

Poetry and Faith

Mark Oakley talks about the difficulties and rewards of poetry and its relation to faith.

I was at a conference the other day when one of the speakers began by saying: 'I don't know many of you here so I've asked for a list of you all broken down by age and sex; but as I look at you all now,' he said, 'I can see that *most* of you have been broken down by age and sex'. Well, I'd never be so rude... although...

I'm here to talk about poetry and faith – to my mind, two inseparable topics. But I know that the word poetry is scary for a lot of people because it can have bad memories of boredom or humiliation at school as you tried to understand or recite a poem, and sometimes then maybe you've tried to come back to poetry in later life but don't know quite where to start and when you did it all seemed pretty incomprehensible, too much work for too little result. There's even a word 'metrophobia' – the fear of poetry – not fear of London transport, the fear of poetry. Or, maybe Blackadder gets nearer the truth: 'Baldrick, I'd rather French kiss a skunk than read your poetry'.

I remember the day I realised my life needed more poetry in it. I went to hear Wendy Cope read her poems and towards the end she read this short poem called 'Names'. It is written about her grandmother.

She was Eliza for a few weeks
When she was a baby –
Eliza Lily. Soon it changed to Lil.

Later she was Miss Steward in the baker's shop
And then 'my love', 'my darling', Mother.

Widowed at thirty, she went back to work
As Mrs Hand. Her daughter grew up,
Married and gave birth

Now she was Nanna. 'Everybody
Calls me Nanna,' she would say to visitors.
And so they did – friends, tradesman, the doctor.

In the geriatric ward
They used the patients' Christian names.
'Lil,' we said, or 'Nanna,'
But it wasn't in her file
And for those last bewildered weeks
She was Eliza once again.

I listened to those few simple lines that capture the fragile life cycle of a woman you feel tender towards after just 107 words and found I was crying. Not all poems make you cry of course, far from it, but what

became clear to me that day and since then is that when we talk about poetry we are talking about a 'soullanguage', a way of crafting words that distils our experience into what feels like a purer truth. This is, I think, what the Irish poet Michael Longley meant when he was asked: 'Where do you get your poems from, all the words and images, where do they come from?' and he replied: 'If I knew where poems came from, I'd go and live there.'

I've called my new book *The Splash of Words* because a good poem, it seems to me, is like the pebble thrown into a lake: there is that immediate splash (like the effect here when I had finished reading 'Names'), and then the poem begins its work, the ripples set out towards your shore and they begin to lap over the shores of your understanding, shifting sands, unsettling hard stones. And if you're a person like me who thinks theology is a beachcombing exercise, then the work of a poem brings things onto your shore that you might want to cherish and take home.

In the Church we often like to think we're rather good with language, a bit cool and hip even. This isn't always so. I once saw a big poster outside a gloomy north London church that simply asked passing shoppers: 'Tired of sin? Then come in'. To which someone had scribbled at the bottom: 'And if not, telephone 367475'. But I don't need to tell you that for a person of faith language matters. And whereas we can get very obsessed about being relevant it seems to me that what we should be striving for is not relevance so much as resonance.

I'm originally from Shropshire and I was brought up by my grandparents. There are a lot of sheep in Shropshire and at the bottom of my grandparents' garden about two years ago I saw Tom out in the field. Tom's in his 80's and is a shepherd and that day he was carrying his shepherd's crook. So I called him over and joked that my boss carried something very similar and then I asked him what it was for, did he really use it to hook around naughty sheep and pull them back? He laughed: 'No,' he said, 'I'll tell you what this is really good for. I stick it into the ground so deep that I can hold on to it and keep myself so still that eventually the sheep learn to trust me.' I can't tell you how I've wanted to preach at a bishops'

consecration service ever since! But it's an important image for the Christian and person of faith: drawing on a deeper place, nearer the humus (the root of humility) so that we can be so still, so centred, that we might be found worthy of some trust. And for this we need a language worthy of the vocation. I believe that language will be poetic.

But let's just go back to the problem of poetry for a moment because by now you might be feeling, ok I can see where this is going but I'm still stuck on the poetry thing. I don't get it. If that's how you're thinking then let me take you for a trip that I mention in the book – a trip to Belgium.

Consider the way you'd be thinking if you were planning a trip to Belgium. You might try to learn a few useful phrases, or read a bit of Belgian history, or thumb through a guidebook in search of museums, restaurants, flea markets. The important thing is that you'd know when you get to Belgium you were going to be confused, or at least occasionally at a loss, and you'd accept that confusion as part of the experience.

