Poetry and Scripture

Michaelmas Term, 2012

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Poetry and Prayer

Introduction to Poetry

Michaelmas 2012

Dr Simon Perry

During the summer, my youngest son asked me, "Dad, can you explain to me, Frankenstein's theory of relativity!" One of our physicists told me I probably had a better chance of explaining that, than of explaining Einstein's: and he may well have been right. So here goes:

Frankenstein seeks to relativize the all-pervasive influence of modern science – by concerning himself with the deeper secrets of life – and, of course, he succeeds in creating his own, alternative life-form: unfortunately, that life form became known as Frankenstein's monster. The monster himself carried a deep sense of alienation – he craves acceptance by his creator, he longs for affection and companionship. He shows deep sensitivity towards a peasant family, saves a girl from drowning, but in the end is rejected because of his hideous appearance: the monster seeks revenge on his creator, and becomes a murderous, violent demon. As the story progresses, Victor Frankenstein himself, slowly turns into the alienated monster he has created, obsessed with revenge, alienated, guilt-ridden. In the end, his attempt to create alternative life, just ends up with more-of-the-same: the dehumanised, alienated and violent self. Mary Shelley's novel is thus a narrative for the modern, human self: trapped inside a world and a worldview from which there is finally no escape.

Well, our theme for this term is Poetry. So what has poetry got to do with Frankenstein?

For some people, poetry is a bunch of words that rhyme. And poems are the product of those who possess the literary genius of T.S. Eliot, G.K. Chesterton and Dizzee Rascal. But, according to existentialist philosophers, poetry forms a specific function within language – that opens up a world beyond language. Not so much something that you read, as something that invites you to read differently, to see the world differently, and to act differently.

If all is well with the world, if life is happy – free of tragedy, suffering and pain – then there would be no need for poems. But if the experience of Frankenstein, the alienation, the remorse, the anguish does describe something of the modern human condition, then it is here that poetry has a specific function.

Poetry has its place in a world full of woe, a gloomy, depressing reality. It is the gloominess of our reality that is described in Christian terms, with the concepts of sin, and fallenness and guilt: The feeling that there is something wrong with the world. In its crudest forms, Christianity says to people – ah, thou unbeliever art destined for eternal damnation – unless you accept your guilt, repent, and become a tedious and intolerable do-gooder – thus guaranteeing a seat in eternal bliss, alongside a multitude of other tedious and intolerable do-gooders.

Hardly surprising then, that the late Christopher Hitchens, an icon of militant atheism, used to plagiarise that famous line that – according to Christianity, we are "Created sick and commanded to be well." That is, a prominent strand of Christianity says, that every human being is sinful, depraved and utterly corrupt, from before the moment we were born. But in order to avoid hell, we have to become perfect! Created sick, commanded to be well.

But – it is not only the corrupted mainstream of Christian orthodoxy that promotes this view. There is a far more pervasive way of life that instils this belief: and it's called, Advertising. It was recognised as early as the 1950s, that

lots of advertising works on the basis of telling us that we are too this, too that: too fat, too thin, too inadequate, too plain, too outdated for us to be happy – and, of course, the only way that we can taste paradise, is to buy the product on offer. Our lives are unfulfilled, until we obey the advert – created sick, commanded to be well.

You see this in marketing trends in recent decades. There was once a time when if a company wanted to sell a car – they would simply say: look, this is a motor vehicle, a fully functioning masterpiece of precision engineering – so, if you happen to be looking for a new vehicle, this is an excellent choice. Then later on, the adverts moved from practicality, to envy, to keeping up with the Joneses: look at your neighbour's marvellous vehicular equipage! See how beautiful it is compared with yours… Solution? Ah, purchase the motor vehicle we are selling. Eventually, adverts move on again – no longer are Ford selling you a car – they are selling you a feeling. Quite an expensive feeling: peace, satisfaction, security. If you want to be happy, you need to attain the items that produce this feeling. Of course, the moment you do possess it, whether its car or clothes or wardrobe or technology: the satisfaction is short lived – because in order to be happy, you need the next upgrade.

This is not simply a critique of advertising, as though mass advertisers were free to employ alternative tactics. Advertising is simply one manifestation of the era of capitalism in which we live. Advertisers manipulate individuals to open their souls like countries open their economies to foreign investors. Once inside, an alien character dominates its host, leaving victims with the 'unhomely' feeling that they are living someone else's life.

It stretches beyond the world of advertising and into the depths of modern self-identity. Social Media offer a fine example, since they are a necessity in the modern world. Those who abstain from Facebook, for instance, are increasingly regarded with suspicion. These social media require a 'profile' page in which individuals construct their public identity with the use of favourite music, sports, activities, philosophies and quotations – all of these identity-markers being carefully packaged by corporate organisations. The result is nicely critiqued by a figure who is undoubtedly today's foremost social critic, Stewie Griffin. Having created a MySpace page, he announces ironically, "yeah, I loaded up other people's creations to express my own individuality."

In other words, even our attempts to express who we are, our own most individuality – tend to be shaped by a alien forces from which there is no escape. Plenty of what passes for poetry – coming in the form of music, books, or movies – prevent us from imagining an alternative world, an alternative way of being. The result is what existentialists call the herd mentality, the they-self or the spirit of the age, the zeitgeist. And to exist is to stand out, in Greek, to ek-sist, from this inescapable, all-pervasive gloomy reality. In other words, genuine poetry is meant to liberate, to do the impossible, a miraculous, world-changing event – Poesis – in Greek.

Poems are simply one aspect of Poesis, because they have the ability to break down dominant worldviews, and draw us to inhabit other worldviews. It is not dissimilar to the function of education. On the one hand, it is easy to portray education here at Cambridge as though it were mere training – where you absorb information, acquire certain skills, and go back into the same old world to function efficiently and slavishly within it. But – education is not training. Education means to be liberated – to climb into new worldviews, to embody and to offer alternative ways of being in the world, and so to create – to make a new world: in that sense, education is poetic and those who use well their time here at Cambridge go back into the world as poets.

Of course, this is not the only way to understand poetry. But it does highlight one of the major literary dynamics of Scripture: In the preaching of Jesus, we see him constantly turning people's worldview inside out: the first will be last and the last will be first, everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted; whoever would be the greatest among you, must be the servant of all.

