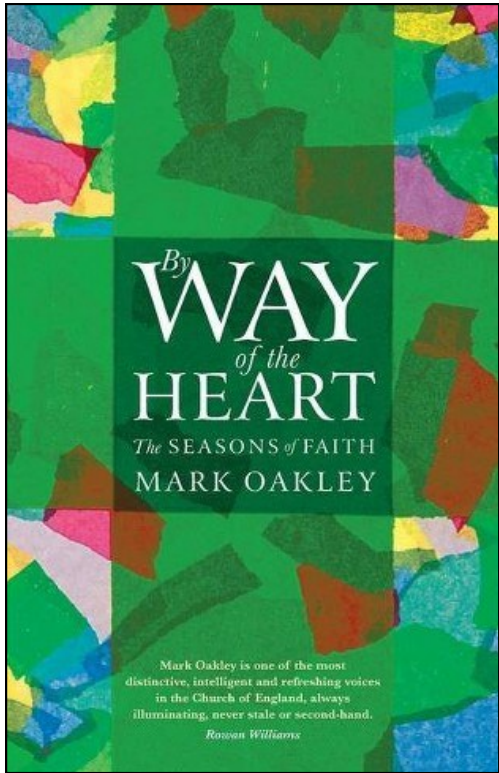
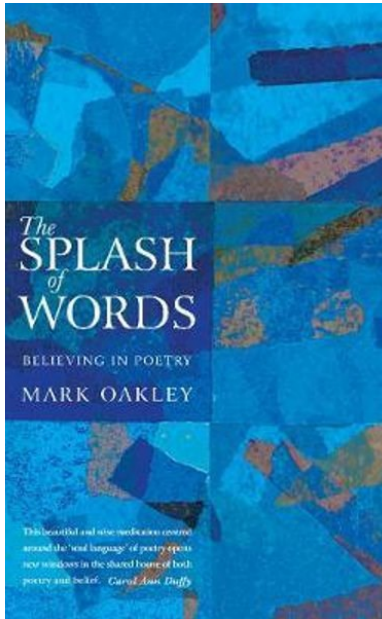


NAMBUCCA VALLEY ANGLICANS
LLM Resources #2 08.09.2021



Poetry is that which arrives at the intellect by way of the heart.

R. S. Thomas

No revelation can be complete and systematic, from the weakness of the human intellect; so far as it is not such, it is mysterious ... The religious truth is neither light nor darkness, but both together; it is like the dim view of a country seen in the twilight, which forms half extricated from the darkness, with broken lines and isolated masses. Revelation, in this way of considering it, is not a revealed system, but consists of a number of detached and incomplete truths belonging to a vast system unrevealed.

John Henry Newman

Introduction

Was the pilgrimage

I made to come to my own self, to learn that in times like these and for one like me God will never be plain and out there, but dark rather and inexplicable, as though he were in here?

R. S. Thomas, 'Pilgrimages'

On the whole, I'm not sure I like books of sermons. I'm not sure I like this one much either. Sermons are events, not texts, and something inevitably dies when they are printed and read alone. As I look back, though, I recognize that some collections of sermons have been very influential on my thinking about God and the life of faith. I remember as a school boy being captured by Harry Williams' True Wilderness, and then, at university, admiring the life-loving collections of Eric James. Since then the sermons of Michael Mayne, Barbara Brown Taylor and Rowan Williams have provoked, excited and changed my perspective with their wisdom and imaginative force.

My own sermons are not in their league. Those published here were mostly preached in St Paul's Cathedral, when I was a Residentiary Canon, although some were preached for special occasions in other churches and cathedrals. The congregations at St Paul's are generally large with many international tourists for whom English is either a second or third language.

Each sermon was therefore seeking to be as accessible as possible and not assuming that many in the pews knew the basics of the Christian faith or had any other natural vocabulary for the soul. Each sermon was delivered in around 12 minutes to a different congregation each time, most of whom I had never met before and who didn't know me. It was a ministry to the general public at St Paul's. This context, as for all preachers, shapes the tone and style of what is preached. I have not edited them to be read as essays. They stand (or fall) as they were written – scripts for a delivery aimed to be heard. As I go back to them, I see occasional repetitions occur as I return to core beliefs that I seem to want to transmit in a particular way.

from which you can draw and be refreshed.

In 1619 Bishop Lancelot Andrewes said in a sermon that our charge is to preach to people 'not what for the present they would hear but what in another day they would wish they had heard'.

So, though I'm really grateful to those who wanted me to publish some of my sermons, now you know why I don't like this book very much.

Mark Oakley Cambridge, 2019

Mark Oakley.

