POETRY, PRAISE AND PRAYER

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I'm occasionally asked to record a week's worth of BBC Radio 4's Prayers for the Day. The programme goes out at 5.45am, just before Farming Today, and I don't think its audience is huge. But it can provoke strong responses from its committed listeners, and I've had more emails about this programme than any other I've done for the BBC. Some critical, some complimentary, some downright strange.

I often refer to poetry in my contributions, particularly when I've been working on poetry in my teaching or research. Inspiration and perspiration often go together, I find. In one of my recent Prayers for the Day, I spoke about Elizabeth Bishop's poem 'One Art' (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47536/one-art). It's one of her most famous poems, and begins, 'The art of losing isn't hard to master'. It then goes on to list things that she has lost, beginning with innocuous things like keys and names, then more precious things like her mother's watch, before dropping the bombshell that she has lost her beloved. The light-hearted tone of the poem jars with the profound sense of this loss, as the speaker asserts, somewhat unconvincingly at the end of the poem:

It's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.

There's much that could be said about this poem, (and please bear in mind, with Prayer for the Day you are given about 1 minute 30 seconds to say everything), but what I focused on was the villanelle form that the poem follows, and the very strict rules about repetition and rhyme which this villanelle form demands. This Prayer for the Day was broadcast on the anniversary of the first lockdown, and I began by reflecting on the losses that this had entailed for us all. I suggested that Bishop's poem acknowledges it is part of the human condition to experience loss, and that 'mastering' these losses may well be what we long to be able to do. I said that perhaps on the outside that's how it has looked and continues to look for each of us, in the same way that Bishop's use of the constraints of the villanelle form seems to control the rising sense of

bereavement she is feeling. Then I went on to suggest that 'One Art' quietly, implicitly, acknowledges that some losses are indeed 'disasters' which may have to be lived with, even if never fully mastered. Finally I offered a prayer asking God to comfort those experiencing loss and to be a companion to those in sorrow, as well as helping us to share one another's burdens.

Let me be honest and say I was rather pleased with this bringing together of the poem and the situation I was asked to address. The producer seemed happy enough too. But I did receive an email afterwards which made me think again about what I was doing and how effectively I had communicated the message. The writer of this email was angry and disappointed that I had drawn on a poem that she didn't know. She felt excluded by what I'd said, when what she really needed was a word of comfort and encouragement on the anniversary of a traumatic moment in her life and the life of the nation.

Yes, of course she could have looked up the poem online, if she had wanted to read it; I certainly didn't have time to read the whole thing, and I probably wouldn't have been allowed to even if I had wanted to. Yes, I had closed with a prayer which addressed the very needs she expressed. But she was already alienated and wasn't able to hear that.

Since then, I've had to reassess my use of poems and the poetic in worship, and I've become more attuned to consider the effectiveness of poetry in the worship led by others. I'm hoping I don't have to justify the potential role of poetry in worship to members of the Church Service Society, although it would be open to debate. However, I've realised that if we *are* going to weave poetry into the fabric of public worship, we need to offer enough of it to make sense and 'catch' people, but not so much that it turns people off and becomes another word-heavy element in an already wordy experience. I've had to reconsider my use of poetry, to make sure it adds to and complements the message, rather than just demonstrating something about my likes and interests and yes, let's be honest, my scholarly proclivities. So I offer this story as a warning to us all, before I hurtle into a more positive apology for the title of my lecture, 'Poetry, prayer and praise'.

The structure of the paper is roughly this:

- Allowing space and time for a poem to breathe
- Poems as hymns

- Hymns as poems
- Poems as prayers
- Prayers as poems

Be warned, however, that what follows is more of a meditation on the poetic than a sustained argument.

1. **Allowing space and time for a poem to breathe**

But let's go back to my opening anecdote which I hope highlights my first heading, that there's something about poetry which makes it both a highly suitable and a tricky resource for public worship. (And I should say here that it's public worship I'm focusing on here, rather than private devotion, which is much more amenable to interacting with formal poetry, of course.) My point is that poetry demands, and repays, careful attention. It needs thought and imagination to engage with it fully, to the best of our ability and interest- which will be different for each one of us. I'm not sure we do poetry justice when we simply throw in a line or two in a sermon, or even read a whole poem. But, when poetry is introduced with sensitivity to its form and power, I suggest it can enhance and deepen the worship experience of our congregations, helping us all to interpret scripture for the particular context we're in.