With the parable of the rich man and Lazarus – the predominant, accepted worldview is one in which the wealthy man is blessed by God – and Lazarus, outside the gates of the wealthy man's comfortable world, is clearly cursed. We may not experience life like Frankenstein or his monster – we may eat and drink and live in relative luxury. But outside the gates of our household, there is a world where nasty things happen: a world where 2.5 million are transported into forced labour every year, a world in which 200 thousand children are subjected to slave labour; where drought and war have left 19million west Africans in dire need. Of course, we can extend the list indefinitely.

The point of the parable though, is not to force us into guilt about not doing more the solve international crises that seem beyond our control: Feeling guilty because we benefit from the world's economic injustices; feeling hopeless because we cannot change those injustices. The impossible burden of selflessness simply brings us back to the notion of being created sick and commanded to be well. No, the parable does not force upon us what Oscar Wilde described as the "sordid necessity of living for others."

Instead, the parable works poetically: to re-orient us in our world, to change our worldview, to help us to understand who we are in relation to others. To see ourselves through the eyes of others, even others who go by names like Lazarus. We live in a world that has programmed us with particular ways of understanding our place in the world, faced with a constant barrage of adverts and other cultural dictates that help us to forget about Lazarus.

Poetry, however, serves as a literary explosive device. It is the invitation to an alternative world, a world that might otherwise have been unimaginable, but a real world nevertheless. Throughout the term, we will explore in more detail, the territory of the world that poetry creates.

Poetry II - The Magnificat

Michaelmas 2012

Simon Perry

The Song of the Pregnant Teenager:

This evening we come to the second in our series of sermons on poetry. And I'd like to begin by quoting a beautifully crafted piece of outstanding poetic elegance from 2003. In fact, these words are among the most influential poetry of the last decade. Since they were first spoken, they have been celebrated worldwide and will be familiar to most of us:

[T]here are known knowns; there are things we know that we know.

There are known unknowns; that is to say there are things that, we now know we don't know.

But there are also unknown unknowns – there are things we do not know we don't know.

Now, if you haven't already drowned in the sheer genius of Donald Rumsfeld's word-craft, you will notice a gaping logical absence in the sequence: there are known knowns, known unknowns and unknown unknowns. But where are the "unknown knowns"? The things we know, that we don't realise we know. Or as Dr Spock put it, "you know more than you think you know." It is that knowledge we subconsciously have, that poetry has the power to reach.

I don't know if Donald Rumsfeld was familiar with medieval Persian literature, but if he was – he would have found a clearer version of his own poetry, without the logical gap: The poet says there are four kinds of individual:

One who doesn't know and doesn't know that he doesn't know... He will be eternally lost in his hopeless oblivion!

One who knows and knows that he knows... His horse of wisdom will reach the skies.

One who doesn't know, but knows that he doesn't know... His limping mule will eventually get him home.

And, most importantly, there is

One who knows, but doesn't know that he knows... He is fast asleep, so you should wake him up!

There is a sense in which this is very immediately true for students in their first term at Cambridge – the sense that everyone else is very clever – but you are here by mistake and sooner or later, someone is going to reveal you as an intellectual fraud. Some academics feel that way until retirement, at which point they positively celebrate their intellectual fraudulence. For me, at every stage of my academic career – I feel as though I have managed to con clever people into thinking I am one of them! Of course, there is such a thing as having a healthy sense of humility about your own abilities. But to those who feel they have conned their way into Cambridge, then Dr Spock, along with the Medieval Persian Poet and Mary the mother of Jesus, would all say, "you know more than you think you

know." If you are a student at Cambridge, it is because you are good enough to be a student at Cambridge. In that very straightforward way – some poems wake you to your unknown knowns -

That very dynamic is at work in a much deeper way in today's New Testament Reading: the poem we look at this week – more specifically, the song of Mary, widely known as the Magnificat. Every week, the choir sings these words: a song written by a pregnant teenager to criticise predominant forms of government. The song bursts from her lips when she meets up with one of her older relatives, Elizabeth, who is also pregnant with a future leader of Israel.

But their get-together is not some sickly kind of messianic baby-shower – there are no predictions about the glorious future of their soon-to-be-born babies. Mary's song is in the past tense –inviting us to wake up to the world as it really is. To wake up to the reality in which the servants of this God have been living, ever since God first made his promise to Abraham all those generations ago. The purpose of the song within the text, is not necessary to create a new impression of God, but – as the Persian poet would have it – to wake people up. That is, to wake them up to what they don't know they know, to wake them up to their unknown knowns – the presence and the character of the God they have always worshipped.

After all, it was easy to forget the nature of God as a liberating God – when the Promised Land is occupied by an alien, hostile and dehumanising superpower. The land of Israel was still a land with super-abundant natural resources, still the land flowing with milk and honey – but all the milk and honey was diverted into Roman hands – particularly to a local building programme in honour of Roman emperors. So, with the local economy going up the wall, with widespread discontent, the mood for rebellion was widespread – and probably accounts for the number of followers that flocked to Jesus.

But the message of this Jesus was not a call to armed rebellion. Jesus had said there will plenty of would-be Messiahs, would-be liberators who try to form amateur armies before marching to their doom at the hands of Rome. No – Jesus offered and embodied a way of life that was – in a sense – nothing new. The whole message of the Gospel, is not that God intervenes in human history and do something different – but to wake people up to who this God has always been. To alert them to the God they don't know that they already know.

This is not only true of the Gospels, but is heard in how the apostle Paul's prays: he is not praying for God to provide more power, or more stuff for his fellow believers, he prays rather that his fellow believers will wake up to what God has already done! He prays, in other words, that they wake up to what they already know – to their unknown knowns.

But although Mary's poem – is not designed to incite political rebellion, it does not follow that it is an attempt to spiritualise the longing for justice, or to postpone justice to some state of post-morten bliss beyond the grave. This is a rejection of the predominant, imperial value system that favours pride, wealth and power. The God who is worshipped here is a God who sides with the poor, and the oppressed and the downtrodden. According to Mary's song – the Almighty God scatters the proud, dethrones rulers, sides with nobodies and opposes the wealthy:

He hath shewed strength with his arm : he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He hath put down the mighty from their seat : and hath exalted the humble and meek.

He hath filled the hungry with good things : and the rich he hath sent empty away.

