WORDS AND THE WORD

Reflections on Scripture, Prayer and Poetry

Bonnie Thurston

FOR MOST OF MY ADULT LIFE, I have been both a poet and a professor of the New Testament. The Word and words are central to my life. They are also a source of considerable perplexity and sometimes of downright difficulty.

First there are all the complications of the Word, of Holy Scripture, of the Bible. It has been my privilege to deal daily with the mystery of Holy Scripture. And it is mystery, this process of inspiration and the resultant authority of the Bible. Would that we could remember that Scripture is mystery, would that we could kneel in its presence and open it in awe, gratitude and wonder as frequently as we confront it with scalpel and microscope! But, as Kathleen Norris quipped in an introduction to the Psalter, 'today's bblical scholars are trained in abstraction, and not in poetry'.[1] A major problem with the study of Scripture in the academy is that scholars and pastors are often trained to treat the Word as ordinary word.

Then there are difficulties with the language of prayer. I agree with Jean Daniélou that prayer is primarily,

> … the expression of an ontological bond that exists between God and us. It is the outward manifestation of a fundamental reality: we continuously receive ourselves from God, and we continuously refer back to [God].[2]

Prayer is essentially a matter of making ourselves present to the God who is always present to us.[3] But in the practice of most Christians, prayer is less a matter of presence and more a matter of saying words.

[1] Kathleen Norris, 'Preface', in *The Psalms* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997), xviii.
[2] Jean Daniélou, *Prayer: The Mission of the Church*, translated by David Louis Schindler (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 15.
[3] Daniélou, *Prayer*, 19.

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Eventually 'saying words' goes stale, and what is one of God's greatest gifts, that most wonderful gift of relatedness to the Divine Self, is truncated. Seldom is it seriously experienced and deeply explored.

Once again, at least part of the problem is that words obscure the Word. We are bombarded by so many words that we forget language's power. Writing in an article in *The Christian Century* in 1986, Kathleen Norris reflected:

> … when I began attending a small Presbyterian church in my town, it struck me that, for a religion of 'the Word', Christianity had a long way to go to take words—and their real power, beauty and mystery—seriously enough.[4]

That power and beauty and mystery are dependent on the presence of silence. Writing in 1960, the US American Cistercian monk Thomas Merton noted that some people,

> … are beginning to feel the futility of adding more words to the constant flood of language that pours meaninglessly over everybody, everywhere, from morning to night. For language to have meaning, there must be intervals of silence somewhere. … For the mercy of God is not heard in words unless it is heard, both before and after the words are spoken, in silence.[5]

In what follows, I want to explore how the Bible talks about the Word, words and God, to outline what we might call a biblical theology of language. And I want to suggest that Scripture, prayer and poetry are, if not always simply identical, certainly closely related.

A Biblical Theology of Language

'Language is the precinct (*templum*) … the house of Being', Martin Heidegger wrote in *Poetry, Language, Thought*.[6] 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God', declares the opening of St John's Gospel. From very different points of view,

[4] Kathleen Norris, 'Finding a Place for Poets in the Church', *The Christian Century*, 103/35 (19 November 1986), 1054.
[5] Thomas Merton, 'The Solitary Life' (1960), in *The Monastic Journey*, edited by Patrick Hart (Kansas City: Sheed, Andrews and McMeel, 1977), 153-154.
[6] Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon, 1975), 132.

both of these statements suggest that language—word—is a fundamental human reality. Language is more than little puffs of breath, and words are more than a series of significant sounds; 'language is not only and not primarily an audible and written expression of what is to be communicated'.[7] For Heidegger, language 'houses' existence itself; it is the 'place' in which we dwell. And in the thought of John the Evangelist everything comes into being or existence via the Word who is God. Word, being equated with God, is eternal. So says the prophet Isaiah: 'The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever' (Isaiah 40:8). So says God's Word-made-flesh, Jesus: 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away' (Mark 13:31). At this point a biblical theology of language begins. In the Bible the Eternal Word of God creates, sustains and saves.

The Creating Word

The Bible is very clear that everything that came into being did so through God's Word. God speaks and things happen:

> In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light. (Genesis 1:1-3)

For the wonderful poet of Genesis whom scholars call the Priestly writer, God's language is powerful. The pattern of creation in Genesis 1

[7] Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 73.

is 'and God said', followed by 'and it was so'. For the Priestly writer, God *spoke* the world and all its creatures into being; God's *Word* made it happen.

