

Love Dogs (John 20. 1-18)

© Sarah Bachelard

Love Dogs

One night a man was crying,
'Allah, Allah!'
His lips grew sweet with the praising,
until a cynic said,
'So! I have heard you
calling out, but have you ever
gotten any response?'
The man had no answer for that.
He quit praying and fell into a confused sleep.
He dreamed he saw Khidr, the guide of souls,
in a thick, green foliage,
'Why did you stop praising?'
'Because I've never heard anything back.'
'This longing you express
is the return message.'
The grief you cry out from
draws you toward union.
Your pure sadness that wants help
is the secret cup.
Listen to the moan of a dog for its master.
That whining is the connection.
There are love dogs no one knows the names of.
Give your life to be one of them.

Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī

Christians should be poets in residence and their worship should be poetry in play because, at the end of the day, we are not seeking relevance but resonance – not the transient ideas of today that can convince for a time but the truths that address the deepest longings of a human life and a fragile world. Poetry, like God, with an immense intimacy and intimate immensity, is our faith's pulse.¹

Mark Oakley is currently Dean of the Cathedral of Southwark in London. This is a quote from his book, *A Splash of Words: Believing in Poetry*. For me, it serves as a kind of epigraph on the series we're embarking on today – a four-week series in which we'll bring four poems into conversation with four passages of Scripture, exploring how together they illuminate our understanding and nourish our living. Oakley says, and I agree, that a good poem can help us see and feel the truth of things (the pulse of life) in fresh ways; it can attune us to the depth dimension of our own spirits and so connect us to the depth dimension of our faith and the biblical text. That's why we call this series *Poetica Divina*. It's a play on the notion of *lectio divina* or 'holy reading', where we seek to encounter God through the prayerful reading of texts. We've had series like this a few times before – but not since 2019. So, we're beginning again – with this whimsical and yet poignant poem by the thirteenth-century Sufi mystic, Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī, called 'Love Dogs'.

If you look up this poem on the internet, you'll find a clip of it being read aloud by its translator, Coleman Barks. Barks' reading is accompanied by a cello and the plangent strings of some kind of lute because, as he tells us, Rumi's poems were always recited to music and they were part of the work of a community. The work was the work of opening the heart. So he begins: 'One night a man was crying, "Allah, Allah"!' And with this single line, spoken so tenderly, a world of longing is evoked. The cry sounds at night – from the dark, from the depths – and reaches out to the life beyond the self. In this very act, Rumi sees that the one who calls is changed: 'his lips grew sweet with the praising'.

¹ Mark Oakley, *The Splash of Words: Believing in Poetry* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2016), p.xxxi.

But then, in the poem, comes the put down. Someone whose heart is perhaps disappointed or hardened belittles the one who calls out to God. A cynic says, 'So, I have heard you calling out, but have you ever gotten any response?' Suddenly self-conscious – maybe even ashamed of his naïve faith in an answering reality – the man in Rumi's poem realises he's never heard directly from the one to whom he cries. He has no answer for the cynic; so he quits praying and falls into a confused asleep. And if 'awakening' is a metaphor for spiritual awareness, maybe this image of falling into an uneasy sleep reflects the state of restless unconsciousness that characterises those who give up on God.

Yet grace is still present, active, and in Rumi's poem (as in so many biblical stories) it's communicated in the form of a dream. Khidr, an angelic messenger and guide of souls, appears to the man vibrantly alive, 'in a thick, green foliage'. And with the wisdom of the true spiritual guide he offers, not a command or a judgement, but a question. 'Why did you stop praising?' 'What's going on for you?' In the legend of the Holy Grail, there's a critical moment when the knight Perceval asks the wounded Fisher King, 'what ails you?' This is called 'the healing question'. In Rumi's poem, Khidr's healing question creates space for the man to express his hurt and name his lack. It makes him present to himself. And so, neither hiding his vulnerability nor disavowing his grief, the desolate seeker responds: 'Because I've never heard anything back'.

In the gospel of John, in the aftermath of Jesus' death, Mary Magdalene is depicted as similarly desolate. She has come to the tomb to anoint her Beloved's body, only to find it empty. She cries out to the other disciples, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him'. They rush in and then rush away, but she continues to stand there, outside the tomb, exiled, as it were, from all her hopes. She weeps, and then she tries again, bending over and looking into the darkness. Suddenly, unexpectedly, she too sees angelic messengers. She too is asked a question: 'Woman, why are you weeping?' Neither hiding her vulnerability nor disavowing her grief, she says to them: 'They have taken away my

Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him'. Then she turns around and sees Jesus himself, though she does not recognise him. And there comes another healing question: 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?'

Unlike Rumi's seeker, Mary has never stopped praying, never stopped looking, but like him, she has been brought to the place where loss of contact with the Beloved seems final. And yet, against all reason, she persists. 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away'. And finally, her seeking, her longing, her desire for the Beloved yields again to connection. Jesus said to her, "Mary!"

