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Christ at Cana (Mark 1:9-11)

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‘Religions are poems. They concert [that is, they harness]
our daylight and dreaming mind, our
emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture

into the only whole thinking: poetry’.¹

With these lines the great Australian poet, Les Murray, asserts the kinship – even the identity – between religion and poetry. Both are concerned with ‘whole thinking’, an apprehension of reality that draws on our intellect *and* intuition, or (as he puts it) our ‘daylight and dreaming mind’ along with ‘our emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture’. On this view, it’s not that there’s something called ‘poetry’, a subset of which has religious, spiritual or devotional subject matter. Rather, good poetry is itself religious. It connects and reconnects us to the whole; the whole of ourselves and our knowing, and the whole of reality – the said *and* the unsaid, the evident *and* the mystery.²

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann draws on the same kind of insight to argue that our reading of Scripture must call forth the same whole person response that poems evoke. It must open us to dimensions of truth beyond instrumental reason. If we’re not alive to this poetic dimension, he claims, we read the bible in a ‘flattened’ way, as if it speaks of ‘a world that is organized in settled formulae’.³ But by such ‘prose’

¹ Les Murray, ‘Poetry and Religion’ cited in John Foulcher (ed), *Poetry and the Sacred*, St Mark’s Review No. 238, December 2016 (4), p.vii.

² Cf. Alan Gould cited in Foulcher, *Poetry and the Sacred*, p.vi.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis, MI: Fortress Press, 1989), p.3.

(prosaic) reading we cannot be surprised, challenged and opened to new possibilities; we fail to experience the biblical text's 'generative power to summon and evoke new life'.⁴ To be truthful readers and hearers of the Scriptures, then, somehow we must let our prose world be disrupted – our listening renewed. For this reason, Brueggemann says, preachers must become poets.⁵

Well, I don't promise to become a poet myself – but over these next four weeks we're going to let four poems speak to us. Some have explicitly Christian reference, some don't. But by putting them in conversation with Scripture, by means of this 'holy reading', I hope we may find ourselves nourished and enlivened and more fully present to the mystery of things.

We begin tonight with John Foulcher's, 'Christ at Cana'.⁶ John is one of Australia's foremost contemporary poets – he's Canberra based, just recently retired as Deputy Principal of Burgmann Anglican school.

At the table basted with food

he is lost,
sees only the Baptist's head
torn away,
the empty eyes
as rank as milk in a dish.

Long after the wind has come
and the young happy marrieds are twisting
on the bed,
he stays at the table,
fingers the empty cup, thinks of the water
cool and endless,
the Jordan's sky and the voice so light on the wind.

⁴ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, p.4.

⁵ Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, p.11.

⁶ In *John Foulcher*, Poets and Perspectives Series (Canberra, Halstead Press, 2008), p.18.

I love this poem and for me it exemplifies in a profound way Murray's notion of 'whole thinking'. It does so by taking 'poetic license' with the biblical story in such a way as to manifest striking and powerful insight into the experience of faith. The setting, obviously, is the wedding at Cana as told in the gospel of John. In the poem, the banquet is over – the miracle performed, the guests dispersed, the 'young happy marrieds are twisting on the bed'. But Jesus lingers 'at the table basted with food' and the poet imagines him 'lost', seeing 'only the Baptist's head torn away, the empty eyes as rank as milk in a dish'.

Now in the chronology of John's gospel, by the time of the wedding at Cana, John the Baptist hasn't yet been arrested. And at the beginning of Jesus' ministry in the synoptic gospels (none of which report the wedding at Cana), John has been arrested but not yet beheaded. So – in a prose world – this scene looks like an impossibility – chronologically out of joint. But the truth it points to is deeper.

You'll remember that the transformation of water into wine for this wedding is the first of Jesus' signs. In the symbolism of the Jewish tradition, it announces that the true bridegroom of Israel is come – in other words, this miracle is a radical claim to messiahship. Performing it, Jesus has gone public. He's stuck his head above the religious parapet. And what now? Exposed, alone, he sits among the dregs of the feast, fingering the empty cup. In the background, perhaps, are these words: 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me'. And (as the poet imagines it) there comes to Jesus' mind the vision of another exposed head at the end of another feast – the head of his cousin John the Baptist, severed and presented on a platter at Herod's table. It's as if Jesus foresees the end that's implicit in this beginning – not only for John, but also for himself. That's whole thinking. The truth seen not logically, chronologically, causally – but intuitively, the whole recognised in the part, the future already present.

And so this poem invites us into Jesus' skin, his vulnerability. It invites us to feel with him that dread, that terrible aloneness when the magnitude, the folly, the cost of what he's begun suddenly suffuses his vision, when he 'sees *only* the Baptist's head torn away'? And for what? On the basis of what?

When Jesus is baptized by John in the Jordan, the gospels portray his calling and divine endorsement unequivocally. 'A voice came from heaven. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased"' (Mk 1:11). No mistaking it, no doubting. But we know, don't we, from our own experience, it's usually not that simple? It's true, we can be gifted with moments of clarity – this is the way I must go, the thing I must do. Sometimes we might even be bold to say: *this* is what God wants of me. But how fleeting and tenuous that clarity can come to seem; how easily the doubts crowd in – when we glimpse the cost, when we meet with misunderstanding and opposition. Maybe I am deluded, maybe I misheard.

Could it have been like this for Jesus too? In the poem, he remembers the day of his baptism but it seems a memory without consolation, 'the water cool and endless', 'the Jordan's sky' indifferent, without signification. And he remembers the voice – but not like Charlton Heston, not unequivocal, a 'fact' attested by all present. No - for Jesus, looking back, it seems a voice almost not there. And in five words, John Foulcher evokes a world of ambiguity and the agony of discernment: it's so little to stake a life on – that voice 'so light on the wind'.

There's so little surety – truly a *via negativa*. And isn't this true of much of our experience of discipleship? Life is mostly not full of signs pointing the way – and God is mostly not palpably with us, a cheer-squad and source of endless affirmation. We can set out in the direction we think we're called, but it's not like the Camino – there aren't yellow arrows every 200 yards reassuring us we're still on track. Often, we're not even sure how we chose our way. We simply wake up in the midst of things, doing what

we're doing – wondering if we're living the life we were meant to, wondering if we missed the crucial turn.

But the thing is, that's the risk of faith. And what matters in the end is our willingness just to keep listening, and our daring to keep faith with our calling, our life as best we can discern it. Of course, this isn't easy. It doesn't give us grounds for being self-confidently assured of our own righteousness. Yet Jesus shows, by his own courageous persistence, that this difficult practice of humility and trust *is* the way, the way that leads to the feast that does not end, the banquet to which all are invited, the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:9).