The Priestly writer's view comes to be the biblical understanding of creation: God created by means of Word. 'By the word of the Lord the heavens were made', the Psalmist declares, 'and all their host by the breath of His mouth' (Psalm 33:6). This vision carries over into the New Testament. John the Evangelist's creative genius equated the concept of the *Logos*, and all it meant in his Jewish and Hellenistic environment, with Jesus Christ. John writes of the Word who is God: 'All things came into being through Him, and without Him not one thing came into being' (John 1:3).

In Hebrew Scripture, God creates by means of the Word. In the New Testament, the Word becomes flesh in Jesus Christ, who thus comes to be understood as God's agent of creation. Jesus comes to function much as the figure of Wisdom does in Proverbs:[8]

> When He established the heavens, I was there, when He drew a circle on the face of the deep, when He made firm the skies above, when He established the fountains of the deep, when He assigned to the sea its limit, so that the waters might not transgress His command, when He marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside Him, like a master worker; and I was daily His delight, rejoicing before Him always, rejoicing in His inhabited world and delighting in the human race. (Proverbs 8:27-31)

The Christ Hymn in Colossians, a poem which probably pre-dates the letter into which it was inserted by Paul, sings that in Christ,

> … all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.
> (Colossians 1:16)

For the biblical writers, 'the word of God is living and active' (Hebrews 4:12). God 'sends out His command to the earth', the Psalmist writes, 'His word runs swiftly' (Psalm 147:15).

[8] Compare also Wisdom of Solomon 7-11.

Language is thus not a passive collection of words, but an explosive, creative force in the universe. Writing about the prophets of Israel, Gerhard von Rad noted that 'in the deepest insights of theology or prophecy alike, Israel took as her starting point her conviction that the word possessed creative power'.[9] By means of the Word, God created the world; by means of the Word, God is sustaining the world; by means of the Word, God is bringing out the divine purposes for and in the world. Especially in the prophetic canon of Hebrew Scripture, a word spoken by God brings about what it states. Similarly, according to the Deuteronomist, Israel's history is 'a history of Yahweh's effective word; it postulated a number of predictions as the real causes of events'.[10] The prophetic formula 'Thus says the Lord' means business. Here is one very pointed example from Isaiah 55:10-11 (italics and lineation mine):

Language is an explosive, creative force in the universe

> For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven
> and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
> making it bring forth and sprout,
> giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
> *so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;*
> *it shall not return to me empty,*
> *but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,*
> *and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

For the prophet Isaiah, the Word of God which issues forth from God's mouth is as active and as inexorable a force as the natural processes of fertility and growth. Given that his cultural context in the ancient Near East was shaped by fertility religions, what he says represents an immense theological advance. God's words will do what God says. Word causes to be. Word accomplishes.

The Sustaining Word

Word also sustains. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel use the image of eating the Word of God and being sustained by it. Poor old, miserable

[9] Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, translated by David M. Stalker (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 65.
[10] Von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets*, 73.

Jeremiah, who seems to have had so little joy, says in a rare burst of light:

> Your words were found, and I ate them,
> and your words became to me a joy and the delight of my heart ....
> (Jeremiah 15:16)

As part of his call experience, Ezekiel too is given a scroll of writing to eat (Ezekiel 2:8-3:11). In modern parlance, Ezekiel is to 'internalise' the words of God, so that he can speak them to Israel with power. Both Jeremiah and Ezekiel imagine nearness to God, intimacy with God's ways and intentions, in terms of eating God's Word, of taking in the creative and accomplishing power of God.

That the creative Word of God sustains is an idea that also occurs in the New Testament. The writer of 2 Peter wants to encourage a group of Christians who are facing both persecution from without and the threat of false teachers from within. He encourages them to remember the words they have heard before:

> … I am trying to arouse your sincere intention by reminding you that you should remember the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets, and the commandment of the Lord and Saviour spoken through your apostles. (2 Peter 3:1-2)

He continues:

> … by the word of God heavens existed long ago and an earth was formed out of water …. But by the same word the present heavens and earth have been reserved for fire, being kept until the day of judgment .... (2 Peter 3:5,7)

While 2 Peter's image of judgment may sound odd to us, it would not have sounded odd to his innocent and persecuted audience. It would have sounded like justice. However, the point in this context is that Peter presumes that the active power of God in God's Word is both creative and sustaining. By the Word the heavens and earth were formed; by the Word they are kept, sustained, preserved.