I find Seamus Heaney's definition of what poetry is and isn't very helpful here, from his 1986 lecture, *The Government of the Tongue*. There he insists that poetry 'does not propose to be instrumental or effective', it is 'practically useless', almost without any function of its own, and yet it is concerned with action of a sort: the moment of attention, the opening of a space for deep contemplation and reflection. Heaney reflects on the (admittedly disputed) story in John's Gospel of the woman caught in adultery, and the response of Jesus which is to bend down and draw in the sand before making any pronouncement or judgement. He then identifies poetry 'as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves'.[1] Just as Jesus' moment of pause gives everyone, and him too, a chance to stop and reflect and recalibrate, so too does poetry, when sat with, pondered over. It gives the reader

1 Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and other Critical Writings*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), p. 108.

or hearer a moment to enter into something that is wider, and deeper than the immediate moment.

So, for a particularly stark example, consider Tom Leonard's famous poem, 'The Good Thief' (https://www.tomleonard.co.uk/online-poetry-and-prose.html), the beginning of which looks like this:

heh jimmy
yawright ih
stull wayiz urryi
ih

heh jimmy
ma right insane yirra pape
ma right insane yirwanny us jimmy
see it nyir eyes
wanny uz

I've lost count of the number of times I've presented students with this, and enjoyed teasing out with them what's going on: how reading this aloud makes all the difference; perhaps showing them a video of Leonard reading the poem (there's a good example on you-tube); the connection between the poem and the biblical story of Jesus' crucifixion; the significance of the thief's recognition that Jesus is 'wanny us' and his use of Glaswegian to express it. Quite soon we're in the realm of the theology of the incarnation, but there are barriers of sense and sound, biblical knowledge and lack of it, which have to be broken down first, before we get there. In public worship, are we ready to do that sort of work, or do we demand too much from our poetic examples, tossed cavalierly into a sermon, talk or prayer?

Books of poems for worship are great- I have a fair few myself- but my plea is that we handle poetry in worship respectfully, carefully, applying our skills in biblical exegesis to it, if we want it to touch the soul and the imagination of our hearers. And then we need to give congregations the opportunity to hear a poem meaningfully, perhaps by printing the poem in an order of service, or on the screen, or sharing it digitally before or after the service (copyright allowing of course).

A particular poem may not speak to everyone, but I suggest poems only really come alive when they are given space and time. And what is worship if it's not space in which to hear the Word behind words, to explore the interconnections between our souls and those of others, and to apply all our powers of interpretation to the revelation of God, wherever it is to be found?

2. **Poems as hymns**

Many poems, of course, have become hymns, and we hear them speak as we fill our voices with their cadences. Christina Rossetti's poem, 'A Christmas Carol' later became the carol we know as 'In the Bleak midwinter'. 'Love came down at Christmas', the other popular carol by Rossetti, was another, untitled poem long before it was spotted as being suitable to be sung. In fact, at least 46 of her poems were turned into hymns, according to Hymnary.org.. John Julian's *Dictionary of Hymnology*[2] from 1907 suggests that the most popular of these at that time was her 'What are these that glow from afar', from her poem 'We meet in joy but part in sorrow'. The date of the latest hymnal to include this hymn is *Songs of Praise for America*[3], from 1938, before it fades from view. It's a good example of the way poetry, and hymns, come and go in light of taste and fashion. I'm a great fan of Rossetti's work, but even I would find it hard to sing the following (although I'd be happy to discuss it as a piece of poetry):

What are these that glow from afar,
These that lean over the golden bar,
Strong as the lion, pure as the dove,
With open arms, and hearts of love?
They the blessèd ones gone before,
They the blessèd for evermore;
Out of great tribulation they went
Home to their home of Heaven content.

2 John D. Julian, *Dictionary of Hymnology: Origin and History of Christian Hymns and Hymnwriters of All Ages and Nations, Together with Biographical and Critical Notices of Their Authors and Translators,* (New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1907 ed).

3 L.E. Daniels (ed), *Songs of Praise for America* (New York: OUP, 1938).

What are these that fly as a cloud,
With flashing heads and faces bowed;
In their mouths a victorious psalm,
In their hands a robe and palm?
Welcoming angels these that shine,
Your own angel, and yours, and mine;
Who have hedged us, both day and night
On the left hand and the right.
(https://hymnary.org/text/what_are_these_that_glow_from_afar)

Perhaps Rossetti's two carols have survived because of their spare simplicity, and a timeless and restrained use of imagery, both biblical and nature-based. In the case of 'What are these that glow from afar', we can *understand* the appeal of a poem or hymn which comforts the bereaved with an image of the dead loved one fully equipped with the paraphernalia of the angelic host. Perhaps this is especially true for those who would be facing the potential and early mortality of their children as well as themselves. But all that glowing and flashing and leaning over a golden bar to wave at those below takes me, anyway, into the realm of science fiction and Doctor Who rather than theological hope.