Locating the God of Universe, outside the official structures of power – is a radically, political act of subversion – because the oppressive regime runs on the basis that its human leaders inflict their injustices and inhumanities, with divine backing. As history unfolded, the followers of Jesus who worshipped this subversive God, were persecuted as Atheists. They did not worship the official gods of the age – the Roman emperors, or Mars (the god who justifies violence to bring about political ends) or Venus (the goddess who entices impoverished citizens to embrace the ideology that crushes them – like the Tea Party movement). Christians refused to bow to these belief systems, and as such were persecuted as atheists.

Mary's song comes from a young, peasant teenager in a society where she could have been executed for her unexplained pregnancy: she is vulnerable, and fearful – but she remembers the identity of the god she worships. This song – a poem of political subversion – serves precisely to wake people up, to alert them to the god they already know – to remind people of their unknown, knowns. The picture of God that emerges from this poem then, is not the distant god of deism, nor the interfering busy body of traditional evangelicalism.

The last conversation I had with Paul Austin was over the dinner table in the Senior Common Room – where we spoke about Christian morality. The picture of God that our society imagines, he lamented, is a God who is more concerned with drinking, smoking and swearing than he is with the massive injustices and suffering faced by countless thousands of real people in the real world.

Millions of Contemporary Christians don't seem to realise that their God is so busy answering prayers about lost car keys, exam results, and supernatural healing for distant relatives of church-goers – that he no longer has the time or energy or inclination to do anything about economic injustice, ecological breakdown, or the atrociously avoidable death of a child every 2.5 seconds. The awful reality is that so many Christian believers do not realise that this is the God they worship – this God is an unknown known – Maybe we don't realise the identity of the God we value.

Mary's poem gives us no new information.

It is a wake-up call, alerting us to the character of the God who has been consistent from generation to generation all the way back to Abraham.

It is a poem designed to alert us again to unknown knowns – a poem designed to disorient us out of one worldview, and reorient us within another.

It is a call to reimagine who God is, and who we are in relation to this God.

Poetry III - Psalms

Michaelmas 2012

Simon Perry

Researchers at the University of Ottowa, have been using mathematical modelling systems to address the disturbing impact of an epidemic sweeping through the western world. The symptoms of the disease include uncontrollable screaming and crying, emotional dysfunctionality, dizziness, loss of consciousness and poor lifestyle choices – like terrible hairstyles. The epidemic is, technically known as 'Bieber Fever'. According to researchers, devotion to Justin Bieber - the American teenage pop sensation – behaves like a disease. Acording to "scientists," those infected by Bieber Fever (i.e., Beliebers), are victims of the fastest growing diseases on earth.

I suppose in a series on poetry, Justin Bieber may not be the most obvious staging post. But there is something about Bieber fever which may highlight an often neglected dimension of poetry.

In scripture, of course, the most obvious form of poetic writing is to be found in the psalms. It is often forgotten by Christians, particularly by Christians who make a lot of the bible being the word of God – that Scripture is comprised of a wide variety of literary genres. There are histories, laws, narratives, lament, letters, propaganda, poetry, hymns and psalms. And perhaps one of the worst things that has happened to scripture since it was written, was the invention of Chapters and Verses.

Chapters and verses are not simply a means of being able to steer one's wbay around a massive compilation of documents. What tends to happen, is that any sound bible-thumping Christian making any case for anything, quotes chapters and verses, and is able to take them so far out of context that the entire game becomes meaningless. Hence, the unthinkable sin of Bibliolatry – devotion to the words of a text, displacing devotion to the God who inspired those words. The idea that those verses might actually belong to a text of their own, with a genre of its own and a meaning of its own, just doesn't feature. In lots of Bibliolatrous Christian circles, in the end – chapters and verses are a means of ignoring the real text altogether. It allows us to stand outside Scripture, and use it as though it were a resource to provide us with stuff – and as such, the bible is a commodity that we consume – a proof text for endorsing all that we find warm and snug and secure.

This is the attitude Jesus confronts : knowing that even the literary scholars of his day (the scribes), along with the Pharisees – by masquerading as the official custodians of biblical soundness, missed the very God to whom the human words of Scripture point: the result, according to Jesus, is that those who venerate the law – by doing so, actually desecrate that law. These people honour me with their lips but their hearts are far from me: in vain they worship me, teaching as doctrines, the precepts of men. But turning the biblical text into an end in itself, it becomes an idol – bibliolatry!

But to hear Scripture well, is not to stand outside the text, ransacking it for meanings that will be helpful to the reader. Each literary genre within scripture invites us to read it in a certain way. The point of the psalms, is not simply to provide us with information about God and the universe, but to invite us to worship the God of Israel. Not necessarily in the sense that Beliebers worship Justin Bieber. To worship, is to acknowledge the stuff that you value, that makes you tick, the things and motives to which you attach worth. Politics is then, the way that we structure our lives around the things that we value – so to worship is to get to the root of our social, political identity. Every human being is a worshipping animal as much as every human is a political animal.

The psalms then, are not simply to be understood as though they were designed to provide us with vital information. The psalms are designed to be sung – to become a means by which we worship the God to whom they point. When we sing the psalms, we position ourselves in relation to God, to others, to the world, to time and to eternity. In this sense, the psalms function as poetry in the fullest sense.

The psalm we look at specifically this evening, is a psalm that reads like a celestial request for national security. Jerusalem is the nation's capital, and at several key moments in the history of Israel – it was vulnerable to attack from hostile armies. So the psalm reads very much like a request for God to be on our side – for the sake of our families and our friends. But if you can imagine yourself into the situation of those who wrote or first sung this psalm – it was a world with no Geneva convention, no coloured maps, no international law, no United Nations. The crops that you sow may be reaped by future invaders – who in an instant can take your land, your family and your life. So, one of the principle jobs of a god – of any god – is to provide military security. It is the most natural thing in the world, to seek protection from an almighty divinity.

But there is more to the psalm than barring our gates towards the threat of our enemies. Jerusalem houses the temple – the one point on earth at which the heavens touch the earth. Those in Israel, with a global concern for justice, believed Jerusalem to be the place through which God would bring justice and fairness and peace to the whole world. Of course, throughout the history of Israel that belief would degenerate into God blessing us rather than them – whereas the logic of this psalm is for us to be the means by which God blesses them.