Desire has mixed press in religious traditions. On the one hand, at least in the Abrahamic faiths – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – it's recognised as a pervasive and God-given feature of the human search for God. 'O God, you are my God: eagerly will I seek you. My soul thirsts for you, my flesh longs for you: as a dry and thirsty land where no water is' (Ps.63.1-2). From the Hebrew Song of Songs to the ecstatic poetry of the Sufi mystics to the bridal mysticism of the mediaeval Christian tradition, the yearning for and experience of God can have a profoundly erotic dimension – a longing for and sense of intimacy and consummation. 'O taste and see that the Lord is good' (Psalm 34.8).

Yet, on the other hand, in relation to the divine no less than to the world, human desiring can be problematic. Just because we long for something, doesn't mean it's real. We all know that our desire can be activated by false goods and false gods, leading us away from truth and causing us to act in self-centred, destructive ways. Desire is often connected with craving or attachment, with the greedy drive to possess or acquire, that disturbs our equanimity and limits our generosity. When wanting fills my inner life and colonises my attention, it can stop me from truly seeing others and responding justly to their needs. Thus the Book of Common Prayer warns us of following 'too much the devices and desires of our own hearts', because of which we leave 'undone those things which we ought to have done' and do 'those things which we ought not to have done'. For this reason, there's much emphasis in

ascetical and contemplative traditions on taming the passions, becoming detached from our ego-ic desires, learning to say 'not my will but thine be done'.

So how do we discern our way here? How do we know when our desires, our yearning hearts, are leading us closer to the truth of ourselves and of God, and when they're miring us in illusion and neurotic, ego-ic craving? It seems to me our texts tonight give us a clue. They're not concerned with the question of whether we should or shouldn't desire. Indeed, they see our desire for God, our yearning for intimate connection, as intrinsic to finding and being joined to the Love we seek. Their concern is not to suppress or limit human desire; it's to purify it.

For Rumi's seeker, the purer desire for God will emerge from disillusionment, and from learning (as Rowan Williams puts it) 'to look to God without regard to my own instant satisfaction'.² In the poem, the fact that the cynic's question derailed the seeker's prayer showed he had some expectation of what a response from Allah might look and feel like; his prayer was attached to an imagined outcome. What he must learn is to seek God for God's own sake, 'for nothing' as Meister Eckhart put it. He must learn that his simple longing for God is itself God at work within him. 'This longing you express is the return message'. And it's fidelity to the longing that is your fidelity to God and that leads you home – whatever consolations come or don't come. 'The grief you cry out from draws you to union. Your pure sadness that wants help is the secret cup'.

For Mary, the response to her desiring love seems at first glance different. Like Rumi's seeker, she too has been brought to the place of absolute poverty of spirit; she's unable to generate the outcome she seeks from her own resources. But unlike him, her yearning is answered – not just by its own continuance, but by an encounter with the risen Lord. She sees Jesus again directly, she speaks with him and hears him speak her name. But then, almost immediately, she too must let him go. There's that same movement of dispossession. 'Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to

² Rowan Williams, 'Address to the Synod of Bishops on The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith', Rome, October 2012, s.10.

me”’, do not cling. At the very moment of the consummation of her heart’s desire, she is beckoned on, called beyond the stasis of something attained to an ever more generous trust and self-yielding.

Why is it like this in the spiritual life? Why won’t God let us settle down with God as a possession? Why does the purification of our love require the constant deferral of its satiation? Is this just divine sadism, God playing hard to get? Well, let me respond to this question at two levels – theologically and experientially. Theologically, our tradition holds that the reality we name God, Allah, is infinitely beyond what we can know or grasp. To wait on God is always to be drawn to deepen our faith and expand our capacity to receive; it’s to embark on ‘a journey without end’³ that draws us ever beyond our acquisitive ego-ic identities to become sharers in a larger life.

Experientially, this journey can be felt in different ways. Sometimes there is a touch, a taste, which leaves us paradoxically both overflowing and wanting more. In the unforgettable words of St Augustine: ‘I tasted and now I hunger and thirst. You touched me, and now I burn with longing for your peace’.⁴ And sometimes, there is no felt sense – just sheer yearning. But the yearning itself comes from God. How do we know? Because as we consent to it, as we open ourselves to it humbly and patiently, as we keep faith with it and refuse to fill the space, the need, the emptiness with anything that is not God, ‘our lips grow sweet’, our hearts expand and we know we are becoming truer. Rumi says: ‘Listen to the moan of a dog for its master. That whining is the connection’. This is what it means to be a ‘love dog’. This is why we must give our lives to be one of them.

³ Williams, ‘Address to the Synod of Bishops, s.6.

⁴ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X.