The Saving Word

God's Word creates. God's Word sustains. And God's Word, incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ, saves. So, again, the prologue of John's gospel:

> And the Word became flesh and lived among us …. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. (John 1:14, 16)

The other wisdom hymn I mentioned, Colossians 1:15-20, repeats the same idea: in Christ,

> … all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross. (Colossians 1:19-20)

So far, I have tried to express two ideas. First, God, Word and Christ are equated. The biblical writers understood the Godhead itself in terms of the concept of language. Second, Word is described as creating, sustaining and saving. A biblical theology of language understands that Word is the first gift of God, whose operative power it is.

Writing about Christianity and Zen Buddhism, William Francis Healy noted:

> Christianity is a religion of the Word. It begins with word, message, good news, revelation. It would be misleading to call the 'good news' of Christianity merely a doctrine for it is God revealing Himself in Christ. However, it is proposed to us in statements ….[11]

God is revealing God's self to us through the Word. Word is God's power active among us. But word in what sense? I would suggest word as metaphor, as symbol, and thus, in a sense, as sacrament.

The Languages of Scripture, Prayer and Poetry

Once we begin to have some inkling of how *Scripture* sees language as dynamic and powerful, we can never again take the language of the

[11] William Francis Healy, *The Thought of Thomas Merton Concerning the Relationship of Christianity and Zen* (Rome: University of St Thomas Aquinas in Urbe, 1975), 55.

Hints and Glimpses

All we have
are hints and glimpses,
something seen
fleetingly
as in peripheral vision,
a shadowy shape
beyond the drape,
the voice that whispers
behind the grille,
the merest murmur
of Elysian melody,
a prickling of the skin
which might be
but a draught
from an open window.
But it is the window
opening on eternity,
seen now darkly,
but then
face to face.

Bonnie Thurston

The title poem of a collection published by Three Peaks Press, Abergavenny, Wales.

Bible as merely literal. This is not to suggest that biblical language is untrue. On the contrary, it is the truest language there is, precisely because it mediates Reality to us on many, many levels. The language of Scripture, like the language of poetry, is multivalent. It has many levels of meaning.

Let me put it another way. Biblical language cannot be just literal, because human beings cannot speak literally about God. This is not my idea; you can find it in St Augustine. Remember that the name of God was so powerful to the Hebrews that they did not even dare to speak it. Remember how God is so immense that humans cannot begin to comprehend what is meant by the word 'God'. And now attend to St Augustine:

> What then … shall we say of God? For if you have been able to comprehend what you would say, then it is not God …. If you have been able to comprehend Him as you think, by so thinking you have deceived yourself. This then is not God, if you have comprehended it. But if it be God, then you have not comprehended it. Therefore how would you speak of that which you cannot comprehend?[12]

The answer to the question 'How would you speak of that which you cannot comprehend?' is: 'By making a metaphor'.

God is not some object to be grasped or comprehended or defined. The proper response to the Reality for which the word 'God' stands is not comprehension, but worship. God is the Creator before whom the creature falls down in worship. The creature may be able to ascertain the *fact* of this God's existence, but the *manner* of that existence, God's

[12] Augustine, *Sermon* 52. 16.

being, God's essence, is beyond human comprehension. Now hear St Thomas Aquinas:

> When the existence of a thing has been ascertained there remains the further question of the manner of its existence, in order that we may know its essence. Now, because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have not means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not.[13]

Because we cannot know God in the way in which we know 'ordinary things', the language used to talk about God, or indeed to communicate with God, cannot be 'ordinary language'. We can only either describe what God is not (*via negativa*) or else compare God with things that are and can be known—what St Augustine in Book II of *On Christian Doctrine* calls 'perceiving through similitude'.