One of the choir anthems today draws from psalm 24, and the injunction to lift up your heads of ye gates: rather than barring our gates towards the threat of our enemies – is the urgent call to open up our gates to the God we worship. By barring our gates, by seeking to protect ourselves from otherness, from those who are out there, who are different, we may thereby exclude the presence of God from our world. As Rudolf Bultmann once said, the only way to find true security, is to abandon our desire for security.

To worship the God of this psalm, to worship God through the words of this psalm, is to seek and to celebrate peace. Not peace that is the absence of enemies at the gates. Peace here, is an active, dynamic, relational kind of peace – when everything is working well, when we relate well to those on our doorstep and those beyond it, when we relate well to our neighbours as well as to God himself. To pray for the peace of Jersualem, is in the end, not a request for national security. Instead, it is a prayer that Jerusalem will be all that Jerusalem was meant to be. A prayer that Jersualem embodies a peace - not like the Pax Romana, designed to make sure the world behaves itself and does not unsettle the imperial status quo. The peace of Jerusalem is a disturbing, open kind of peace that reflects the character of the LORD our God. A peace that seeks the welfare not only of those within our citadel, within our walls, within our world of familiarity – but a peace that rests also upon genuine, active desire for the welfare of those beyond our immediate world.

Of course, the history of Israel and the history of the church both show that those who call themselves the people of God, do not have a great track record of embodying this kind of peace. This is why the psalms are sung as often as they are in Christian and in Jewish circles: they function as a literary, liturgical check-point in our walk through history.

The psalm then, has a poetic function: it breaks down a recurring worldview and invites us to inhabit an alternative worldview. This is not a text designed to be simply read or understood. It is music. The great composers of history, from King David himself, through Brahms, Beethoven and Bach, right up to Justine Bieber himself, have understood

well enough – that the poetic engages a dimension of our humanity that affects our whole being. It does not automatically mean that we contract Bieber Fever. But it does engage a full-blown reorientation of the mind, the affections and the will – to the extent that our actual, day-to-day political life is reoriented around the things that we value.

Reading the text well certainly doesn't mean that we can understand the text by treating each individual verse as an isolated, free-floating, nugget of good, sound, Bibliolatrous claptrap. To sing the psalms is to locate ourselves inside a community of worship that comes to form and re-form every dimension of who we are. That is what makes the psalms poetic texts – designed to make and remake us in the image of the God of Israel.

The Dream of the Rood

Dr Rosalind Love

Michaelmas 2012

The Dream of the Rood

Weop eal gesceaft,
cwiðdon cyninges fyll. Crist wæs on rode.

You may have seen in the news earlier this year that archaeologists digging at Trumpington uncovered the grave of a young girl who was buried in the seventh century wearing a gold and garnet cross (see picture). In that girl's day Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England was still young. Handsomely decorated crosses like hers are rare finds, but we have enough to sense the importance the Anglo-Saxons attached to that symbol of their newly-acquired faith. I've also given you a photo of a reconstruction of the crumpled cross that was part of the Staffordshire hoard found by a metal-detectorist in 2009. That's probably a closer analogy to the cross in the Old English poem I want to tell you about.

That poem has been described as 'one of the greatest religious poems in English literature' [C.L. Wrenn], though if I summarise its content you might wonder what the fuss is about: a dreamer describes his vision of a tree that speaks to him, to tell how it was cut down and made into a cross for the crucifixion. Nowadays for us speaking objects belong to Walt Disney's sugary world and so we have to work to put aside our cynicism and recapture a time when it would have been a fresh, striking idea. Though, you might feel there's still something faintly shocking about a talking cross.

This poem is referred to as the Dream of the Rood, where the oldfashioned term 'rood' picks up the poet's word for CROSS – rod. The text survives in two distinct forms: as a 150-line poem in a book written at tenth-century Canterbury, and as a fragmentary sixteen lines of Old English runes carved on an eighth-century stone cross that's now (and always was) at Ruthwell in southern Scotland (see picture), part of the kingdom of Northumbria in the Anglo-Saxon period. No-one knows whether the runes were drawn from a longer poem that already existed when the stone cross was carved, or whether someone took the runes and

built them up into the poem in the book. But we can leave that for scholars to wrestle with, because for our purposes it doesn't matter too much: we can simply enjoy the full poem. A poem written at a period some people think of as the Dark Ages, which uses remarkable artistry and insight to bring a telling message.

This evening's readings give us two perspectives on the meaning of the cross: Isaiah's prophetic words about the lamb led to the slaughter, cut down for the iniquity of us all. And then John's account of Jesus's own words, about the hour when the Son of Man will be glorified; 'when I am

lifted up from the earth and will draw all people to myself'. The pity of the cross and the glory of the cross. The tension between these two views of the crucified Christ, who was at once human and divine, troubled early Christians and caused arguments over the right way to understand Jesus's nature – God? or man? And if both, then how both? Sharing God's will? or accepting it submissively? What our unknown poet does is to blend those two views of Christ, and to put US – his listeners – right at the intersection of the two. The poem's modern title suggests it's about the Rood, but really it's about the transformation wrought in the dreamer through his meditation upon the rood. As we listen, the poet very skilfully draws us deep into that transforming experience. He does this by a steady shifting of perspective and a merging of identities. We, his listeners, see with the dreamer's eyes, then we see and feel the cross's view, which is also Christ's view, then we revert to the cross's view, finally back to that of the deeply moved dreamer. In this way we're taken through passion, crucifixion, resurrection, towards the promise of everlasting bliss. Both cross and dreamer pass, with Christ, from degradation to glory, and we are swept along by the updraught.

So let's begin: there's not time to read out the whole poem and then tell you about it, so I've given you the text (the handout) and what I'd like you to do is follow the text as I take you through roughly the first two thirds.

Hwaet! Hey! Hark! is the poet's blunt summons to us to come alongside.

