THE CONSOLATION OF POETRY

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WAKING UP TO A NEW DAY, we find out what is going on, perhaps by listening to the news on the radio or watching it on breakfast television. Today the news may be good—accolades in the realms of sport or fashion or music or even, sometimes, in politics. And week after week, in many countries, people win lotteries and become rich overnight. But so often the bad news seems to predominate. The ice caps are melting, we hear, sea levels are rising, glaciers receding. In different parts of the world, we learn of fires, floods and droughts, typhoons, hurricanes and earthquakes. The news drags on: wars, with towns and villages devastated; terrorist attacks; ethnic and religious clashes; serious accidents; economic ills with their unhappy effects on livelihoods; trafficking in people and drugs; theft and murder; the spread of organized crime. In the midst of all this, people lose loved ones, homes, jobs, possessions, their own lives, their sanity or even their very humanity.

How do we react when we hear these things? Do we feel connected to what is going on? Sometimes we are overwhelmed with 'compassion fatigue', so we look away, unable to face these terrible happenings. Is this the kind of world in which we want to live—a beautiful world, yet often disfigured by thoughtless or deliberately destructive human activity? Is this a way of life we want to pass on to our children—a threatened environment and troubled human communities, some living in fear or hunger or poverty, many growing only in anger and hate? Can we build a better world? These are challenging questions, and it seems to me that poetry, which opens our eyes to see things with a clarity that is more than purely physical, can help us to think about them. Poetry reminds us, as Elizabeth Barrett Browning memorably said, that 'Earth's crammed with heaven / And every common bush afire with God'.[1]

[1] Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'Aurora Leigh', in *Aurora Leigh and Other Works* (London: Penguin, 1995), 265.

The Way, 56/1 (January 2017), 23–29

The consolation of poetry and its power to touch and enlighten the reader have been brought home to me over recent months through my contact with a fellow parishioner, Fred, whom I meet each day at Mass. Attendance at weekday Masses in most churches fluctuates a little from day to day, and ours is no exception. Nevertheless there is a nucleus of regulars, of whom I am one, and after many years of praying daily together, a genuine community spirit has grown among us. Several of us are retired, so we have time for short, often lively conversations after Mass, as we update one another on a variety of physical ailments, birthdays, family joys and sorrows, parish and local news.

Fred, a thin, upright East Ender in his late 80s, a widower of nine years, is rarely absent. When I arrive for the 9.30 a.m. Mass, he is nearly always sitting at his place in our so-called 'weekday chapel', praying silently. Every so often, and at least two or three times a month, he hands me a poem, sometimes more than one. He does this with gleaming eyes, as if he cannot wait to hear what I think of his offering. I now have a good-sized sheaf of these poems, each one handwritten in block capitals on a large sheet of yellowing, lined paper torn out of a foolscap-sized jotter. I have put all these into a special red folder marked 'Fred's Poems', and I take delight in adding to the collection and, from time to time, rereading some of the poems.

Fred's love affair with poetry began many years ago, when he was a schoolboy in top primary. His teacher read Wordsworth's *Composed upon*

Composed upon Westminster Bridge

Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty:
This City now doth like a garment wear
The beauty of the morning; silent, bare,
Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air.
Never did sun more beautifully steep
In his first splendour valley, rock, or hill
Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will.
Dear God! The very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!

William Wordsworth

Westminster Bridge to the class and he responded, heart and soul. He can still recite it word for word—as he did spontaneously on the day he told me about it. The poem draws him into another world, he says, not just because he is a Londoner and loves that wonderful vision of the awakening city, but because the words raise his spirit, so that he too experiences the 'calm so deep' of which the poet speaks. Ever since then, and especially since he retired, he has continued to read poetry.

Fred knows he is lucky in having easy access to books, for our London borough, Tower Hamlets, is exceptionally well served by its libraries. He tells me that he goes to our local library about once a month. He can borrow up to eight books, and he always makes sure that at least one of these is poetry. He favours anthologies, because they offer a wide range of poets and cover a variety of historical periods. He picks out what he wants to read fairly randomly, looking at titles and authors, and following his intuition. Having found a poem that attracts him, he reads and rereads it meditatively. He is not put off by archaic language, indeed he seems to relish unfamiliar words, taking delight in guessing their meaning and comparing them with their modern equivalents. He has persevered with Chaucerian English, and loves the opening lines of the Prologue to the Canterbury Tales.

Most of the poems in Fred's folder are not explicitly 'religious' or 'spiritual', but all of them delve beneath the surface of things and probe the deeper questions about who we are and why we are here. So, in reading poetry, Fred finds himself grappling with deep thoughts and ruminating on layers of meaning. Sometimes he warns me that a particular poem is not easy to understand, and advises me not to give up on it. 'Read it slow!' he says, adding that if I do not get the point the first time round, I must keep on rereading the poem until the meaning reveals itself—for, in his experience, it always does!