Well, poetry is best thought of in the same way. The art form is enormous and perplexing but you can amble across the landscape, taking time, being curious. Like all foreign countries poetry has customs and rules but you don't have to remember them all to make the trip worthwhile. You need motivation to book your tickets and patience once the journey's started. The point is, that no matter how much you prepared for your trip to Belgium, you know that at some point you're going to be confused and the thing about going on holiday is that to be confused is part of the fun, part of the exhilaration of the break. Poetry is the same. You will be confused. This is language but not as we know it. And you are allowed not to always like it – and here is the spiritual point: difficulty can be important in a life.

A quick exercise – if I said to you now: 'Here is the News', you would probably sit up and expect to hear the facts of the day, events that have occurred and some commentary on them. But if, instead, I said: 'Once upon a time', you would probably be equally expectant for truth but you'd tune in differently and be ready to receive it in a different form, story, where meaning is communicated without summarising it. Now, when you walk into a church or a place of worship how do you tune in your ears? Have you got your newsroom ears on? Have you walked into a Google temple of facts on tap? Or, have you walked into a poem? Have you walked into a space that is celebrating the fact that God is not the object of our knowledge but the cause of our wonder? You see, to

walk in with expectations of the one and to get the other might mean you miss something very important.

Certainly in a Christian service you have walked into poetry in motion. You stand and sing a poem, called a hymn or worship song, then you'll hear an ancient poem called a psalm, then prayers full of images, metaphors, similes come along. I'll mention scripture in a moment. If you're a high church cleric or a charismatic singer, the gestures become poetic, arms go into the vocative, as a language is sought to praise the mystery and reality of God. You see, when we fall in love we look for a language that will express what we feel and we will go to every length to describe the loved one, we all become poets. Poetry is the language of the lover, the language of love. And that, simply, is why it must be the language of the Church, the language of faith, as we scurry around trying to do some justice with our words to the truth of God and the truth of ourselves. When you're in love, truth is far too important to be literalistic with.

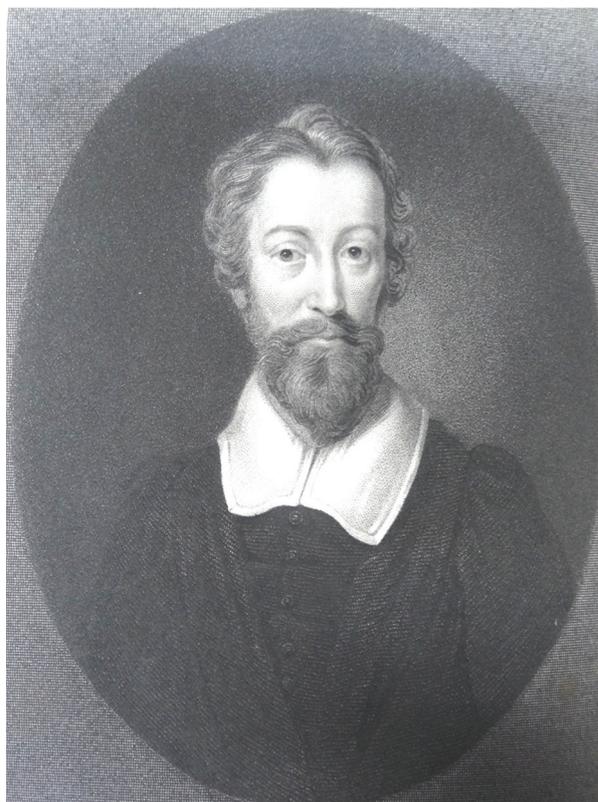
Now just in case you think this is all a bit Radio 4, a little too 'I wandered lonely as a Canon', let's just remember the ancient traditions of the great world faiths and the place poetry has in the heart of each.

The earliest sacred texts of Hinduism, the *Vedas*, are in effect thousands of poems, then the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita* or *Song of God*, composed in verse. In China, the classic *Tao Te Ching* was written poetically in the 6th century BC, the opening verse referring to the 'gate to all mystery'. Then the Hebrew Bible, full of poetic exploration: the psalms, the noble language of Job, the imagery of the *Song of Songs*, the riddles of the *Proverbs*. And the prophets warning people what they've turned into, doing it through intense imagery and metaphor. It's a message today's church needs to be reminded of, that prophets always call us to a proper vision with poetic hope and never with prosaic plans. I'll come back to the Gospels in a second, but let's jump now to the Qu'ran, where God is the poetic author of a text so beautiful that Muslims developed particular chant styles for reciting it. Listen to its much repeated line that has become the key statement of Islam's *shahadah* or confession of faith: 'There is no god but God' in the Arabic transliterated as *la ilaha illa Allah*, repeating the double consonant *il* between the open *a* vowels gives it rhythm and emphasis to translate into your life. In these spiritual traditions truth is expressed through poetry for the faithful. Poetry isn't a better way of saying truth, rather truth is found in poetic form.

