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Reading Rumi in the Red Bear (Matthew 24: 36-42)

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Reading Rumi in the Red Bear

*The study of this book will be painful for those
who feel separate from God*

The landlord, his ponytail curving
towards the till pulls someone's pint
then comes to take my order.
He rings it through to Susan.

*Who says words with my mouth?
Who looks out with my eyes?*

An elder in the alcove, her hair
the yellow side of white, drinks pints and smokes.
She talks about the morning: what she did
what the other woman said.

*Be empty of worrying
think of who created thought*

Through the window by the traffic lights
a man laughs, amused at what he's seeing
his tooth-gap shares the joke.
Rumi says: *feel the delight*

*of walking in the noisy streets,
and being the noise*

In the oak-panelled dining room
heart-shaped stools with matching tables.
On the wall a framed stallion
held forever by a stable lass.

*Flow down and down, in always
widening rings of being*

A surge of silver blurs my eyes.
Susan brings the scampi and chips.

Michael McCarthy

‘Father Michael McCarthy will long be remembered as the priest-poet, a man of deep spirituality and a caring pastor who, in various capacities, gave almost fifty years of devoted service to the Diocese of Leeds’. So concludes the obituary written last year for Michael McCarthy in *The Catholic Universe*, which describes itself as ‘Britain’s most trusted Catholic newspaper’.¹ And it struck me, reading this, what a profoundly catholic poem McCarthy has given us here – catholic not in the denominational sense, but in the sense of ‘universal’, wholistic, world embracing. A 21st century Irish priest, reading the 13th century Persian poet Rumi at a pub in Yorkshire, the Red Bear no less; Rumi’s cryptic, mystical insights floating through the bar, and brushing against its working class patrons as – what? Comment, critique, illumination?

As I read this poem, I imagine McCarthy sitting in a little booth, or maybe a small table at the side of the room. He reads a line from Rumi and then lifts his head, looks around, his eye falling on some snapshot of life.

The study of this book will be painful for those who feel separate from God, says Rumi.

The landlord, his ponytail curving
towards the till pulls someone’s pint
then comes to take my order.
He rings it through to Susan, McCarthy observes.

Who knows what he, the landlord, feels about God. Whether he’s even conscious of what we ‘spiritual types’ call ‘the inner life’ and the state of it. But he seems pretty connected – his ponytail curving *towards* the till, his actions joining him to three different people in four short lines – pulling someone’s pint, coming to take ‘my’ order, ringing it through to Susan.

McCarthy returns to his book. ‘*Who says words with my mouth?/Who looks out with my eyes?*’, wonders Rumi, struck by the mystery of selfhood. ‘An elder in the

¹ <https://www.thecatholicuniverse.com/obituary-fr-michael-mccarthy-rip-17423>.

alcove, her hair/the yellow side of white, drinks pints and smokes', and seems – as McCarthy observes her – not in the least concerned about who says words with her mouth or looks out of her eyes. She chats about the morning, 'what she did/what the other woman said'. Likewise, the man who can be glimpsed through the window by the traffic lights, laughing, unselfconscious about the gap between his teeth, just is, as Rumi enjoins us to be, 'empty of worrying' though he's not, one assumes 'thinking of who created thought'. Or, in fact, thinking of anything – other than what has amused him in this moment. Which is, as it turns out, the whole point. 'Rumi says: *feel the delight/of walking in the noisy streets,/and being the noise*'. Not reflecting on it, not separating from it. Total immersion, simple being.

Which seems to return McCarthy to the room he himself is in – the oak-panelled dining room, with its stools and matching tables (somehow significantly) 'heart-shaped', and on the wall one of those pictures that are always in English pubs of a 'framed stallion/held forever by a stable lass'. And Rumi's gentle invitation to keep deepening the felt sense of connection between past and present, between wood, animal and human life, 'flowing down and down, in always/widening rings of being'. And then suddenly, just as our poet seems about to dissolve into a puddle of oneness and union with all, an annunciation happens – an angel, a surge of silver blurs his eyes. It's Susan, bringing the scampi and chips.

There's so much to delight in, in this poem – the brilliant juxtaposition of the poet's observations with Rumi's gnomic pronouncements, the gentle irony of the whole situation, and above all, the paradoxical awareness of world's colliding in the very proclamation of life's radical at-oneness, in the very exhortation to be at one with everything. Rumi is all about transforming union – he wants us to know ourselves not separate from God, from ourselves, from our experience of life. 'The study of this book will be painful for those/ who feel separate from God' – so 'be empty of worrying, be the noise, flow down and down/in always widening rings of being'. McCarthy is about that too – he's a Catholic priest and spiritual director – he's

committed his life to enabling others to realise this possibility of radical reconciliation, radical union with God and themselves.

But, sitting in the pub, among the people he's given himself to serve and love, it's as if he's from a different planet. The language, the thought world, the existential preoccupations of the professionally 'spiritual' seem utterly alien here, so much flotsam and jetsam compared with the solid realities of pulling pints and telling of the days' events, the furniture of the dining room and those lovely hot chips. Does it actually amount to anything? Contribute anything? Are these people in fact already there – the pony-tailed landlord, the yellow-haired elder, the gap-toothed man and St Susan of the visitation – and it's only angst ridden intellectuals and priests who haven't realised their connection with the whole? Who are talking about it rather than simply living it?

Or is it the other way around? Are these apparently unselfconscious, unreflective souls the ones living in a dream? 'Eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage' until the day some flood might come, until some urgent awakening to a deeper reality is called for, and they will prove to be unequipped, asleep, and in the end overwhelmed? It's hard to say, isn't it?

And it seems there might be two questions at issue here. One is the whole idea that there is something to wake up to, something about life that's not just lying on the surface of things but is nevertheless the real truth of the whole. This idea is imaged in the apocalyptic literature of the New Testament as 'the coming of the Son of Man' but, stripped of its cosmological trappings, it signifies just that it's possible to miss the real calling of a human life, to get to the end and discover somehow that you hadn't connected to the deeper rhythm which could have transformed your way of being in the world. This is a way of imagining life that our culture finds increasingly implausible. Philosopher Charles Taylor speaks of the self-sufficing humanism of our secular age, which cannot believe there is any world but this one, any transcendent reality, any fuller future to which the present time is answerable. Watching in the

bar at the Red Bear, it's as if McCarthy is asking us, asking himself, can we still make anything of it?

What's tricky (and this is the second question) is that you can't necessarily identify whether or not someone is awake to what I've been calling this 'underlying reality' in the circumstances of daily life. We're all just going about our business, doing ordinary things in the same kind of way, 'two women grinding meal together' or two men 'in the field' or talking in the pub. People's readiness to face and respond to the deep truth of life *may be* radically different, but this might not become visible until a crisis befalls. Only then will it become obvious that their lives were sourced differently – and so enabled differently. And only then might we be able to make sense of the idea that there is indeed another world in this one, and that some kind of intentional awakening and spiritual practice might be our means of access to it.

Well, Michael McCarthy doesn't resolve these questions for us. With gentle, self-deprecating irony he leaves us, as he leaves himself, simply amidst the ambiguous and intersecting worlds of the so-called spiritual and the so-called mundane, of Rumi and the Red Bear. Not quite clear which one is 'really real'. Or maybe recognising that it's all real, that everything belongs, and is part of a mutually illuminating whole. And if that's so, then maybe this poem is at least in part about accepting that his and our priestly calling is (as it was for Jesus) to celebrate the whole of it, to draw things together in so loving a gaze that we become a bridge between worlds, so that all things may finally be fully realised and know themselves one.