

Bishop Auckland: A Spiritual Adventure

*Auckland Castle, the traditional home of the bishops of Durham, is in the process of a radical transformation, largely through the generosity and entrepreneurial flair of one man, **Jonathan Ruffer**. It is now a faith, art and heritage destination of international significance. The castle is being renovated; a museum exploring the history of faith in the British Isles is being established; a Spanish Gallery, home to Zurbaran's masterpieces has been created; the walled garden is being restored; a new Mining Art gallery is in prospect. Kynren, an epic open-air show depicting 2000 years of British History, attracted large audiences in the summer of 2016 and will be repeated this summer. In this article Jonathan explains his motives for embarking on this extraordinary adventure, and reflects on the way different groups have responded.*

I am a child of my time. Having trained as a barrister (good news, I can't stop talking; bad news, I didn't know what I was talking about), I found myself in the City, as an investment manager. One of the quirks of success in the City is that it results in comically prodigious financial rewards, and that creates a conundrum - what does one do with it?

I regard such earnings as a fact of life. Why is Gwyneth Paltrow so beautiful? Why should the Duke of Norfolk be a Duke? It's simply the way things are - but what one does about being an outlier in worldly gifts is what turns an absurdity into a disgrace, or its opposite. I didn't want, before the Lord, to be a disgrace. The obvious

thing, therefore, was to give it away. I reckoned that there are only three things you can do with money: spend it, save it, or give it away. I have never been much of a spender, so there was no obvious opening there, and to save it seemed morally unattractive, so the last option was the only option.



Photo: Richard Gregory

Auckland Castle

I have never seen this as in any way sacrificial – living, by any reasonable standards, an enormously rich and fulfilled life, wanting for nothing. Nor do I see it as being unusually saintly, except in the sense that all who strive to be obedient to the calling of their creator can be said to be saints. Because the figures gifted are so large, and the medium through which it is done is so public (of which more anon), it attracts a wide degree of adulation. Who was it who said that immoderate praise results either in embarrassment or a comic sense of the absurd? How right they were.

It is a great truth that giving away money is an extremely difficult thing to do. Indeed, it is so difficult that I do not think the human mind is capable of the level of selfless judgement required in the systematic distribution of great wealth. Money is too connected with power, and, more often than not, the people who make money are naturally powerful people. A powerful tool in the hands of a powerful human being is so far from the model of Christ's ministry that it seems almost doomed to failure. Certainly, it came to me as an unpleasant shock to perceive how absolutely I fit the pattern of membership within the ruling class. There are many who want a slice of the money, or a reflected glory, and there are also many who are simply overwhelmed by the forward momentum of it all. Bullies come in two shapes – shits and enthusiasts; I am an enthusiast.

So much for the background. This article is a narrative of what is going on in my life, and through it, how it has translated into a course of action which I did not seek. I find many elements of it that I would wish otherwise, but which would be sin to 'correct'. God has sent me, and my wife Jane, on a journey – but He has not vouchsafed, even in general terms, the destination. I am regularly credited with a vision (as in 'amazing vision'), but vision is

exactly what's not there. One step at a time Jane and I walk forward, as Abram did, towards a promised land; our prayer is that, one day in God's good time, Sarai will become Sarah, and Abram reconfigured as Abraham.

An eight-day silent retreat in 2010 at St Beuno's was a game changer. I came away knowing that my days as an investment manager at a firm bearing my name were numbered. I had two years to prepare (so I believed). I had no idea this had been in the pipeline, but I knew it was non-negotiable. In the event, I have been 'given back' my work in the investment world – for the moment, I am in London, thinking about the money-supply figures of Nicaragua for two-and-a-half days a week, and the rest in a post-industrial town in County Durham, striving to see a regenerated community.