Poetry calls for a singular attentiveness to words and thoughts, and, as Fred has discovered, it invites the reader to be for a time inwardly reflective, to contemplate profound realities. Poets seem to have a sixth sense, an innate gift, which somehow opens a door into the momentary but not illusory experience of (as Francis Thompson so beautifully puts it) knowing the unknowable, viewing the invisible, touching the intangible, clutching the inapprehensible.[2] Poetry, with its special characteristics,

[2] See Francis Thompson, 'In No Strange Land', in *Poems of Francis Thompson* (London and New York: Continuum, 2001), 299.

including rhythm, imagery and sometimes rhyme also, is far more than a collection of memorable sound bites. It conveys a concentrated awareness of the here, the now, the fragile, the fleeting. Using words alone to communicate its message, poetry creates its own inward 'landscape' and atmosphere, and through it, the soul is expanded and reminded of its spiritual cravings and needs. At its core is the quest for wisdom of heart and mind. Fred, as he reads his poems contemplatively, has been drawn into this quest and finds himself consoled.

Among Fred's collection of poems, 'The Things I See' by Jenny Joseph is a special favourite of mine. This poem, although written long before *Laudato si'*, shares some of Pope Francis's perceptions about life and living in our time. 'Nature', says the Pope, 'is filled with words of love, but how can we listen to them amid constant noise, interminable and nerve-wracking distractions, or the cult of appearances?' He might be echoing Jenny Joseph's words as he continues, 'Many people today sense a profound imbalance which drives them to frenetic activity and makes them feel busy, in a constant hurry which in turn leads them to ride rough-shod over everything around them'.[3] Jenny Joseph gives the same message, reminding us that it is the capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life, and opens our eyes to see things as they really are. In a few telling words, she describes some of the beautiful things she has seen and would have missed had she been in too much of a rush. With deliberate ambivalence, the last lines of the poem bring together both hurriedness and leisureliness, as the poet rejoices in,

> All the things I see
> As I hurry hurry hurry
> To work, but slowly, slowly.[4]

Yes, hurry if you must, she seems to say, but, as the old Latin tag has it, *festina lente*, hurry slowly ….

Poetry comforts the soul by opening up the heights and depths—and the humdrum middle ground—of human life and living, by pointing towards a new way of seeing things, hearing things, touching things. It arises from those flashes of insight that lead the poet creatively to interweave the material and the spiritual, the beautiful and the ugly, the human and

[3] Pope Francis, *Laudato si'*, n. 225.
[4] Jenny Joseph, 'The Things I See', in *All the Things I See: Selected Poems for Children* (London: Macmillan, 2000).

the divine. In construction and expression, the language of poetry can be opaque, can appear to be more than superficially impenetrable, and is often ambiguous. But, as Fred learnt through personal experience, at some deep level, the effort needed to wrestle with the challenging or perplexing meaning of a poem satisfies the soul's need to encounter the mysterious, to trust the inexplicable, as it searches for truth and beauty and integrity.

I do not know whether Fred would agree with me (although I suspect he would), but it appears to me that his experience of reading poetry has much in common with what W. H. Auden calls *the technique of prayer*:

> To pray is to pay attention to something or someone other than oneself. Whenever a man so concentrates his attention—on a landscape, a poem, a geometrical problem, an idol, or the True God—that he completely forgets his own ego and desires, he is praying.[5]

For so many of us today, our lifestyle does not prepare us for contemplation, and often we pass over the present as we race towards the future. Perhaps we sometimes forget that in human life, as in music, the silences are as important as the sounds. Just as any symphony, any song, includes both silence and sound, so in our daily living, there must be space to breathe, space to be, as well as bustle and activity and commotion. Our lives can be cluttered by a multitude of distractions and opportunities, our attention seized and our consciousness invaded, not only by trivial occupations but by a plethora of serious concerns as well. Reading poetry, or writing it, can lead us into stillness, as Pablo Neruda seems to say when he calls poetry 'an act of peace'. 'Peace', he said, 'goes into the

[5] W. H. Auden, *A Certain World. A Commonp1ace Book* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), 306.

making of a poet as flour goes into the making of bread'.[6] A poem written from that place of peace, a poem which is the fruit of contemplation, is also a prayer.

Some spiritual instinct, some innate sensitivity to the power of words, has led Fred to discern the rich vein of gold in what some might regard as the rock that poetry, with its unfamiliar language and syntax, sometimes presents. Undeterred by such things, he has come to see that poetry offers an atmosphere in which we can ponder our desires and become aware of our fears and longings. It encourages us to be for a time inwardly reflective, to value the here and now, to live in the present. In reading a poem, we may find ourselves momentarily uplifted by the beauty, complexity, simplicity and power of life, and then lessons in spirituality will pour into us without any effort on our part.

Poetry puts us in touch with the providence that shapes and guides our lives; it seems to have the power to open the door of the heart to all the seasons of human life. As we walk through that door we are sometimes led to encounter the mystery of God in the concrete experiences of day-to-day living, to touch the springs of hope and rediscover the grace and energy to be all we can be. Poetry can lead us to become more keenly aware of the depths within us of laughter and tears, of joy and love, of trust and faith. In the words of Seamus Heaney, it 'encompasses the desolations of reality, and remains, like hope, an indispensable part of being human'.[7] When we are invited to face, in God's presence, such 'desolations of reality'—doubt,

[6] Pablo Neruda, *Memoirs*, translated by Hardie St Martin (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 137,

[7] Seamus Heaney, 'Bags of Enlightenment', *The Guardian* (25 October 2003), available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/oct/25/poetry.highereducation.

discontent, restlessness, despair, longing—poetry can strengthen the life of the spirit within us. A poem, or a few lines from a poem, can for a moment shed a transforming ray of light which helps us to see the way forward with greater clarity, and 'to savour the sweetness of the Lord' (Psalm 27:4) along the road of life.

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