The shifting fortunes of Christina Rossetti as poet, and then inadvertent hymn-writer, should remind us that poetry needs to be assessed for its relevance to today's world of imagery, theological need and taste, before it's dropped into worship. There's nothing inherently precious about the poetic form, and it can be as alienating as any other example we might draw on in our construction of worship, whether it's a hymn or sermon example or part of a prayer.

But equally let's try to avoid being too censorious when it comes to poetic worth, and too demanding about the poetic heights of the hymns at our disposal. I was recently at an event in the Festival of Sacred Arts, at which John Kitchen, the Edinburgh City Organist, spoke about the stories behind a range of hymns. About the Victorian hymn for ascension, 'The lord ascended up on high', he made the throwaway comment, 'it's a little bit ordinary but perfectly serviceable', which is probably true about many of our hymns (and maybe much of our preaching too). John is reminding us that we don't need to be too precious about the poetic heft of all examples of our hymnody- but that

choosing some hymns at least that really sing in all senses of that word may enhance our worship.

Often knowing something about the background to a poem which becomes a hymn helps us to understand it, and appreciate it, better. You'll all know the hymn 'Let all the world in every corner sing', based on a poem by the metaphysical poet George Herbert. The words started out as a poem in a collection which was published posthumously under the title *The Temple* in 1633. Just before his death, Herbert had sent this collection to his friend Nicholas Ferrar, a member of the Anglican community at Little Gidding. Ferrar arranged for it to be published and it was immensely popular in the mid 17th century. The other well-known Herbert poem/hymn is 'King of Glory, king of peace', and it comes from this collection too. (now excised from CH4!). But here is 'Let all the world' as it was originally written:

Cho. Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
My God and King.

Vers. The heav'ns are not too high,
His praise may thither flie:
The earth is not too low,
His praises there may grow.

Cho. Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
My God and King.

Vers. The church with psalms must shout,
No doore can keep them out:
But above all, the heart
Must bear the longest part.

Cho. Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
My God and King.

(http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/herbert/antiphon.htm)

Although 'Let all the world' had the title 'Antiphon' in *The Temple*, which is probably a term from the choral tradition, there's no evidence to suggest that

Herbert intended this poem to be sung. And indeed, it wasn't until the 20th century that the poem became a hymn and a popular one at that, partly thanks to the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. He inserted it as the final movement of his *Five Mystical Songs* (1911), which were all Herbert poems, bringing it and the others into the public gaze again.

In 1960, Erik Routley set the poem to the tune he called 'Augustine', after the Augustine-Bristo Congregational Church in Edinburgh where Routley served as minister from 1959 to 1967. For him, the tune highlights something important about the antiphonal form of the original poem: that the lines were designed to be spoken or sung by two groups, each singing a set of lines to the other. The antiphon is the first two lines, and the stanza, or response is the middle four lines. Routley's setting keeps the original form of the poem, with its antiphon, stanza, antiphon, stanza, antiphon structure.

However, the tune that we most often sing when this hymn is chosen is Basil Harwood's 'Luckington', although Routley's tune remains more common in the States. 'Luckington' inserts an extra antiphon as the opening lines of the second verse, so the two verses are of equal length.

'Augustine' was given as an alternative tune to 'Luckington' in CH3, but has disappeared in CH4, perhaps because it was rarely sung. However, it is worth noting the way the antiphonal structure is significant in the poem. Most hymns are strophic rather than antiphonal, i.e. they are written in poetic stanzas. If we recognise this hymn is different from this common pattern, we hear afresh the proclamation of the people singing 'My God and King!' followed by Herbert's reflections on the heights and depths of the creation of God, and the power of God's message. The pattern is proclamation followed by reflection. Hearing the contrast might also highlight other beautifully balanced contrasts within the stanza sections: heavens and earth in the first and, most significantly, perhaps, church and heart in the second, with the heart having the higher place.