It was another eight months before I discovered that Bishop Auckland was to be Jane's and my destination. I have always had a penchant for baroque counter-reformation art, and I had in my possession an English 18th century copy of a Zurbaran St Francis. A striking feature of it is that the painter was almost completely unknown in England at the time – the only other examples being a remarkable set of *Jacob and the Patriarchs* in the Palace of the Prince-Bishops of Durham in the eponymous Bishop Auckland. The Church Commissioners, observing they were not nailed to the floor, decided to sell them at auction. They had an estimated value of £15 million. I offered to buy them, and my offer of £15 million was refused: I was as certain as anything in my life that this sale would happen, and on the following day, I sold 'all that I hath',

and was nonplussed to see that the sale proceeds came to £15,010,000. It seemed to be a reflection of the kingdom of Heaven, reflected through the merchant selling everything for the pearl of great price, except that I got baroque pictures, whereas the merchant got the pearl. Then I was hit by a thunderbolt. I discovered that the word 'baroque' was an insulting term for the baroque painterly style – literally, it means 'deformed pearl', reflecting its shapeless iridescence. And I saw, too, that when Christ gave all that He was, he did it for humanity, in all its deformed inadequacy. It is mammon who wants the perfect pearl. God moves towards the unattractive, the weak, the needy – and is thereby full of power and authority. It was a first lesson in the nature of the journey.

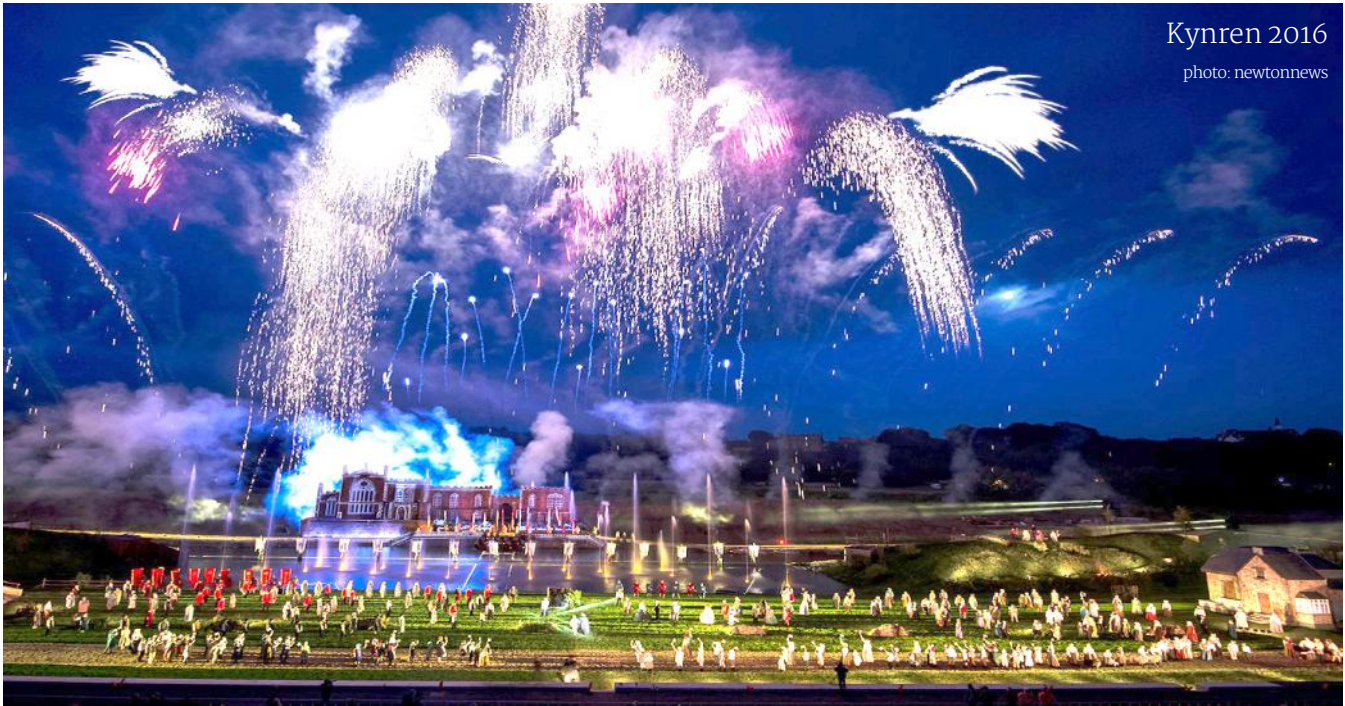
A generative initiative, based on the restoration of a Palace, and the establishing of a Spanish Gallery (with a unique collaboration with the Prado and the Real Academia), a Walled Garden with a glass pleasure-dome designed by an international award-winning Japanese architect, a Welcome building by a leading UK architect, hotels, a Michelin restaurant, and much else. There has been great excitement and acclaim – but the more I heard the cries of 'bravo', the more I saw that they were