He turns out to be a dreamer, like us, an audience. By the time he starts his tale, we've tacitly accepted the invitation, and settle to listen and to 'see' the best of dreams. Gradually the picture builds: what do we see? A 'tree' above us, wreathed in light, a beam, a beacon: it's bright, it's covered in gold, there are gems at the four corners, and five up on the cross-beam. These are just clues, as yet unexplained. Then another detail: angels look on too. The object we're all looking at is not yet named, quite – tree, beam, beacon. The Anglo-Saxons had a lively tradition of riddlepoems that play with perspective – a shield speaks as a battle-torn warrior, fingers holding a pen are four travellers who leave black tracks, and so on. In fact the whole poetic tradition was impregnated with riddling, oblique ways of seeing things. So here too the poet plays with our expectations – this riddle's solution, the cross, hangs in the air, seen but unspoken. Then suddenly we have a roundabout naming that's darker, and brings us up sharply: that was no robbers gallows. That was no robbers gallows. Abruptly the view pans out to wide-angle and we're surprised to find that we're not alone with the dreamer, the 'tree' and the angels; there are holy souls, everyone on earth, ALL THIS GREAT CREATION. Still we don't directly name this thing we're all looking it,

rare victory-beam. At this point the dreamer becomes self-conscious – he's stained with sins, wounded with defilements – contrasting with the bright tree, wrapped in joys, gold, gems. At the same instant, though, we catch sight of something more sinister, our seeing penetrates the vision's surface to glimpse 'an old strife of wretches', suffering and evil breaking through the bright beauty, and straightway the cross starts to bleed on its right side, takes on human characteristics. The dreamer responds in horror: I was driven by sorrows, feared that fair sight. And now things speed up: like time-lapse cloud-movement, the object before us, the beacon, undergoes extraordinary changes, expressed as violent contrasts: now it's covered with blood, now studded with jewels; or maybe the fresh droplets glisten like gems. Just as the dreamer is stained so the tree is too, not with sins, though, but by the consequences of sin, the Saviour's blood (though as yet the poet doesn't say this out loud). Heavy-hearted the

dreamer lies watching some while and at last he names the tree a little more plainly – Haelendes treow, the Saviour's tree, standing at once for human shame and divine glory. Time seems suspended. But the best of woods breaks the silence, fully takes on human character by speaking into the night's silence. The dreamer shows no surprise at this – it seems entirely natural – in dreams anything's possible.

Here we exchange the 'I' of the dreamer – for that of the tree: little by little too, our own identification with the dreamer becomes an identification with the tree. The story it tells could easily be one of the Old English Riddles I've mentioned, which sometimes make an inanimate thing tell its life-story. We're taken to the edge of a forest, where the tree has been felled and stripped. Enemies take it, and give it harsh orders, so it says, to raise up their felons. It's carried to a hill and set up. By now we've solved the riddle and guess that this is the cross, and we think we know what the tree will tell us next. But since the crucifixion story is familiar, that shared knowledge can be exploited, by letting well-known events unfold from an unfamiliar standpoint. And I think we must assume the story was familiar to the poet's audience too; this was no poem for the uninitiated, it was aimed at hearts of faith.

We might quibble that the Gospels have Jesus or Simon of Cyrene carry the cross to the crucifixion. Yet here it has already been erected. What's the poet up to? He wants to create a dramatic encounter with Jesus, because now the speaking tree becomes itself an onlooker: geseah ic, I SAW. Now alongside the kind of Old English riddle-poem where the object speaks about itself, there's another kind where the riddler says I saw and describes an object riddlingly. So what did the tree SEE? I saw the Lord of mankind hasten with great keenness, when he wanted to climb on to me, a young hero. Not a passive victim, then, dragged to a

shameful death. The poet's active verbs, come hasting, want, climb, emphasise the vigour of the approaching figure, willing, eager. And the poor tree is in a quandary. Anglo-Saxon poets wrote within a society built on the key relationship of lord and retainer, bound by ties of loyalty and obedience. So the tree daren't go against the Lord's word and bend or

break, even though the earth trembles. Its instincts are to slay the surrounding enemies – fully human now, its responses – but no, it must do otherwise. Next we're told that 'the young hero' (se geong hæleð) who has come up in haste, strips himself as if for battle, strong and steadfast, like a Germanic warrior, and almost as an aside comes the blunt statement: þæt wæs god ælmihtig That was God almighty. Then we get active verbs again: he mounted the gallows, bold in the sight of many: þa he wolde when he would, he wanted to loose mankind. Here is the purpose of the Cross, presented as Christ's own choosing – he wolde – he wanted, to redeem. Moreover, the hero clasps the tree, embraces it like a friend or lover, and it, a thing made, after all, only of wood, trembles: 'Still I dared not bow or fall to earth, but had to stand fast'. You'd have to be pretty cold-hearted not to feel the emotion of this moment. Which brings with it the stark unveiling of one half of the 'riddle': Rod wæs ic… Rood was I raised up, lifted a mighty King, Heaven's Lord.

By depicting Christ as vigorous young warrior mounting the cross and clasping it, the poet foregrounds his Divinity: Almighty God choosing the Cross to loose mankind. But it's not at the expense of also showing Christ's humanity, which is simultaneously present through the Rood's experience. This identification was already hinted at when the tree bled, when it told how it had been taken by foemen at holt's edge, reminiscent of the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus was arrested. And as the cross unfolds the passion narrative its identification with Christ becomes yet clearer.

Now comes the true agony: again, though, the Rood's words jolt our expectations: 'with dark nails they pierced me; and you can see the scars, cruel gashes': not Christ but the Cross. The Rood is both terrified onlooker and agonised sufferer: both dreaming audience—us indeed – and crucified Christ. Then the blurring of identity reaches a point where the Rood can say 'they taunted both of US together'. The poet uses overemphatic language, unc butu aetgeadere, where just one of those would have done. Now the Rood is covered in blood, as it was earlier in the dream, and here at last Christ is shown vulnerable too: the blood flows from the man's side, not from the Cross as before. But even in death

Christ actively sends out his spirit. This moves the Cross to express the bleakness of the moment – much have I borne on that hill, saw the God of Hosts harshly hung up, as darkness wreathed the radiant corpse. Out of

the shocked numbness comes a response in a line full of mournful alliteration: wann under wolcnum: Wéop eal gesceaft 'dark under the clouds, all creation wept.' The king has fallen, the bold hero vanquished, prompting the stark near-monosyllabic Crist wæs on rode. The two halves of the riddle are now solved, both 'tree' and 'hero' named for what they are.

