

Wednesday Reflection: Butterflies

Vanessa Atalanta or the Red Admiral butterfly is both familiar and dramatically beautiful. Its black wings, scarlet red bands and white spots are easily recognisable. Recently, on a gloriously sunny morning as I sat at the back door of the manse, a Red Admiral gently came to rest on the paving stones a few feet from me. Motionless, peacefully, it sunbathed while I looked on. Blessed, we sat together absorbing the healing warmth of the sun. For only a short time, we shared a moment of being, of companionship and consciousness. An incredibly attractive creature, small enough to sit in the palm of your hand, fluttering silently, its delicate wings soon carried it across the garden and over the sparred wooden fence.



In the art of ancient Greece, *Psyche*, the goddess of the soul, was often depicted with butterfly wings. It was believed that, freed from death, the soul was released and able to fly. The body or chrysalis was the shell of the dead. The association of butterflies with the souls of the dead is found across many cultures, including that of Australian aboriginal

people. The dead go to the land of the Morning Star, a place of great beauty and joy, full of butterflies, flowers, fish and honey.

In Christianity, butterflies are a symbol of resurrection. The symbol signifies both the resurrection of Jesus and all humanity. Caterpillar, chrysalis and butterfly are metaphors for life, death and resurrection. After life as a caterpillar, it is hidden in a cocoon, as if dead, but only to emerge transformed, immensely colourful and able to soar as a butterfly. In his letters to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul wrote of the transformation from this earthly life to that of new life beyond death. Paul said that we are sown in corruption and raised in incorruption, sown in dishonour, raised in glory, sown in weakness, raised in power, and sown a natural body and raised a spiritual body. Butterflies are sometimes depicted in Christian artwork, in particular, paintings



of the Virgin and Child. In the work of Jean Malouel, the Virgin and Child are surrounded by angels and above their heads flutter a storm of butterflies suggesting the Cross and Resurrection. (see insert).

In the Gospel of John, Jesus taught His disciples the *Parable of the Grain of Wheat*:

Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

The ‘death’ of the grain of wheat and the abundance of harvest may be similar to that of the butterfly symbol. However, more than life and life beyond death, the parable is about dying to self in this life. Each of us is tempted by the things of this world: status, wealth, selfish ambition, and power. Much of our striving is underpinned by a deep desire for personal approval and affirmation of self-worth. Once we journey beyond these worldly goals, discover that our worth does not lie in material treasures, we are free to live more fully, with a truer, more mature sense of self. With typical hyperbole and exaggeration, the Islamic mystic, Rabiya of Basra, offered this prayer:

*O God, if I worship you in fear of hell, burn me in hell.
If I worship you in hope of paradise, shut me out from paradise.
But if I worship you for your own sake, do not withhold from me
your everlasting beauty.*

May the butterfly be a symbol not only of physical death but also of death of our selfishness; may the Red Admiral be a sign of God’s love, our true self-worth, and our renewal and resurrection.