

## TOWARDS THE LIGHT – 9



Thomas Gainsborough, *The Painter's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly*, about 1756, National Gallery, London

Commons Wikipedia / Public domain

We conclude our series by returning home, to England – Gainsborough's double portrait was painted in Ipswich, Suffolk – to explore the familiar, the common experience of family. It is a painting that makes a connection, captures, with warmth a fleeting moment and holds secure the transitory.

The picture, which isn't quite finished (although Gainsborough was prepared to blur the boundaries), predates the artist's fame and fortune, and is one of six double portraits of his daughters, Mary and

Margaret. Both children are spot lit, the unfiltered white light falling from the left. They are dressed respectively in 'Naples' yellow and ivory with a silvery hue, the sheen of the silks reflects this unseen light, which contrast with the darkness of the background. The younger child, Margaret, stretches out to a butterfly, which rests on a thistle, her body moves instinctively. Mary is also in motion, but she is more measured, careful even, and she seems to look outside the picture space, towards the light.

This painting 'works' on all sorts of levels: it is at once a father's careful representation of his two precious daughters, marked with something of their quite different personalities (the impulsive, perhaps impetuous, younger child and the cautiousness of the older); and measures out in paint, the first steps towards independence. It may not be found in a good parenting guide, but those of us who have 'been there' know that parenting leaves us with a gentle aching in the heart: we can't anticipate the last time a child will reach out for our hand to cross the road; our children grow, inevitably, away from us.

But let's not tip over into sentimentality, instead we must return to the painting, for there is more to say as we reach our conclusion. The picture is, essentially, a nocturne, a night piece. There is a hint of grey-blue in the sky but this is no more than the shading we might discover near the summer equinox, the landscape is wild, nature untamed. The butterfly, a diurnal creature that one would expect to hide at night, becomes not so much a symbol of the transitory as a distraction - drawing Margaret towards the thistle bed. Yet Mary's hold of her sister is firm and her gaze remains fixed on the light. The children are moving towards this light when a sudden breath of air, prevailing from the very same direction, lifts both shawl and pinafore.

As we reach the threshold of Pentecost we must wonder how much activity we really want of God. The butterfly like the Holy Spirit is tantalising, attractive, immune to the thistle's hurtfulness. For she invites us to go beyond the "thorns and thistles" (Genesis 3:18); and draws us toward the Light of Light which shines from the darkness which cannot overcome it.

With eagerness the disciples waited in Jerusalem for the arrival of the power from on high. It was not a time for carefulness or caution. Their prayer was deep and full of longing. The centuries have taught us that the faith that follows Christ can get people into all sorts of inconvenience. But the activity of God will not be measured by common sense or caution. We are called to be as little children expectant and fascinated by the Spirit's breeze and trusting that God for our future.