When we 'perceive through similitude', when we seek to understand through comparisons, we are comparing what cannot be fully known with what we do know. When the writers of the Hebrew Bible call God a king or a judge they are 'perceiving through similitude'. They do not mean that God sits on a throne wearing a crown, any more than when Jesus called God 'Abba' he meant that God engaged in the sexual act of fathering children. They do not mean that God sits in a courtroom wearing a wig and a black robe, any more than the American poet Anne Sexton is saying that God would like to pick up some bad habits when she writes,

> God loafs around heaven,
> without a shape
> but He would like to smoke His cigar
> or bite His fingernails.[14]

All these expressions involve the making of metaphors; they are comparing what is known to what can be only seen 'in a glass darkly', as the Authorised Version memorably renders Paul in poetic mode (1 Corinthians 13:12).

In John's Gospel, Jesus suggests that his teaching too is metaphorical. In the middle of the farewell discourse he announces:

[13] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae,* 1.3, Introduction.
[14] Anne Sexton, 'The Earth', in *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 24.

> I have said these things to you in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father. (John 16:25)

'Figures of speech' is the NRSV translation of *en paroimiais*, which George R. Beasley-Murray thinks is in its turn a translation of the Hebrew word *masal*. *Masal* means proverb, riddle or parable; those who hear it take for granted that it has an enigmatic quality.[15] John's Jesus here echoes Mark's, who says to the twelve and the disciples:

> To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables. (Mark 4:11)

To the crowd 'he did not speak … except in parables, but explained everything in private to his disciples' (Mark 4:34). For John full understanding 'did not come until the era of the Spirit'.[16] Before the great revelation of the passion (Jesus' 'lifting up'), his disciples cannot understand 'plain speech', *parresia*. (Is there a delicious audible pun on the word used for Jesus' ultimate presence, *parousia*?) It is not simply that Jesus as a person is 'a riddle to those who fail to perceive his role as mediator of the kingdom of God';[17] it is also the case that his teaching is meaningless to those who do not recognise its form, 'figures of speech'.

It is crucially important that Christians understand metaphorical or symbolic language. It is the primary way in which human beings can speak of God, and the primary way in which God speaks to human beings. Through the mystery of inspiration, God empowered the biblical writers to make God known by means of human language. The metaphors and symbols they used carry us from the known to the Unknown; the word carries us to the Word. Moreover, as metaphor and symbol, they speak to the whole person, not just to part of the person, and this reflects God's plan and providence. Metaphorical and symbolic language engages emotions and intellect, heart and head, and, if Jung is correct, a deep connectedness uniting the whole human family.

It is crucially important that Christians understand symbolic language

[15] George R. Beasley-Murray, *John* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 286.
[16] Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 723.
[17] Beasley-Murray, *John*, 287.

In his book *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade speaks of how symbols enable us to find our way out of particular situations and open ourselves to 'the general and the universal':

> Symbols awaken individual experience and transmute it into a spiritual act, into metaphysical comprehension of the world … by understanding the symbol, man succeeds in living the universal.[18]

Eliade here echoes what the US American poet Mary Oliver says about poetry:

> … as I see it, the work of the poem is to transcend the ordinary instance, to establish itself on a second, metaphysical level ….[19]

'Metaphysical' is exactly the right word here, formed from the Greek *meta*—meaning 'after', 'alongside' or 'behind'—and *physis*—meaning 'nature'. Kathleen Norris says nearly the same thing:

> Poets are making a kind of wisdom literature, in which the ordinary events of life are seen to have deep spiritual significance.[20]

Biblical language, the language of the Sacred, and poetry have in common a deep understanding of the power of the word. Each speaks of what humans cannot fully know in terms of things that they can know, that they have known. Each, if you will, seeks to make visible what is invisible. 'What are the sacraments?' goes the question at the back of my *Book of Common Prayer*. 'The sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace', the answer begins.[21] God's language, sacred language, the language of prayer and poetry takes the 'inward and spiritual' and makes it 'outward and visible'. Scriptural and poetic language uses the known to help us glimpse the Unknown. How else could we know or communicate with God?