After all the intimacy of identification – the cross's, ours – briefly the Rood draws back, becomes an onlooker, like the dreamer, and like us. Then, the narrative moves on. The identification of cross and Christ continues, yet simultaneously the poet sustains the externalised observation of events. The disciples take Jesus down while the Rood looks on, grief-stricken; and here the poet deliberately repeats the language of the dreamer's earlier horrified reaction to seeing the cross first begin to bleed ic waes mid sorgum gedrefed 'I was troubled with sorrows'. Humbly the Rood stoops to the disciples' hands, just as before it had obeyed the Lord and not bent. The poet presents a scene that flickers disconcertingly, almost surreal: they took there Almighty God, he says, lifted him from the grim torture. The cross they leave, blooddrenched, wounded by spears. And go instead to lay down the limbweary crucified one, stand at his head, looking upon heaven's Lord. Even after death the poet still gives Christ agency: 'he rested himself there a while, tired after the great conflict'. The disciples lay the Lord of Victories in a tomb of bright stone. Only then do they give voice to their grief: they sang a sorhleoð, a sorrow-song for him, sad in the eventide. And then they left. With poignant understatement the Rood says, 'He rested there with small company.' A moment's respite before what comes next and air of expectancy, though interestingly, once it has told of its own fate, the Rood never actually takes the narrative any further than this, to the events of Easter Day.

As the disciples' voices die away, the Cross and others – it says we – maybe the other two crosses (though they're not mentioned before), or other onlookers, or perhaps it and us – stand weeping, as the fair corpse cools. Then like Christ, the rood is taken down and buried, but ignominiously in some pit. Luckily, though, it's later dug up again, and decked with gold. This alludes to the story that Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, found the true cross, an event described in another Old English poem that's in the same book as this one in fact.

So, the metamorphosis which, with the dreamer, we watched like timelapse photography at the start of the poem, is completed – from tree, to blood-stained cross, to gem-studded sign of glory.

6

At this cliff-hanger – Christ rests in the tomb, the cross dreams of its own exhumation and exaltation – the Rood addresses the dreamer directly for the first time. It calls him the same as it called Christ, hæleð ('my belov'd hero'). 'Now you can understand what I suffered, work of baleful ones, sore sorrows', and it's time for me to be honoured. The Rood's words echo the dream's opening, when mankind across the earth and all creation gazed upon the Tree, as they are bidden to do now. 'On me God's son suffered awhile'.

And now again, as at the poem's start, the Rood draws itself up to full height, towers under the heavens, with power to save. It, the cruellest instrument of torture, so hateful, is made a highway towards life. From this position of authority, the Rood entrusts a task to the dreamer and to us: 'tell this vision to men' ….. it is the glory-beam on which Almighty God suffered'.

In the passage that follows – and there's another 50 lines of the poem beyond what I've given you – the Rood reminds the dreamer, in summary, of the Resurrection, Ascension, Second Coming, and finally Judgement Day, when it will be asked of you, it says, 'where among you is one willing to taste bitter death for the Lord's name, as he did? And none will know how to answer. Only those, says the Rood, who bear the best of tokens on their breast need not fear: those who wear the cross, literally, or perhaps those who carry it metaphorically in their hearts.

Those who know, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the Concentration camp, that 'only the suffering God can help'.

The Rood falls silent, and the poem ends with the dreamer's joyful response, full of hope for intimacy with Christ – may the lord be my friend! he say – and for a heaven imagined as a feast in the hall, far from this lean life. By the cross hope was renewed, he says, mid bledum ond mid blisse, with blessedness and with bliss.

The tenth-century book that preserves the Dream of the Rood alongside other religious poems also has a bunch of prose sermons whose clear theme is penitence. Our poem too urges a turning of the heart – it presents the crucifixion not in order to bring us to faith, because that is taken as read, but to provoke a reaction, to ask us what we'll do in response to the sacrifice we've just witnessed.

Rosalind Love

21 October 2012

Why Remember?

Professor Morna D. Hooker

Remembrance Day, Michaelmas 2012

So Abram rose, and clave the wood, and went,

And took the fire with him, and a knife.

And as they sojourned both of them together,

Isaac the first-born spake and said, My Father,

Behold the preparations, fire and iron,

But where the lamb for this burnt-offering?

Then Abram bound the youth with belts and straps,

And builded parapets and trenches there,

And stretchèd forth the knife to slay his son.

When lo! an angel called him out of heaven,

Saying, Lay not thy hand upon the lad,

Neither do anything to him. Behold,

A ram, caught in a thicket by its horns;

Offer the Ram of Pride instead of him.

But the old man would not so, but slew his son,

And half the seed of Europe, one by one.

With the last two lines of that poem, The Parable of the Old Man and the Young, Wilfred Owen completely subverts the well-known biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. Up to that point in the narrative, those of you who are familiar with that story may well have thought that I was reading from the book of Genesis itself. Oh yes, we think, we know this one! Abraham sets out to sacrifice his only son Isaac, but at the eleventh hour an angel intervenes and orders him to sacrifice a ram instead. Only an occasional phrase hints that this is not the story as we normally hear it – 'fire and iron', 'belts and straps', 'parapets and trenches' – and so begins to make us uneasy. And then, suddenly, the story goes horribly wrong. Instead of the happy ending to the story that we expect (happy, that is, for everyone except the ram!), we find ourselves not only bewildered by Abraham's pointless sacrifice of Isaac, but overwhelmed by the mindless slaughter of the first World War. Owen's attention is no longer focused on Abraham and Isaac, centuries ago, but on the conflict in which he himself is a participant. And yet he keeps up the pretence that this is the true biblical account to the end, for the phrase 'half the seed of Europe' in the very last line echoes the term used in the Bible for Isaac, the seed of Abraham.

In the original version of this story, in Genesis, Abraham learns a vital lesson about the nature of his God. Like all his contemporaries, he had assumed that God demanded costly sacrifice – and what more costly sacrifice could he offer than the life of his only son, Isaac? What he learns is that God is not that sort of God – that he is not, that is, a God who demands the slaughter of the innocent. Instead, Abraham begins to grasp the great biblical truth that God's nature is love. But because Abraham had faithfully done – or nearly done – what he honestly believed God to be asking of him, he came to be regarded in Jewish tradition – and later, in Christian and Muslim tradition also – as the

supremely obedient one, who trusted in God's promises to him even when it must have seemed to him that God had forgotten them. In contrast to Adam, who disobeyed God and brought ruin and death upon the whole world as a result, Abraham had obeyed God's commands and trusted his word.