Finding all this out (and I should acknowledge Douglas Galbraith's help in this[4]) means I'll sing this hymn with fresh insights: knowing something about the poem informs my singing of the hymn. Of course, there's an added layer of complexity to be factored in to our use of this poem, and that comes with

4 In addition to the information found in the following website: https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-let-all-the-world-in-every-corner-sing

the critical insights of postcolonialism. Yes, the poem echoes the sentiments of Psalm 66: 'All the earth worships you; they sing praises to you, sing praises to your name.' It also reflects the period in which it was written, a time of exploration and discovery and expansion, from the perspective of the western world at least. The British East India Company had been chartered in 1601, a sign of the growing influence and reach of the British Empire. The somewhat lofty monarchical language of the poem invites further critical consideration, even as the hymn is sung with pleasure and gusto in the spirit in which it was surely written. Perhaps it's in preaching that these themes may be drawn out, as part of the interplay between hymn, poem and meaning for today.

3. **Hymns as Poems**

So now let's think a bit more about what happens when things go the other way, and hymns are read as poems. I didn't know my grandfather, who was a minister in Queen's Cross church in Glasgow, and the North Church in Stirling in the 1930s to 1950s, and died long before I was born. But my mother told me he almost always ended his sermons by reading a verse of a hymn. I've done it myself on occasion- maybe you have too. It rounds things off neatly with a satisfying, usually rhyming, quatrain or couplet, connecting the congregation with familiar words and hopefully with the message of your sermon! Similarly, I remember my great friend Marjory Maclean advising the group of worship leaders we were training that if she's stuck for an apt sentence before the benediction, she'll often use a line or two from the closing hymn. A trick I've appropriated on occasion too. It brings a satisfying repetition into the rhythm of the service, a poetic device if ever there was one.

And so I hope I'm building the case for understanding the connection between the value of the poetic in its broadest as well as its narrowest sense, in the construction of all that makes up our public worship.

4. **Poems as Prayers**

Perhaps that allows me to move reasonably seamlessly to the uncontested comment that poems are often written as prayers, and wonder whether we might appropriately and effectively use such poems as public prayers. A particularly direct example would be the prayer-poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins: 'Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend with thee….Send thou my roots rain…'

(https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44404/thou-art-indeed-just-lord-if-i-contend); or the opening of *The Wreck of the Deutschland* (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44403/the-wreck-of-the-deutschland):

Thou mastering me
God! giver of breath and bread;
World's strand, sway of the sea;
Lord of living and dead;
Thou hast bound bones and veins in me, fastened me flesh,
And after it almost unmade, what with dread,
Thy doing: and dost thou touch me afresh?
Over again I feel thy finger and find thee.

These are truly prayers written from the depth of the soul, psalm-like in their honesty and questioning of God and God's presence. Could I imagine weaving such a poem into my public prayers? Or are they too personal and of their time? Probably the latter, but Christina Rossetti's 'A Better Resurrection' (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44991/a-better-resurrection) might be more suitable. The last verse, still in the first person, offers an image I can imagine using, turning around, playing with, in prayer:

My life is like a broken bowl,
A broken bowl that cannot hold
One drop of water for my soul
Or cordial in the searching cold;
Cast in the fire the perished thing;
Melt and remould it, till it be
A royal cup for Him, my King:
O Jesus, drink of me.

Jean-Luis Chretien called prayer 'wounded speech'[5]: an acknowledgement of incompleteness, a yearning for the connection of heart and mind in the presence of God which is always just beyond us. Perhaps it is this sense of

5 Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Ark of Speech*, trans. Andrew Brown (London: Routledge, 2003).

prayer which poetry may open up for us and allow us to explore with our congregations.

Norman MacCaig's poem 'July Evening' (https://davidsuttonpoetry.com/2016/04/08/week-180-july-evening-by-norman-maccaig/) is not a prayer, and comes from a very different religious context from that of Rossetti, but it touches something of this idea:

..And grass is grace. And charlock
Is gold of its own bounty.
The broken chair by the wall
Is one with immortal landscapes.

Something has been completed
That everything is part of,
Something that will go on
Being completed forever.

The poem fully justifies its inclusion in Meg Bateman *et al*'s anthology, *Scottish Religious Poetry*[6], it seems to me, and speaks of a sense of there being something beyond us that prayer as 'wounded speech' expresses. We hear it too in Robert Louis Stevenson's 'If this were faith' (https://www.poetryloverspage.com/poets/stevenson/if_this_were_faith.html), which begins as a prayer:

'God, if this were enough…'

And ends:
'To go on forever and fail and go on again,
And to be mauled to the earth and arise,
And contend for the shade of a word and a thing not seen with the eyes:
With the half of a broken hope for a pillow at night
That somehow the right is the right
And the smooth shall bloom from the rough:
Lord, if that were enough?'

6 Meg Bateman, Robert Crawford and James McGonigal (eds), *Scottish Religious Poetry: From the Sixth Century to the Present: An Anthology*, (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2000), p. 241.