"By Way of the Heart:
The Seasons of Faith"
Canterbury Press Norwich.
Kindle Edition. 2019.

then say, 'Once upon a time', they appear to become more involved, equally expectant for truth but tuning in differently and ready to receive it in a different form, a story, where meaning is communicated without summarizing it.

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? To walk in with expectations of the one and to get the other might mean you miss something very important. It might even mean you think the whole thing implausible. Category errors like this cause a lot of frustration in the brain and heart. And that's why I'm sure Jesus often ended his sermons with 'those who have the ears to hear, hear'. That is, have you tuned in properly? This isn't news, it's the 'good news' and language has gone into a state of emergency to help get us to the place known as the kingdom.

This means that preachers to my mind can relax more about whether they have three simple points, one clear message or 15 well-honed

conclusions for everyone to take home or not. The preacher, Jesus-like, can preach of the mystery of God not by resolving it but by deepening it, allowing threads to trail, thoughts to meander, finalities and closures to remain well out of reach, disturbing us into truths rather than congratulating us on reaching a particular one. Meaning can be communicated without defining it – we call it story. Think, too, of the painting in a gallery that though we struggle to understand it, somewhere within we know that it understands us. That's why I feel adventure is in the air when I hear a good sermon. I can't do all this, by the way. In fact, I'm pretty bad at it. I'm just laying out my aspirations. On good days, I try to remember to strike out every word that's predictable, saggy, dead in the water. Occasionally I dare to use fewer words in hope of better ones and try to leave the listeners expectant, poised. I am happier now to help them see that truth is a questioning place, an ambling landscape, and that while prose is a river you can sail along, poetry and sermons are fountains

My template for shaping a sermon appears to be 'attract, inform, move'. That is, try to get the listeners' attention and see if they might sense that you are close to them as a human being. John Donne said that he didn't think it was the wit or eloquence of a preacher that won trust in the hearer, but rather their 'nearness'. Then after this I try and inform people about something of the Christian faith, the biblical message, an idea or two that might be worthy of reflection. Finally, I aim to see how this might be translated into life and how, if mind and heart have been engaged, our willpower might now need to follow suit. It does not need saying but I will – preachers preach to themselves most of all.

I implied earlier that congregations want interesting sermons to listen to but jokes about the rigor mortis of the spouting clergy have been part of British culture for quite some time, usually either 'the bland leading the bland' or about the vicar trying to be trendily informal – and being buttock-clenchingly embarrassing in the process. As an Alan Bennett character says in one of his plays: 'Call me Dick, because that's the sort

of vicar I am.' We all know the comedy sketches, from Ronnie Barker to Rowan Atkinson, of the vicar's sermon – showing how a cleric speaking without interruption has been experienced as a comic irrelevance. Fewer people are having this experience as time passes, of course, but research has discovered that one of the top three things that those who do go to church always want from their churchgoing is 'a good sermon'; but, alarmingly, also in the list of the top three things that always disappoint people about going to church is ... the sermon.

Preachers know this, whether they are clergy or lay. At our best we know that we should be thinking through critical questions of scholarship and honesty, being alert to the 'hermeneutic of the congregation' and seeing who is actually wanting to listen to you out there and how their personality types differ so we can adapt our approach. We know we need a self-scrutiny about comfort zones, body language, our fear of certain subjects, and wondering how to preach from our scars and not from our wounds. We know we should think carefully about length, style, variety, wondering if we

still have it in us to surprise or try something new. Being busy sometimes seems to stop us engaging with these things as we should, and it can all be pretty exhausting, but when we do, it is a very exciting privilege to be a preacher. Speaking for myself, the process becomes something of a personal adventure because I discover what I believe when drafting my sermon. For me, theology is what happens on the way to the pulpit.

It's important for a Christian, and especially for a Christian communicator, to hold a reverence for words, and, consequently, to be one who loves, celebrates and excites language. I believe in the sacramentality of words. We should be as reverential and attentive to words as we are to the water in the font, and the bread on the altar. Sacraments are about beginnings not ends. The bread of the Eucharist, for instance, is the food that makes us hungrier, making us long all the more for communion with God. So it is with words, full of holy potential and yearning, if we don't treat them as cheap and disposable and if we stay alert to their lifespan in order to wage our war on cliché. Nothing flies

over heads as quickly as a churchy cliché. Preachers seek to tune our vocation so that people think and feel in a language in which they have never yet thought but which, when they do, starts to feel homelike. To do this we need to take our words to the gym to get the heart working better. Words of faith should 'quicken', be acrobatic and sprightly. Not dense and dull. Oh dear. I've just written that and now don't want you to read this book.

