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Eli, Eli (Matthew 23: 37-39)
Dark Night of the Season: Pentecost X
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Eli, Eli

To see them go by drowning in the river –
soldiers and elders drowning in the river,
the pitiful women drowning in the river,
the children’s faces staring from the river –
that was his cross, and not the cross they gave him.

To hold the invisible wand, and not to save them –
to know them turned to death, and yet not save them;
only to cry to them and not to save them,
knowing that no one but themselves could save them –
this was the wound, more than the wound they dealt him.

To hold out love and know they would not take it,
to hold out faith and know they dared not take it –
the invisible wand, and none would see or take it,
all he could give, and there was none to take it –
thus they betrayed him, not with the tongue’s betrayal.

He watched, and they were drowning in the river;
faces like sodden flowers in the river –
faces of children moving in the river;
and all the while, he knew there was no river.

Judith Wright

I first read this poem by the Australian poet Judith Wright when I was in high school and it totally blew me away – although I wasn't sure I understood it then, and it still feels a little beyond me. When I was preparing for tonight, I tried to find a commentary that might help me feel surer of my interpretation and I looked up Les Murray's *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*. The anthology contains this piece, but Murray pointedly declines to analyse it or any other poem in the collection. He writes: 'I have come to believe more and more strongly that too much labelling tends to entrap a poem and restrict its life. Just as too much commentary may pre-empt our direct experience of the poem'.¹ Far from being necessary, he says, it's 'more likely to get in the way'.²

Well, that sounds a warning over the whole venture of this current series reflecting on poetry and scripture, though I take some comfort from the fact that he doesn't forbid commentary altogether – it's just 'too much commentary' that's problematic. In the case of this poem, I'm certainly glad not to feel any responsibility to 'explain' it or give a definitive account of its meaning. But I'd like to draw out some of what strikes me in the hope this provokes your own wondering engagement with this masterwork.

Judith Wright was born in 1915 on a property in New England and much of her poetry reflects her life-long love of the land and a passion for environmental issues. She was also painfully aware of her forebears' involvement in the dispossession of Aboriginal people, so her work as poet and political activist also reflects a profound concern for justice for indigenous Australians. This poem, 'Eli, Eli', a relatively early work, appears in the second volume of poetry she produced, in a collection called *Woman to Man* first published in 1949.

The poem's title is drawn from the opening words of Psalm 22 – '*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*' which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' These are the words of abandonment that, according to the gospels of Matthew and Mark,

¹ Les Murray, *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1986), p.xii.

² Murray, *Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*, p.xii.

Jesus cried from cross. But whereas they're usually interpreted as expressing Jesus' agonized sense of God deserting *him* in his hour of greatest need, Wright subtly shifts their reference. The heart of Jesus' anguish, she suggests, is not *God's* distance but ours; it's *our* refusal to come close, to be helped, to receive what he offers, that desolates him. Imagined this way, his cry from the cross is continuous with the pained lament Jesus utters as he enters the city of Jerusalem for the last time, knowing that the people will not recognize or listen to him: 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing' (Matt. 23: 37).

The poem, like Jesus in this passage, assumes we're in desperate need of what he wants give. For Wright, we human beings, at least we adults, are drowning; those who seem powerful – 'soldiers and elders', as much as those who seem weak and vulnerable – 'pitiful women'. *All* are 'drowning in the river'. The children maybe aren't so far gone. Their faces are still 'staring' from the river; they're not yet overwhelmed, going under. But they're in the water nevertheless, and will end up presumably like the rest, for they share the human condition. Yet though salvation is at hand, Wright sees all these drowning people resisting, refusing the lifeline that's offered.

The form of this poem is like a litany – a rhythmic series of phrases repeated – and the meaning is communicated by the layering of the lines, the way refusal and the pain of refusal intensifies. Take a look at the beginning and end of the first three stanzas: 'To see them go by drowning in the river... that was his cross, and not the cross they gave him'; 'To hold the invisible wand, and not to save them –... this was the wound, more than the wound they dealt him'; 'To hold out love and know they would not take it, to hold out faith and know they dared not take it –... thus they betrayed him, not with the tongue's betrayal'. It's an extraordinary evocation of thwarted giving – the love of God yearning but failing to connect and save – 'all he could give, and there was none to take it'.

But what is it that we need to be rescued from? What are we drowning in? What is this river from which we will not or dare not be pulled? Well, here's the real tragedy – the final wound to the heart of love. 'He watched, and they were drowning in the river; faces like sodden flowers in the river-; faces of children moving in the river; and all the while, he knew there was no river'. I wonder what happens as you hear this line? How it lands for you? For me it feels like the most extraordinary reversal, like a rug pulled out from under me. I've been going along with a vision of this flooding river as overwhelming us, something so powerful that we cannot extricate ourselves and from which we must be rescued. But now, it's as if Wright is saying that we're being inundated, letting ourselves be drowned by that which has no real existence. The experience of drowning is real, but it need not be. It could be otherwise.

So, again I ask, what *are* we drowning in? What is this non-existent river from which we will not or dare not be pulled?

I wonder if the river Wright sees us struggling in is the current of unreality, the flow of untruth, the illusions by which we get sucked in and under, that overwhelm and ultimately suffocate us? It makes me think, for example, of the unreality of parts of our national life – the way we refuse (at any official level, at least) to tell the truth about such things as the massacres of indigenous people on the frontier or the climate crisis or how homelessness and poverty aren't individual failings but necessary by-products of our economic system. And then how the refusal of these truths causes us to suffer, makes our politics mean and petty and impotent: 'to see them go by drowning in the river – soldiers and elders drowning in the river'. It wouldn't take much – you'd think – just to let the truth be and respond to it, to let ourselves surface from the mire we're stuck in and imagine new life for all out the other side. But somehow it seems impossible.

It can be the same in our personal lives. I think of how we struggle at times to face and accept the truth about ourselves or our relationships and commitments; how illusions of having to be perfect or good or in control keep us locked in

destructive loops, defended, anxious, sad; how some of the stories we tell isolate us and cause us to hurt ourselves and each other, and how all this is at some level unnecessary. Again, it wouldn't take much – you'd think – to let some of this stuff go or (if it's not yet clear how to do that) at least to name our confusion and hurt. But it isn't easy and often we aren't willing. 'To know them turned to death, and yet not save them ... knowing that no one but themselves could save them; this was the wound, more than the wound they dealt him'.

It doesn't have to be like this. But it so often is because we're not willing to give up what's keeping us stuck or small or seemingly safe in a familiar but fictional identity. Embarking on the journey towards fuller reality, fuller life feels too frightening, its consequences too unpredictable. So rather than 'take the invisible wand', the gift of love and faith that would lift us out of the waters, we prefer to drown, our 'faces like sodden flowers in the river'. No wonder it breaks the heart of God.

Eli, Eli ... why have you forsaken me? Jerusalem, Jerusalem ... why are you refusing me? To accept the gift that's offered is to consent to be drawn from illusion towards truth, from unreality towards reality, from meanness to love, from drowning to dry land. It's often not easy to discern what this means in practice, and it can be a painful, confusing and frightening passage – a 'dark night of the soul'. But the grace is this – the offer of salvation is never withdrawn, the wand is always stretched towards us. All we have to do is reach out our hand.