5. **Prayers as Poems**

I've moved, I think, from suggesting poems might form part of our public prayers to the thought that instead- or maybe as well- they enable us to express something deep within prayer's purpose. It's something to do with the relationship between their form, self-consciously constructed and constrained, and the content of many of them, which is tentative, questioning, longing, going to the heart of the matter. 'Wounded speech' doesn't cover all poems, of course, and many are joyful and celebratory- but there are many examples, particularly those which touch on religious or existential matters, which might inspire us in our writing of prayers for the people. At the very least, they remind us that the prayer form, like the poetic form, needs care and crafting for it to be effective.

I couldn't leave this section without mentioning Carol Ann Duffy's famous prayer-poem, 'Prayer', written from a resolutely secular perspective, which can be found here: https://www.thepoetryexchange.co.uk/prayer-carol-ann-duffy.

Again, there is lots we could say about this poem- and there's a sermon lurking in here, I don't doubt. But let's note at least the power of the words used in the poem to evoke feelings of loss and nostalgia; the gift of grace in the unexpected, the 'minims sung by a tree'; and finally, the connection between the familiar and the highly constructed and the slightly strange ('Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finesterre') and the way its liturgical reciting somehow pushes back at the darkness outside. How can we construct prayers which do the same, and allow our congregations, with all their wounds and brokenness, to express their yearning for God and give them space in which to know God's presence? Could our prayers be more poetic in that sense?

We're close now to returning full circle to Elizabeth Bishop's use of the villanelle form to try to contain her grief in 'One Art', and maybe that allows me to offer another example from my Prayer for the Day experience, if you'll forgive the indulgence. One, I hope, which was rather more effective than the example with which I opened this paper.

I used Bishop's 'One Art' for the anniversary of the first day of lockdown, but I also had to cover in my six contributions the anniversary of the day Boris

Johnson announced the lockdown, which was the day before, of course. In this contribution I chose to reflect on a line from a poem which I had no reason to expect any of the listeners would know, Seamus Heaney's 'Would they had stay'ed' (https://fawbie.info/electric-light/would-they-had-stayd/). The poem considers the life and contribution of a group of Scottish poets who had died in the years just before the poem was written in 2001, including Norman MacCaig, Iain Crichton Smith, and Sorley Maclean. The tone is sombre, regretful, questioning, and the poem's title is a quotation from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The line is repeated in the body of the poem. It's from a scene in Act 1 just after Macbeth has encountered the witches and heard their prophecies about his future advancement. The witches then vanish into thin air, and Macbeth cries out, 'Would they had stay'd'. He wants to hear more. Seamus Heaney takes this lament, and asks: would these great voices in Scottish literary history had stayed, what more would we have learned and understood from them? Instead, their presence is as fleeting as the herd of deer he suddenly glimpses, standing 'like the air agog'.

I briefly set this scene in my piece then went on to remember the moment we were all told to 'stay at home'. The 'would we had' construction of the poem seemed to me to be perfect to capture something of the sombre, regretful, surprising journey we had taken since that moment in which life changed for us all. I invited the listeners to reflect on what we had been through since then, and to frame their thoughts using a similar construction of regret and amazement: 'would we had known' the lives lost and the lives changed; the restrictions borne and the loneliness endured; the frustrations and the longings and the blessings too. And I went on to affirm that we did *not* know, perhaps a blessing in itself as life had to be lived day by long day. Then I looked forward, in the light of the ongoing vaccination process, to the year that lay ahead, full of promise, suggesting on that day we might indeed lament of those we have lost, 'would they had stay'd'. And we might consider what, if anything, we would have done differently, 'would we had known' what was to come.

The one line of that poem, which I had come across by accident but been quite 'caught' by, seemed to speak to the situation. The piece wrote itself up quickly, easily. It seemed perfectly and poetically formed for the moment. I needed to set the line in context, but once it was anchored there, it seemed to be set free, like the kite in Heaney's glorious 'A Kite for Aibhin', 'itself alone, a windfall'

(https://poets.org/poem/kite-aibhin). And it seemed to speak to the people who contacted me afterwards.

What I have tried to do in this paper is to offer poetry as a source of inspiration for worship, drawing on ways in which poetry and hymn, poetry and scripture, poetry and prayer, have moments of shared concern and power. I hope I've not elevated poetry beyond its limitations or given it a status which it doesn't deserve. But I hope I may have inspired some of you at least to bring your imagination and your training in exegesis and your faith to your reading of poetry, to the enrichment of your leading of worship.

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