

Bernard G. Prusak

# Holy Cities

THE CONTEMPLATIVE WHIMSY OF BRIAN WHELAN

In her book on Jerusalem, the religion writer Karen Armstrong notes that “in Hebrew the word for ‘holy’ (*kadosh*) means ‘other,’ ‘set apart.’” A holy city, in turn, is somehow other than, and set apart from, other human settlements. What distinguishes a holy city, Armstrong goes on, is that it’s a site where “lost wholeness” is recovered: where heaven meets earth, the divine mends the brokenness of human life, and life transpires in joyful abundance.

This is the vision of Second Isaiah, through whom God proclaims his plan “to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight” and his promise that “no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress” (65:18–19). This is also the vision of John in Revelation, who, echoing Isaiah, sees “a new heaven and a new earth” and “the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.”

For five years now, my family has lived with a painting titled *Holy City* by the Irish artist Brian Whelan. I came to know Whelan’s work through

an exhibition he co-curated, “The Quiet Men: London Irish Painters,” which visited Villanova University in 2010. The cityscapes and “inscapes” of London, where Whelan was born (in 1957) and raised, are recurring subjects of his work. But Whelan is also a novelty these days: a religious painter, whose Catholic faith shows through both in the choice of subjects and in the sensibilities he brings to biblical stories, saints’ lives, and holy cities.

Whelan’s website includes a number of apt quotations about his work. The poet Seamus Heaney calls Whelan’s painting “bold and commanding.” A Brother Vaughan of the Society of Saint Francis remarks that “it’s as if a medieval stone mason had been given a box of paints.” And I’ve always been taken by Sister Wendy Beckett’s assessment of Whelan’s art as “clear, strong, prayerful work, with joy at its center,” and her intuition that “God has His hand on Brian.”

Not at all the cliché of the brooding artist, Whelan is an affable man

who loves conversation over a pint. His work exudes playfulness. Take, for instance, the way he deploys not only vibrant paints, but the gold, silver, pink, blue, and green tin foils of candy wrappers. These come both from sweets he eats while working and from a family in Paris who, he writes, “send me an envelope every month or two full of gold paper from their daily bar of Belgian chocolate.” When I look closely at my own family’s *Holy City*, I can see the contribution made by Galler chocolate. In other paintings, I’ve seen similar contributions from Hershey, including Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups.

A major work of Whelan’s is currently on display at the Washington National Cathedral. Another *Holy City*, comprising nine panels, it measures nine feet high by twelve feet across. This work is installed in the cathedral’s north transept. A number of Whelan’s smaller works are on display as well, in the seventh-floor tower gallery. My favorite is a depiction of the moment in Luke’s parable of the prodigal son “when he came to himself” and realized that his father’s hired hands had it better than he did (15:17). Whelan paints the prodigal son surrounded by pigs. One pig, with a nasty-looking set of bared teeth, has wiggled under his legs. Others look at him quizzically. Most just look deeply stupid, busily chewing carrots and fish bones. The son meanwhile looks to the sky, which is full of silvery gray clouds, and brings his hands together in a worried, almost prayerful gesture—as if a little afraid or perhaps embarrassed to ask for forgiveness. His complexion is notably the same as that of the pigs all around him, and his toothy frown is also distinctly porcine. Has the comedy



Brian Whelan, *Holy City*, 2010

of the prodigal son's plight ever found such wonderful expression? With its profound whimsy, the painting typifies Whelan's narrative art. In Sister Wendy's terms, it is clear, strong, and prayerful: Whelan has entered into Luke's story and meditated on it. And, finally, there is joy at the painting's heart.

**W**helan has observed that his holy cities are "probably the only paintings I do that do not have a narrative" but are, instead, "contemplative." And indeed, the *Holy City* in the cathedral's north transept demands extended contemplation. It can't be comprehended in a glance; it can hardly even be photographed. And looking at a photograph of it isn't all that helpful, anyway: there's just too much to behold, as in a detailed aerial photo of, say, the town or city where you live. Whelan's website links to a brief video, produced by the Washington National Cathedral, of the painting's installation, accompanied by some reflections by the artist. But the painting needs to be seen in person; there's no other way to do it justice.

Whelan has been painting holy cities for about fifteen years; he reports that the *Holy City* in the National Cathedral took him two years to complete. It is not meant to be Jerusalem—even the new Jerusalem—or Rome or Mecca or Santiago de Compostela or, he has written, "any Holy City that exists in today's world." Instead, Whelan writes, "This is my aspirational vision of what a Holy City looks like."

The Holy City of Whelan's imagination contains synagogues, churches, and mosques of various styles and sizes, identified by stars, crosses, and crescents, themselves often gleaming gold, silver, and the occasional green—that tin foil again. These houses of worship, many bulging forth with the appearance of volume, are arranged higgledy-piggledy, nestled together and leaning against one another like the buildings in a medieval hill town. They appear to have grown up together, like plants in a lush, well-watered garden—an impression fostered by the many trees of vari-



Brian Whelan, *In the Beginning*

ous colors and hues likewise nestled in among the buildings. Crowded and colorful, the whole work pulses with life.

There's no telling the time of day in the Cathedral's *Holy City*. There is a sun, there is a rainbow, there is a moon (or maybe two moons), there are night stars, there is a comet shooting out of what appears to be an eyeball in the sky. There is so much energy and kaleidoscopic movement that the boundary between day and night has been undone. What's more, the heavens and the earth embrace: the painting's buildings and trees appear taken up into the cosmos; or perhaps stars have come down to earth, for example in the radiant blue pool at the painting's center, the painting's only truly still point.

I asked Whelan whether he imagines that anyone lives in his Holy Cities. He answered yes: though every building is a house of worship, they are all places of hospitality. It's noteworthy in this regard that there is a figure of a pil-

grim—identified by his scallop shell, the emblem of Saint James the Greater and badge of the pilgrim to Santiago de Compostela—in each of the nine panels. How fortunate, or blessed, this pilgrim is. He has come to a place of peace and shelter, and will surely find welcome, comfort, and rest. In Whelan's vision of a holy city, the old order of distrust, violence, and tears has passed away. A new creation—hardly possible, nearly incredible, beyond our wildest dreams—beckons.

You can see more of Whelan's paintings at [www.brianwhelan.co.uk](http://www.brianwhelan.co.uk). The exhibition "Holy City: A Pilgrimage of Sight" will be on display at the Washington National Cathedral on Wisconsin Avenue until January 30, 2017. ■

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