The Christian Gospels are not so obviously poetic until you study them closely. You then see the artistry of each of the four writers, or evangelists, as well as the persistently figurative preaching of Jesus himself. Jesus, as it were, often took people on that trip to Belgium, leaving people often wondering, it says in the gospel, what on earth he meant and yet being intrigued and drawn by his parabolic language that hovered rather than came into land. He wouldn't have scored that high in a seminary preaching class because there were rarely three easy points in summary. Storytelling reveals meaning without defining it. Jesus was poetic. The Good Samaritan never existed. Nor did the Prodigal Son. There was no Lazarus at the gate or a woman who lost a coin. Jesus made them up. He was a verbal artist. He used similes, metaphors and parabolic riddles all the time. His stories were not designed to make easy sense, they were designed to make you, to re-make you via some difficulty.

Maybe for this reason the Christian creeds found it difficult to make succinct reference to them, no paraphrase possible again, and so if you hear the Apostles' Creed or Nicene Creed recited in a church service you will see that it says that Jesus was born, suffered, died and rose again. But there was something in between. He taught – and his poetry defied dogma. One scholar, Joachim Jeremias, has argued that the original Aramaic of Jesus' sayings would have been full of poetic alliteration and assonance, conveyed through a four-beat rhythm. What we do know is that when he finished his poetry, as the splash took place, he said: 'If you have the ears to hear, then hear'. Might that be, have you tuned in right? This is not the news, you see. This is the good news – and language has gone into a state of emergency to help us get to the kingdom. The poet Hafiz described it as pulling out the chair beneath your mind and watching yourself fall on God.

If you look at the heartland of the world's faiths, and at the heartland of my own, the Christian way, then there is one conclusion: God is a poet. This is not a new conclusion. The former Dean of St Paul's in the early 17th century, John Donne, having read the Bible, told God what was now evident to him: 'Thou art a figurative, a metaphorical God... in whose words there is such a height of figures, such voyages, such peregrinations to fetch remote and precious metaphors... such curtains of allegories, such high heavens of hyperboles, so harmonious elocutions... as all profane authors seem of the seed of the serpent that creeps; but thou art the dove that flies.'



John Donne, Dean of St Paul's 1621-1631

God is a poet and the tragedy is that the troubles begin when people of faith become cursed with literalism, simmering down the richness, the ambiguities, the resonances into something black and white and then often weaponised – those biblical bullets that we fire off. 'Nothing true can ever be said about God from a defensive posture,' wrote Marilynne Robinson. But sadly, when we decide to control the poetry, to decide what its one meaning might be, then we easily set ourselves up against other insights and responses and a language that danced around the divine flame becomes routine, dead and cheap like so much else. To put it succinctly in the words of my poet friend Pdraig O'Tuama: 'Whatever Jesus of Nazareth's death means, it doesn't mean something that can be written on a fridge magnet'. Language is sacramental and is about beginnings not ends. God is not a word for a bumper sticker.

The early theologian John Chrysostom said that when we read the scriptures, for instance, we shouldn't hammer away at a word or a phrase, we should read them, he says, like a letter from a friend, reading the love between the lines. Any interpretation of scripture where you cannot hear the love between the lines is not one to pursue. Having the poetic ear helps us read the love between the lines, not only of the Bible but also of our lives.

And that's what I want to finish with. What does poetry have to do with my life, my discipleship, my faith? Let me try and get to the heart of my belief. I believe that God has given everyone here a great gift. It is your being. And we are all asked to give a gift back in return – our becoming, who we become in our lives. Put it another way: God loves us just as we are, but God loves us so much God doesn't want us to stay like that. Therefore we need a language in our faith that is not so much about information as about formation, a language that helps us become. We need, and the teachings of Jesus are this, a language that doesn't set out to answer all our questions so much as questions all our answers. We need a language that enlarges the heart, the mind, the humane and our understanding of the divine.

What we are more used to is prose. Prose fills endless pages of lines in a relentless language that stops with a small dot, takes a breath and starts again. It travels with you, demanding little more than the occasional pause to have another thought. Prose begins with a capital letter, chugs along nicely and ends with a full stop. It communicated its meaning well or it didn't. When we approach God, it is time to stop being prosaic.

Poetry does not chug along. Words have been placed into relationships we are not used to them being in. They are surrounded by spaces, gaps appear, dashes pop up and sometimes punctuation has completely disappeared. Type an Emily Dickinson poem in your computer and your auto-correct will explode! It doesn't have a single view in mind but has multiple meanings in its sight, having discerned that truth is much richer in connectivity and conjunctions, and more riotously vivid, than the 'prosaic' world of prose would have you believe. Each word of the poem has been listened to for its sounds, its poise and pounce. Reading poetry aloud helps us hear those sounds properly. We forget that the sounds of words are caught up in their communication. Meaning and melody are inseparable. You only need to say 'Hurry up!' or 'Slow down!' to hear how the sound of the words reflect what's being asked. Sometimes the echoing words are placed into a formal rhythm.