No wonder, then, that Owen's portrayal of Abraham shocks us, for it turns this traditional interpretation on its head. Wilfully disobeying the angel's instruction, Abraham refuses to sacrifice the Ram of Pride, provided by God himself as a substitute offering, and sticks instead to his plan to sacrifice his son. He sacrifices Isaac, not in obedience to God, but because he mistakenly believes that this is the way to win favour with God and so prosper. The parallel with the Generals and politicians of Owen's day could not be clearer. Was it not foolish pride that made them stick to their plans about how to conduct the war, and send wave after wave of young men to their death? They obstinately refused to sacrifice 'the Ram of Pride', and instead sacrificed 'half the seed of Europe one by one'. That final line of the poem brings home to us not only the scale of the disaster but the cost to individuals. In Owen's rewriting of the story, Abraham is not merely a foolish old man, but has become the one who has unleashed destruction and sorrow on mankind. It is Abraham, not Adam, who, because of his disobedience and pride, was apparently the originator of humanity's woes.

In Jewish tradition, the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son – a story known as 'The Binding of Isaac' – held an important place. Abraham was revered for his obedience, and his merit in obeying God was thought to redeem Israel. Isaac, too, was seen as one whose merit brought salvation to his people. Jewish tradition tells us that he asked Abraham to bind him tightly on the altar, lest he flinch from the knife. In other words, Isaac himself was seen as a willing participant in the sacrifice, offering himself up to God voluntarily. Indeed, since tradition also regarded Isaac as a young man, strong enough to carry the wood for the sacrifice, rather than as the child depicted in so many Bible illustrations, he must have been a willing victim, for how else would Abraham, by now an old man, have been able to bind him to the altar? In giving his poem the title of 'The Parable of the Old Man and the Young', Wilfred Owen seems to pick up this idea. The young men slaughtered in the First World War had, at first, set out willingly and enthusiastically to the Front, sent to their deaths by old men. Unlike the biblical Abraham, however, those old men were too blind to realize that they had made a mistake, too proud to change their minds.

But Owen's reinterpretation of the story as a parable of contemporary events was by no means the first. Nearly twenty centuries earlier, Christians had seized on the obvious parallels between the Binding of Isaac and the Death of Christ. Once again, a sacrifice had taken place, and the animal for this sacrifice – the Lamb of God – had been provided by God himself. Like Abraham, God himself had been willing to give up his beloved only Son to death, and that Son had willingly accepted the need to be sacrificed. In what may well be allusions to this story, Paul writes both that God gave up his beloved Son for our sake, and that Christ gave himself up. Isaac was seen as a type of one who was to come, since he had been willing to die, but Jesus actually died, and so completed what had been foreshadowed by Isaac. Isaac had carried the wood for the sacrifice, and Jesus carried the wooden beam of his cross. Isaac was as it were received back from the dead, but what had been simply a metaphor became a reality when Christ was raised from the dead. Whereas Isaac's willingness to die was understood to have brought redemption for Israel, Christ's death was interpreted as having brought redemption for men and women of all races. From his death and resurrection came reconciliation with God for the world.

Today, we remember those who have died or been injured in war. How should we remember them? What purpose is there to our remembrance? Since I was brought up in the 1930's, I can confidently say that my memory stretches back further than anyone else's here tonight. In those so-called inter-war years, the mindless slaughter of the First World War described by Owen was all too raw a memory. The anger and sorrow for those whose lives had been thrown away led to the slogan 'Never Again!' If those lives were to have any meaning, then one must ensure that this was the war to end all wars.

But the seeds of the next war had already been sown. Owen himself died just one week before the Armistice. If his spirit was lurking still in that railway carriage in the Forest of Compiègne in November 1918, he would surely have urged the Allied generals once again to sacrifice 'the Ram of Pride', but instead they insisted on humiliating their enemies and demanding total surrender.

Inevitably, then, the peace bred further hatred and conflict and led to another war. This time, at least, one could say that the cause was just and the battle necessary, for the fight was against tyranny and genocide. On either side, the reasons that motivated men and women to fight might be good or bad, but the racial arrogance –'the Ram of Pride' once again – that led the Nazis to murder millions had to be checked. This time one could at least believe that the combatants who died had died for a purpose: they had died that we might live.

And so, in May 1945, the government announced the end of conflict. Except that the conflict continued, and has continued somewhere in the world ever since.

In remembering the past we bring it into the present. Why? It must surely be because we want to change the future. Owen's rewriting of history demonstrates what happens when men fail to learn from the lessons of the past. His poem brings home to his readers the folly of war, and the guilt of those who pursue it out of personal and national pride. But as we, today, remember the conflicts of the past, it is surely not enough to feel anger at the stupidity that led to carnage, or gratitude for the self-sacrifice of those who withstood evil. True remembrance means a willingness to learn from the past; it means vowing that we will work for a better world, battle against greed and pride, and do our best to bring love and justice to those in need, the homeless and hungry, the persecuted and the exploited, victims of a world where millions are still sacrificed because others do not care.

Abraham was prepared to do the unthinkable, and to sacrifice his son.

In Owen's retelling of the story, he does the unthinkable, and carries out the sacrifice. In the Christian version of the story, which we remember in this eucharist this evening, God, too, does the unthinkable, and sacrifices his son, but in doing so reveals his love for humankind. And in this supremely paradoxical version of the story, we discover that God can use even death to bring life to others. Let us pray that our remembrance of those who lost their lives in war may help to bring life to others.

Poetry and Prayer

Michaelmas 2012

Readings: Rev. 21: 1-5; Job 40:6-14.

[6] Then answered the LORD unto Job out of the whirlwind, and said,

[7] Gird up thy loins now like a man: I will demand of thee, and declare thou unto me.

[8] Wilt thou also disannul my judgment? wilt thou condemn me, that thou mayest be righteous?

[9] Hast thou an arm like God? or canst thou thunder with a voice like him?

[10] Deck thyself now with majesty and excellency; and array thyself with glory and beauty.

[11] Cast abroad the rage of thy wrath: and behold every one that is proud, and abase him.

[12] Look on every one that is proud, and bring him low; and tread down the wicked in their place.

[13] Hide them in the dust together; and bind their faces in secret.

[14] Then will I also confess unto thee that thine own right hand can save thee.

[1] And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.

[2] And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

[3] And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.

[4] And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.

[5] And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.

