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An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow (Matthew 5: 1-4)

Dark Night of the Season

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An Absolutely Ordinary Rainbow

The word goes round Repins,
the murmur goes round Lorenzini,
at Tattersalls, men look up from sheets of numbers,
the Stock Exchange scribblers forget the chalk in their hands
and men with bread in their pockets leave the Greek Club:
There's a fellow crying in Martin Place. They can't stop him.

The traffic in George Street is banked up for half a mile
and drained of motion. The crowds are edgy with talk
and more crowds come hurrying. Many run in the back streets
which minutes ago were busy main streets, pointing:
There's a fellow weeping down there. No one can stop him.

The man we surround, the man no one approaches
simply weeps, and does not cover it, weeps
not like a child, not like the wind, like a man
and does not declaim it, nor beat his breast, nor even
sob very loudly—yet the dignity of his weeping

holds us back from his space, the hollow he makes about him
in the midday light, in his pentagram of sorrow,
and uniforms back in the crowd who tried to seize him
stare out at him, and feel, with amazement, their minds
longing for tears as children for a rainbow.

Some will say, in the years to come, a halo
or force stood around him. There is no such thing.
Some will say they were shocked and would have stopped him
but they will not have been there. The fiercest manhood,
the toughest reserve, the slickest wit amongst us

trembles with silence, and burns with unexpected
judgements of peace. Some in the concourse scream
who thought themselves happy. Only the smallest children
and such as look out of Paradise come near him
and sit at his feet, with dogs and dusty pigeons.

Ridiculous, says a man near me, and stops
his mouth with his hands, as if it uttered vomit—
and I see a woman, shining, stretch her hand

and shake as she receives the gift of weeping;
as many as follow her also receive it

and many weep for sheer acceptance, and more
refuse to weep for fear of all acceptance,
but the weeping man, like the earth, requires nothing,
the man who weeps ignores us, and cries out
of his writhen face and ordinary body

not words, but grief, not messages, but sorrow,
hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea—
and when he stops, he simply walks between us
mopping his face with the dignity of one
man who has wept, and now has finished weeping.

Evading believers, he hurries off down Pitt Street.

Les Murray

‘He who is aware of his sins is greater than one who can raise the dead. Whoever can weep over himself for one hour is greater than the one who is able to teach the whole world; whoever recognizes the depth of his own frailty is greater than the one who sees visions of angels’.¹ So wrote Isaac of Nineveh, an 8th century Syrian theologian and monk. He’s talking about what the Eastern Christian tradition calls ‘the gift of tears’. This is a weeping that flows from piercing awareness of your own and the world’s pain, but it’s much more than feeling sorry for yourself. It’s a profound experience of our separation from one another, our alienation from ourselves and from God. Do you know this experience? Maybe there’ve been times you’ve felt just helplessly distant or disconnected even from those you love? Maybe times of being utterly frustrated or disgusted by yourself? I’ve felt it at times as the inability to get out of my own way – an overwhelming sense of entrapment in futility, falsity, the snares of ego. I can see it, but I can’t get out of it – and I realise that at some level I’m just stuck, despite my best intentions, my deepest yearnings. There can be a sense of helpless complicity in the wrongs of life, and sorrow for the world’s sorrow. The gift of tears.

¹ Cited in Alan W. Jones, *Soul Making: The Desert Way of Spirituality* (New York: Harper Collins, 1985), p.82.

‘The word goes round Repins’, Lorenzini, Tattersalls, the Stock Exchange and the Greek Club – in all the places where men are men, all the places the world’s business is done, an uneasy awareness is growing: ‘There’s a fellow crying in Martin Place. They can’t stop him’. And how beautiful is this line – the two short sentences communicating the simple power of this weeping, the way it’s escaped the controlling force of custom, the compulsion to maintain appearances and pretend that everything’s just swell. ‘They can’t stop him’. No wonder everyone is getting edgy, as if some new force has entered the city and is disrupting the rhythms we keep drumming out together. The traffic’s banked up in George St, crowds are muttering and hurrying and pointing, for (and here the poem repeats its shocking news): ‘There’s a fellow weeping down there. No one can stop him’.

There’s a bare vulnerability in this weeping. It’s not the crying of a child looking to be comforted, not like the wind raging and howling, not self-conscious, declamatory or even very loud: he ‘simply weeps’ and the sheer simplicity, the dignity of his weeping creates a space around him that no one dares invade. It’s like a ‘hollow’ in the midday light, a ‘pentagram of sorrow’ – and here the poet surely wants us to remember that the pentagram was used by early Christians as a symbol of the five wounds of Christ. The police are there, ‘uniforms’, but having failed to seize him they find themselves backed into the crowd and staring out at him along with everyone else. They too experience the impact of his weeping ‘and feel, with amazement, their minds/ longing for tears as children for a rainbow’.

