God is not always entered through argument, sometimes it is entered through a painting, a poem, a building full of coloured light, or a story about a lion in an imagined world discovered through the back of a wardrobe.

Karl Newman