Human beings are rhythmic by nature, because as long as we are alive there is a beat playing itself out right in the centre of our bodies. It is what poets call an 'iamb' (the 'te-tum' sound of a light stress followed by a heavy one), a heartbeat rhythm. Place five iambs together in a line – which is about the length of a human breath – and you get the basic rhythmic line structure of so much English poetry – for example: 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?', or Milton:

'Of Man's first disobedience, and the fruit'. Or Dean John Donne: 'Batter my heart three-person'd God, for you'.

Poetry is not an easy-running river. It is not a quick read. It is a fountain, a source from which meaning can be slowly, patiently drawn. We have all heard of 'creative writing' but poetry demands of us a creative reading. There is no quick clarity. No seductive easy answers. Like faith, poetry will challenge your first impressions, because if we live in a world of first impressions we are only half alive. When you buy a poetry book you aren't getting many words for your money but are getting more meaning for your money. You can't paraphrase poetry, though you can try and outline its themes and effects. You could never easily paraphrase the poem by Wendy Cope I started with. Poems communicate somewhere deep within us before they are intellectually or emotionally understood by us. That is why they are potentially transformative and are used in such a variety of places and times: from work to help rehabilitate young offenders to giving voice to unspoken grief at a funeral; from helping children see their world better to stirring up adults to protest for change. Poetry is the more human voice. Poems push our boundaries. The meanings of a poem are always ahead of us, naughtily calling back 'catch us if you can' – and we follow because it feels we are being taken somewhere new.

My book is not scholarly, but it is enthusiastic – very much agreeing with Auden when he said that a poem should always be more interesting than anything that can be said about it. Nevertheless, I look at some poems from my life of faith and try to share something of what I encounter there, the ripples heading to my shore. The poets I've chosen are really varied, with different beliefs, from different times, on a range of subjects. You'll know some of them – George Herbert, John Donne, Dylan Thomas but you may not know Jen Hadfield, in the Shetlands, or Liz Berry from the Black Country or our present Poet Laureate's poem about prayer. I hope people will find a real variety there but feel something of the movement, the formation, that disturbs our surfaces when we read them.

The mystic Meister Eckhart once said that God is like a person hiding in the dark who occasionally coughs and gives himself away. Poetry is where I hear the cough, where my own snoring through life is interrupted, where the splash makes me jump and freshens and puzzles, just like those words 'follow me' still do. Writing this book was my way of trying to celebrate the truth that I have come to believe very



Zarmina's (Rahila's) parents at her grave. Photo: *New York Times*

deeply: that God is in this world as poetry is in the poem. So buy that ticket to Belgium!

Postscript

I end the book with a landay from Afghanistan. A landay is a short poem, 22 syllables, 9 in the first line, 13 in the second, ending with the sound *ma* or *na*. Sometimes they rhyme but more often not. They're short folk poems, recited or sung by women native to the Pashtun areas of Eastern Afghanistan and western Pakistan. Often ancient, sometimes contemporary, reciting them is a secret and anonymous tradition where a woman, who is meant to be invisible, compliant and so on, actually makes her heart known. Some landays go back to the 1700 BC. The landay I chose simply says:

I call. You're stone.
One day you'll look and find I'm gone.

It was recited by a teenage Afghan girl called Rahila Muska. She lived in Helmand, a Taliban stronghold, and she wasn't allowed to leave her home. Her father fearfully took her out of school because the education of women was considered dishonourable by the Taliban and therefore making her liable to kidnap or rape. But Rahila loved poetry, writing it and reciting it.

Rahila liked to listen to poetry programmes on the radio and would often phone in to a live chatline run by a women's literary group called Mirman Baheer. Here girls from the provinces could read out their work or talk to other poets.

One day Rahila phoned in from a hospital bed in Kandahar to say that she'd set herself on fire in anger. Her brothers had beaten her after discovering that she wrote poetry. To many Afghan women poetry is forbidden because it implies a freedom of the will and her brothers were brutal in punishing her. Rahila, with all the strength and resilience she had shown in her poems, set herself alight and, soon after her phone call on the radio she died.

Rahila's real name turned out to be Zarmina. I find her story very moving. A teenage girl on the other side of the world to me decides that she is willing to die to witness to the importance of poetry and its celebration of the whole uncensored human person in a whole and uncensored world.

Mark Oakley is Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral in London. His book *The Splash of Words: Believing in Poetry* (Canterbury Press, London 2016) was reviewed in *Sofia* 122, Christmas 2016. He gave this talk at the SOF London Conference on March 25th 2017.