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When Death Comes (Luke 22-32)

Pentecost V

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When Death Comes

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox;

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

Mary Oliver

It takes me a while to decide which poems we'll read each Poetica Divina. I'm looking for a mix of themes and a mix of styles – some serious, some quirky, some overtly religious and some not. I try to balance male and female poets, and to include a selection of Australian poets. This year one further element entered the process. There came a moment when I realized that all the poets I'd decided on had recently died! Which made the choice of Mary Oliver's poem, 'When Death Comes' seem particularly apt – almost like a lynch pin for these reflections.

Oliver herself, one of America's best loved poets of nature and the inner life, died in January this year, aged 83. This poem, though, was published 27 years ago – part of her 1992 collection *New and Selected Poems*. 'When Death Comes', then, was written a long way out from dying – and it's really not about death at all, but about life, and how consciousness of death is intrinsic to making the most of it.

At one level this is a familiar, even a well-worn theme. From St Benedict's injunction to his monks to 'keep death always before your eyes', to Jesus telling his disciples to keep awake for you know neither the day nor the hour, to Robin Williams in *Dead Poet's Society* telling his students to *carpe diem* or seize the day, the idea that our mortality gives shape and urgency to our living is accepted wisdom. But the question is how do we make this wisdom our own? How do we turn it from general knowledge into the kind of felt experience that really does change us?

Well, Oliver seems to say, you don't do it by minimizing the magnitude, the sense of threat that death is for us. There is a kind of voraciousness, a devouring-ness in death – 'like a hungry bear in autumn'; there's a kind of avarice – for death will take 'all the bright coins from his purse to buy me', and then snap that purse uncompromisingly shut. Death can come in nasty forms, like the measles-pox, a disfiguring disease, or like 'an iceberg between the shoulder blades', an unexpected

blow, striking cold and hard from behind. Oliver doesn't prettify death, and she refuses to pretend that it doesn't feel (at least at times) like an enemy, a robber, a merciless predator. Nor does she gloss over its inevitability. Four times she reiterates, 'when death comes' – 'when' not 'if', 'when' not 'later' ... And it's striking to me that in the first three stanzas of this poem, only death is given agency.

But then suddenly, the sense of agency shifts ... suddenly, death looks like not only something we suffer or undergo, but something we can choose to meet. 'When death comes', Oliver writes, when this inevitability befalls, then there's a way I want to be about it. 'I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering: what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?' Death is still unknown, and kind of scary, but with these lines Oliver begins to imagine it not just as an end, but a door, an entrance to a new space for living – a threshold she can cross with a certain intentionality. And critic Roger Housden notes what a homely space this seems to be – a cottage of darkness,¹ nothing too grand or overwhelming, more like a habitation we might find ourselves welcome and make our own.

But what are we to make of Oliver's way of speaking here? Is it just a kind of imaginary construct – something that might help us manage our fear of death but that's ultimately unreal, a kind of consoling fantasy? There are certain ways of talking about death as a doorway that can feel like that. English theologian Timothy Radcliffe has protested against the sentimental tendency to avoid the suffering of death by way of easy piety: 'There is a prayer for the dead ... which claims that "death is only an horizon, and an horizon is nothing save the limit of our sight"'. And one wants to protest. It appears to trivialize death, as no more dramatic than a trip to London. Henry Scott Holland did not even think he was going that far: "Death is nothing at all, I have only slipped into the next room"².

But I don't think Mary Oliver is being sentimental, pretending this threshold isn't significant. It's more as though she's exercising the kind of spiritual discipline that Jesus is seeking to teach his disciples as they contemplate the ravens and the

¹ Roger Housden, *Ten Poems to Last a Lifetime* (New York: Harmony Books, 2004), p.116.

² Timothy Radcliffe, *What is the Point of Being a Christian?* (London: Burns & Oates, 2005), p.84.

lilies of the field. The thing is that in the face of the unknown, in the face of a future that so often feels threatening, or lacking, or insecure, the human tendency is to worry, to fill the space with dread and anxiety. But though this seems natural, even a 'responsible' acknowledgement of the gravity of our situation, it's almost entirely futile. 'Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life?' Jesus asks. And yet, how hard it is to let our anxiety go! How hard to leave open the space, to be conscious of death looming on the horizon without being colonized by fear of it.

So what helps? For Jesus, what makes possible non-anxious living is a basic trust in the goodness of God, a trust that grows the more we are truly present and attentive to the life of the world around us. 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom'. Mary Oliver encourages curiosity and wonder, journeying through life and towards death with as open a heart and mind as she can muster. And though she doesn't say it, I think there's a sense in which this way of being, this curious openness is also an expression of trust. It involves daring to entrust yourself to what you cannot ultimately control or guarantee.

What authenticates this trust? What gives us reason to hope it's connected to the truth of things? It's certainly not that everything suddenly goes our way – or that what we think we need just falls from the sky. Despite the promise of provision in our passage from Luke, there are times when the rations given us for the journey seem barely enough to get by. Even so, I want to suggest that what authenticates our trust is the way it opens up a new perspective on the whole of life – even in the midst of difficult circumstances. Mary Oliver chooses to forego the fear of death, and in the release of that, the tenderness of that, she experiences a new kind of kinship with all life. 'Therefore' she writes, 'I look upon *everything* as a brotherhood and a sisterhood', all creatures facing together an unknown but common destiny, such that time itself looks different and eternity a possibility. And one of the great gifts that follows this experience of fellowship in mortality is a heightened sense of both the sharedness of creaturely life, and the radical singularity and mystery of each one.

Czech poet, Czeslaw Milosz evoked this sense when he wrote of every leaf of grass having its fate, 'just as a sparrow on the roof, a field mouse/And an infant that would be named John or Teresa/Was born for long happiness or shame and suffering/Once only, till the end of the world'.³ Oliver too writes of this wondrous paradox of sameness and particularity: 'I think of each life as a flower, as common as a field daisy, and as singular', and she goes on insistently to repeat the word 'each': 'each life', 'each name', 'each body' – each one tending towards dissolution, silence, dust turned back to dust, and yet each one unrepeatably itself and a gift ... of beauty, music, and the courage to be.

This, says Oliver, is how she thinks of life now, how she sees things. And it gives rise to the final four stanzas of this magnificent poem, in which she sets out a kind of manifesto about how she wants to live in the light of all this mystery and all life's pain. 'When it's over, I want to say: all my life/I was a bride married to amazement. I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms'. And this imagery of bride and bridegroom suggests a profound involvement and intimacy – I'm not here just to observe life, or to let it pass me by, or to survive it – I want to be joined to it, to embrace it, hold it close, no matter what it brings.

And if this is how she wants to relate to the astonishing gift of having a life to live, there follows three clear statements about how she *doesn't want* to be: 'I don't want to wonder if I have made of my life something particular, and real'; 'I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened, or full of argument', 'I don't want to end up simply having visited this world'. Variations on a theme, really – but they point to all the ways we refuse life – by declining to take the risk of showing up; by chronically complaining, running scared or fighting; by refusing really to get into it as if *that* is going to keep us safe. For strange as it seems, Mary Oliver proclaims, we're released to be wholly in life, to celebrate and inhabit it, only when we've begun to integrate the prospect of our death, only when we're prepared to contemplate who and how we want to be 'when death comes'.

³ 'And Yet' in Czeslaw Milosz, *Provinces: Poems 1987-1991*, trans. Czeslaw Milosz and Robert Hass (New York: Ecco Press, 1993), p.13.