often not from the people whose values I thought were mine. There were two groups who were distinctly underwhelmed – tribes whose goodwill I coveted, since I felt they were 'my' tribes: The evangelicals (as a generalisation) saw it as a wasted opportunity for 'gospel opportunities', most easily evidenced in church-planting, and further



Francisco de Zurbarán, Jacob

Courtesy of Zurbarán Trust




education of those called to Christian mission, either at home or abroad. The social workers, too, have been inclined to see what is going on as a vanity project – done, for sure, in the name of the down-trodden, but of little real value to those at the bottom of the pile. I found myself apologising to both tribes for what was going on, explaining, that, left to my own advice, the gospel opportunities would be addressed vigorously, and the hungry fed, the lame walking (the crutch and the zimmer frame are almost an emblem of the County). ‘God’, they had to understand, was calling for something else, and, perverse as it was (I never quite allowed myself to go that little step forward and replace ‘it was’ as ‘He is’), I had my marching orders as to the priorities. The battle of servanthood still centres around the knowledge that if Jane and I are completely obedient in the little things of our ordinary lives, then we will for sure be walking in His will in areas which are opaque. ‘O worship

the Lord in the beauty of holiness’. I begin my prayers every morning with those words, which are too dense with meaning to register in the fog of morning wakefulness, so I add my paraphrase, ‘O live life in imitation of the LORD, reflecting His nature, and distanced from the ways of the world’. If any readers can improve on this, it would be a tonic to know.

My private aspiration for the town and the region is to see it transformed, morally, economically, socially and spiritually; we have gone public with four precepts. The first is to work with people, not for them. The second is that all we do should go with the grain of our heritage. The last two are held in tension, and are soft-phrased, but hard in intent. The first is ‘the Beauty of Holiness’ – the name given to God in Psalm 96, and the other is ‘the Holiness of Beauty’. The idea is that we outface the professional atheist by declaring for God, and challenge those who appoint themselves as God’s praetorian guard, sitting in

judgement on those who find God diffused in beautiful things. There is, here, a holiness of enquiry; God is as the light of the Sun, bright beyond imagining and bearing, and beauty is as moonlight – not radiating its own source of brightness, but its reflection of the sun.

If I date the start of this glorious adventure to the sale of assets to buy the Zurbarans, we have now journeyed for longer than the course of the Second World War. We are not half-way yet; if we are, I shall be in my seventies when we finish. Of course, these things never finish. I marvel at the energy, flexibility and resilience we both have in the face of almost unbearable pressures, uncertainties, and the constant threat of humiliating failure. Oswald Chambers wrote, ‘God does not keep a man immune from trouble. He says, “I will be with him in trouble”’. We have learnt the importance of this distinction, and we live through the corkscrew of adversity, knowing and savouring life in all its abundance. 



Jonathan Ruffer is Chair of Ruffer LLP, and Auckland Castle Trust. He would like to draw attention to the regenerative initiative, Kynren, a night show performed by over one thousand community volunteers, which sold over 100,000 tickets in its first year. Come and see the miracle of flowers blooming in the desert.