Evelyn Underhill, the great Anglican spiritual writer of the early twentieth century, notes in her magisterial work entitled simply *Worship* three ways in which poetry is suited to what she calls religious

[18] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harvest Books, 1959), 211-212.
[19] Mary Oliver, *Blue Pastures* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 105.
[20] Norris, 'Finding a Place for Poets in the Church', 1054.
[21] *The Book of Common Prayer* (Episcopal USA), 857.

experience. First, it is the carrying medium of something which otherwise wholly eludes representation: the soul's deep and awestruck apprehension of the numinous. Second, it can universalise particulars; giving an eternal reference to those things of time in and through which God speaks to humans. And finally, it is a powerful stimulant of the transcendent sense.[22] Much as the sacraments use physical entities such as water and bread and wine and oil to bring grace to bear upon us, so metaphor or poetic language communicates the things of God through familiar words and ideas. Mary Oliver puts the point simply and beautifully:

> … *all* poetry … carries one from this green and mortal world … lifts the latch and gives a glimpse into a greater paradise ….[23]

Words and Communication

Poems are 'made things': little universes created by an author and brought into being by means of words. And all of creation is God's poem: God spoke it all into being, and sustains it and saves it by that same Word. The writers of the Bible have brought God's eternal and unseen reality and purposes into the temporal and visible realm by means of symbolic language, empowered by God's inspiration. Abraham Heschel speaks of the prophet's word as a means by which 'the invisible God becomes audible'.[24] This transmission from unseen to seen, from invisible to audible, is also fundamentally what the Incarnation, that supreme translation of the Infinite into the finite, is about. In the imaginative transformation of the unseen, eternal world into concrete, physical terms that we can at least partially comprehend, it is possible for word to become Word.

Language is a powerful medium of communication between God and human beings. The biblical writers had a lively sense of the power and mystery of that medium, and they referred to it as 'Word of God'. For them, Word was also God's means of creating, sustaining and saving the world, the heavens and the earth. Language is powerful. We forget that at our peril. Of all the users of language, poets may have the

[22] Evelyn Underhill, *Worship* (New York: Harper, 1936), 112-113.
[23] Mary Oliver, *A Poetry Handbook* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 9.
[24] Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1969), 22.

liveliest sense of its power and mystery. We had better make room in the Church for poets. The New Testament writings, especially the letters of St Paul and the Revelation to St John, provide ample evidence that the earliest Church did.

Language is also the means by which most people reach out to relate to God. It is the medium which most of us use in prayer. If our prayer life seems flat or arid, could it be because it has become all word and no Word, all verbiage with no respect for language? Kathleen Norris described her first forays back to church after many years of absence as exhausting 'word-bombardments'.[25] I sometimes wonder if God feels like the target of all our religious words, rather than the partner in a Divine-human conversation—a thought that I developed in my poem 'You're Safe With Me'.

You're Safe With Me

Poor God,
consigned by theologians
to a dark, cold
corner of the universe
into which they blindly shoot
carefully contrived
arrows of orthodoxy,
small, devious darts of dogma.
They hope to hit You,
listen into the void
to hear You cry out.

Do they frighten You?
Are You lonely hiding there
in heaven's back room?
Come close;
You're safe with me.
I have built a fire
for You in my heart.
We'll have a glass of wine,
toast some cheese,
sit companionably
by the glowing embers
and say nothing at all.

Too many words can prevent us from hearing the Word. Indeed, words can be a symptom of our hiding from the Word. If we are to have a proper relationship with the Word, perhaps we should stop wallowing in language. Most of us, to put it rudely, need to shut up, to be silent for a while, to listen. And when we do use language, we need to use it respectfully. All too easily our religious language can regress, and become merely little puffs of breath, empty sounds. Used without

[25] Norris, 'Finding a Place for Poets in the Church', 1054.

attentiveness, religious language first becomes cant and then dies altogether. In the realm of prayer and worship, familiarity can comfort; it can also kill.

When religious language becomes so familiar to us that it plods, perhaps we need to reach to poetry to make it dance again. If prayer has become a desert, perhaps we should exchange our breviaries for the sonnets of John Donne or Gerard Manley Hopkins, or for the lyrics of Wendell Barry, Denise Levertov, Mary Oliver or R.S.Thomas. Or perhaps we simply need to recover the heart of our Bible: a collection of *poems*, the Psalms, which has always been the prayer book of the Great Cloud of Witnesses.

Mary Oliver has identified what she calls 'the three ingredients of poetry': the mystery of the universe, spiritual curiosity, and the energy of language.[26] In my view, these are also three essential 'ingredients' in the language of Scripture and in the life of prayer. If we lose any one of them in our prayer life and in our reading of Scripture, we run the distinct risk of entombing ourselves spiritually in Ezekiel's valley of dry bones.

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[26] Oliver, *Blue Pastures*, 57.