In years to come, people will try to explain this mysterious held-backness, telling of a halo or force around the weeping man. But ‘There is no such thing’. Some, those who weren’t there, will say they would have stopped him. But that’s bluster. ‘The fiercest manhood, the toughest reserve, the slickest wit among us trembles with silence’. In fact, the simple weeping of this undefended man causes them to burn ‘with unexpected judgements of peace’. His tears reveal the truth of them all, things hidden, unrecognized, deep within. ‘Some in the concourse scream who thought themselves happy’. Only the smallest children and the pure in heart, ‘such as look

out of Paradise', are able to come near him, humbly and undefendedly sitting at his feet, with the creatures of the earth, 'with dogs and dusty pigeons'.

How you respond to him, reveals you to yourself. You call it ridiculous, then realise you've spewed something dreadful. You stretch out your hand, shining, and receive the gift of weeping. All who do the same receive the same gift and weep for sheer acceptance, but many more *refuse* to weep for *fear* of all acceptance – still trying to defend something, control something, be someone. But the weeping man, like the earth, requires nothing. He's not interested in our reactions – he ignores us, he simply inhabits and pours out his grief from his writhen face and ordinary body; he communicates not words or messages, but sorrow, 'hard as the earth, sheer, present as the sea'. It's elemental, irreducible, of a magnitude way beyond the human, only to be undergone. It stops only when it stops, and when it does, 'he simply walks between us/ mopping his face with the dignity of one/ man who has wept, and now has finished weeping'.

Well, it's with some trepidation that I offer a 'reading' of this extraordinary poem. Les Murray, usually described as Australia's foremost poet, our 'unofficial poet laureate' until his death earlier this year, was himself deeply suspicious of 'explaining' or interpreting poetry. In the foreword to his anthology of Australian religious poetry, he wrote that 'too much commentary may pre-empt our direct experience of [a] poem, forcing it, or its reflection in our minds, towards the condition of declarative prose. I don't accept the joking dictum that Exegesis Saves. With good poetry, it is more likely to get in the way, and no amount of it can save bad poetry'.² A poem, like the weeping of the man in Martin Place, must speak for itself.

And I get what Murray means, especially when you come across commentary that seems, in his words, 'to entrap a poem and restrict its life'. Someone I read characterized this poem, for example, as 'exploring themes of modern urban

² 'Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry, selected by Les A. Murray (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 19860, p.xii.

alienation’.³ And though that is part of what’s evoked, it feels to me as though this poem is exploring a much deeper alienation than that – the alienation of humanity from itself, of humanity from God and the life of earth. An alienation that may be healed, as Jesus taught, only as we find ourselves taken beyond any possibility of self-making or self-justification, only as we find ourselves brought to the very end of our resources and let ourselves be there, empty, non-striving, weeping the tears of the world. ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted’.

And it’s as if the poem references the story of Noah, and the flood by means of which God remade creation, brought it into renewed relationship. Just as the waters of the flood washed away the iniquity that human beings had wrought upon the earth, so this deluge of tears cleanses the soul of the crying man and enacts a kind of judgement on the life that comes to a standstill around him – its busy inattention, its commerce and greed, its façade of normality and purpose. And just as at the end of the flood, God’s making of peace with humankind is symbolized by the gift of a rainbow, so this episode of disruptive, public weeping resolves itself in an unexpected peace and the clearing of the tears. The weeping, it is finished – and I hear in this echoes of Christ’s last words, his reconciliation of all things on the cross.

Except, here’s an irony. Les Murray was a deeply religious man – he’d converted to Catholicism in his mid-twenties and publicly professed his faith in an urbane, literary context often hostile or uncomprehending. Much of his poetry evokes the event of radical divine encounter – the painful, yet ultimately reconciling space of poverty and unmaking and mourning – which, a few centuries earlier, John of the Cross had described in the metaphor of the ‘dark night’. Yet Murray also understood that, time and again, it’s precisely our religion, our pious certainties, that get in the way of our entering this space, this broken open and helpless yearning for the real. Religion itself all too often fears the loss of control and assurance and

³ The unattributed entry for Les Murray in the Australian Poetry Library.
<https://www.poetrylibrary.edu.au/poets/murray-les>.

keeping up appearances. Which is perhaps why, when the man has finished weeping, he hurries off down Pitt Street, 'evading believers'. He simply disappears into the city, anonymous to the end – 'a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief' (Isaiah 53:3).

As for us – well, how are you left? For me, I'm a little more tender, emptied, sad. And at the same time, I feel a little more present, connected, made true. And, so for me, this poem is like a sacrament – it brings about that of which it speaks. It draws us into contact with our own sorrow, the world's sorrow, and then somehow humbly, simply, helps reconcile us at root. It is an absolutely ordinary, and an utterly extraordinary, rainbow.