'Poetry and prayer'. What do we feel when we hear these two words put together? Perhaps we're not at all surprised. Perhaps nothing feels more natural to us than to reach for poems in order to explore faith. And poems—which are only poems, after all—can usually be made to do this job pretty compliantly, to do it without raising too many awkward questions. What's more, don't poetry and prayer have quite a lot in common with each other? Both are famous, after all, for making nothing happen. And aren't both, as we're often told, matters of self-expression, of getting something off one's chest? Insincere prayers, it's sometimes thought, are like insincere poems. The folk theory that poems should express our feelings honestly isn't so far, perhaps, from the doctrine that prayer needs no set forms, times and places, but may and even must be the direct and immediate appeal of the believer to her God.

We have, at any rate, the authority of one of Shakespeare's strongest villains for this. When Claudius tries to pray for forgiveness, for having murdered his brother, Hamlet's father, he can get the words out alright; it's just that they don't make him think of anything in particular. The closing couplet seems to confirm Claudius's view. That last rhyme fixes him in a tableau, named, illuminated, judged. 'My words rise up, my thoughts remain below: Words without thoughts never to heaven go.'

It's as though the fact that Claudius can take time to turn a rhyme on his own insincerity is part of what's wrong with him. What sort of a person, after all, would pray in metre at all, let alone in rhyme? To add this little ornament, this jingle or jewel or this hook to what we say to God, as though we were, ludicrously, hoping to entice Him with our verbal music into listening to and granting our prayers? As the philosopher says, scorning epistemology, "if the Absolute is supposed merely to be brought nearer to us through this instrument, like a bird caught by a lime-twig, it would surely laugh our little ruse to scorn, if it were not with us, in and for itself, all along, and of its own volition." We can imagine, at any rate, what Job's faintly sarcastic God might say to this. "Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook? or his tongue with a cord which thou lettest down? Canst thou put an hook into his nose? or bore his jaw through with a thorn?"

If we, today, sometimes think of poetry and prayer as relatively innocuous cultural goods of a roughly similar kind, this is not a view that would always and everywhere have seemed self-evident. Poets themselves, and especially Christian poets, have often understood the relationship between poetry and prayer as a troubling, even a contradictory or powerfully antagonistic one. When Richard Crashaw died, Abraham Cowley hailed him "Poet and saint!" but went on to call this "the hard and rarest union which can be/ Next that of godhead with humanity". To manage to be poet and saint at once, Cowley thinks, is little less of a miracle than the Incarnation itself. But his reason for thinking so might surprise us. Cowley thinks that metrical composition itself continues to house pagan demons.

Still the old heathen gods in numbers dwell,

The heavenliest thing on earth still keeps up Hell.

Nor have we yet quite purg'd the Christian land;

Still idols here like calves at Bethel stand.

And though Pan's death long since all oracles broke,

Yet still in rhyme the fiend Apollo spoke . . .

Cowley's Apollo is no pale bust, but a menacing and energetic "fiend". And just to make sure we don't think that all this is in the past, Cowley has his classical demon, anachronistically, speak in rhyme—as Cowley himself is doing just at this very moment. The Christian poet, for Cowley, is not really a purveyor of inoffensive uplift and general meditativeness, but is something more like a walking, breathing, speaking oxymoron, one who must continously subdue those very demons which he would now compel to sing the psalms.

Cowley's acute sense of the power and danger of spoken rhythm is far distant from us, no doubt; but it is by no means heterodox. For Saint Jerome, in his twenty-second letter, the pleasures of measured speech were amongst the most stubborn temptations of the desert. Jerome recalls a familiar pattern of binging and purging—not on food or drink, but on classical rhetoric. "Many years ago, when for the kingdom of heaven's sake I had cut myself off from home, parents, sister, relations, and—harder still—from the dainty food to which I had been accustomed; and when I was on my way to Jerusalem to wage my warfare, I still could not bring myself to forego the library which I had formed for myself at Rome with great care and toil. And so, miserable man that I was, I would fast only that I might afterwards read Cicero." Jerome falls ill, and dreams that he is brought before God Himself. "Suddenly I was caught up in the spirit and dragged before the judgment seat of the Judge; and here the light was so bright, and those who stood around were so radiant, that I cast myself upon the ground and did not dare to look up. Asked who and what I was I replied: I am a Christian. But He who presided said: You are lying. You are not a Christian, but a Ciceronian." The Christian poet, and the Christian orator, like saint and anchorite, build their cells and little stanzas next to the spring where the pagan god was thought to dwell. Our sacred English poems, like our cathedrals and our churches,

stand on those sites where the furies are buried. T.S. Eliot was never a more Christian poet than when he had the Eumenides turn up at the family reunion.

Why would you need to go to a particular place to pray, when God is everywhere? Why would you want to pray in rhythms and rhymes, when God dwells without exception in every tiniest particle of a second, and when He may hear even the forlornest little scrap of unornamented talk? Perhaps just in so far as prayer is never all my own work, any more than poetry is. "Lord, teach us to pray, even as John taught his disciples." We pray to be taught how to pray; we need God's help even to know in just what words we should ask for it. The pagan forms themselves may come in aid of sacred speech; a rhyme or a tune may cross our mind with good news, just at the moment when that place might otherwise feel like the blankest tablet in the desert. How does the old rhyme go? Hagiasthétō to onomá sou : elthétō he basileía sou : genethetō to thélemá sou : in other words, Blessed be thy name : thy kingdom come : thy will be done. Newman, trying to explain why set forms of prayer might be needed, even for praying in private, to explain why such forms might be, not an improper curb to spontaneous devotion, but a precious help in time of trouble, ended his meditation with this very prayer. "He gave the prayer and used it. His Apostles used it; all the Saints ever since have used it. When we use it we seem to join company with them. Who does not think himself brought nearer to any celebrated man in history, by seeing his house, or his furniture, or his handwriting, or the very books that were his? Thus does the Lord's Prayer bring us near to Christ, and to His disciples in every age." At those few moments when prayer and poetry, almost impossibly, come together, we can find ourselves caught up into an anamnesis, an unforgetting, in which my words do anything but express something peculiar to or singular with me, but in which I am instead spoken by those spiritual ancestors whose very words I take into my mouth. From just this venerable antiquity I may find out new heaven and new earth; a record of long pain and sorrow, but spoken in accents of the New Jerusalem.

Lord Jesus Christ, you find already what we seek; you give already what we need; you stand already where we fall. Grant that our failing speech may be filled with your truth and light, that we who stand in direst need of help may learn through you how to ask for it. Amen.