What I'm trying to say, I think, is that words are not just a medium for conveying something else but sometimes themselves an essential constituent in the experience, and, in the hands of a preacher, the experience of divine presence. Preachers are nothing less than the Church's poets in residence. They are those who dare to break the eloquence of silence by asking, in Bill BroSEND's homiletical formula: 'What does the Holy Spirit want to say to these people at this time through these texts?'

There are frightening similarities between the spelling of the words 'devil' and 'drivel'. Drivel used to mean the act of letting mucus flow

Jesus had objectors: 'Can you please tell us what you meant?' Even his disciples pushed him to the point of him getting annoyed with them. But Jesus' style of preaching reminds us that the language of the preacher is not ultimately informative but formative. We have been given our being and what we are asked for is our becoming. God loves us just as we are but loves us so much that he doesn't want us to stay like that. Jesus' preaching is tricky: the words hover over you rather than quickly come into land; they are open to opinions, reflections, different takes. You are where the words go and where they lead you. Pin them down and, butterfly-like, they die.

Jesus' sermons were not preached to make easy sense. They were preached to make you, to remake you, and if we are going to change we first usually have to encounter some difficulty. This is a serious spiritual insight, usually won at cost, but difficulty is important. It's where your full-stops can turn into commas. The most important times in our lives are often the difficult ones. As in life, so in language. We need words that push contours, that interrupt our

snoring, help us reimagine ourselves and the world. We need a language that can put the 'odd' back into God. At one point, the Gospels tell us, Jesus told a parable so that people wouldn't understand. I've been tempted to try it out – a nice sermon aimed so that no one can make head or tail of it all, including me – but perhaps I do that every week anyway? I reflect a lot on David Brown's words:

Fundamental to religious belief is the conviction that, however much the divine has put of itself into the creation, it remains of a fundamentally different order. So, in trying to conceptualize God, words must resort to images and metaphors that in the nature of the case draw unexpected connections between different aspects of reality, and indeed derive much of their power precisely from the fact that they are unexpected.
(God and Mystery in Words, p. 20)

An exercise I sometimes do with groups is to say to them 'Here is the News', and watch them sit up and expect to hear the facts of the day, events that have occurred and some commentary on them. But when I

and that sounds about right for the preacher of God's good things.

The English poet Alice Oswald believes that poetry isn't about language but about what happens when language gets impossible. Her poetry, she says, began when she was eight years old: 'I saw the dawn coming up and I realized I couldn't describe it other than in a different language.' As Simeon knew, when the dawn from on high has visited us, people of faith need a language that is richer, broader, deeper and able to resist paraphrase, a language that is not prosaic, that will not lead to lives that are prosaic. When you fall in love you become a poet; some things are far too important to be literalistic about, so we stretch words, phrases, images, metaphors, all to give some expression to the reality. If poetry is the language of love it is the language of the Church. Poetry is not just a set of fancy trimmings to an otherwise obvious truth. It is language brought to its most scorching, most succinct, most pellucid purity, like a Bunsen burner, where we want not an impressive bonfire but a small prick of blue flame that sears and leads us closer into the presence of the holy, the true, the

beautiful, the mystery and Source. I believe, though I sadly don't live up to it at all well, that preachers should be poetic. They should be unafraid of providing a fountain of biblical wisdom, images, ideas, images from which to draw and refresh. 'It did not suit God to save his people through logic,' commented St Ambrose.

Up to a point we are socially conditioned against ambivalence, and religious types especially can get freaked out by words not under rational or doctrinal control, prescriptive and literalist. But my point is this: such fundamentalism is to Christianity what painting by numbers is to art. If this bothers you, take it up with the one who taught it to me. 'Jesus came,' says Mark, 'preaching' and he was persistently figurative: parable, metaphor, simile, hyperbole, irony, paradox, sublation, prolepsis, invective and fabrication. The Good Samaritan never existed, there was never a woman who lost a coin, and Lazarus never lay at the rich man's gate – Jesus made them all up. Parables are a way of talking about God by talking about anything but God. I think this has influenced my sermon construction very deeply without me being aware.

out from the mouth. Well, we've all had Sundays like that. Language, though, is like water. It goes stagnant if it doesn't move. We are following a man who knew this, celebrating it day after day on mountainsides and lakes, in homes and synagogues. He knew it and we follow him but our own faith and our words may have been sleeping in different bedrooms for a while and to preach is to want them both to fall in love again, spend proper time with each other, explore, be still together, enjoy a playful, serious love and so bring out the best in each other for the glory of God, who at the end of the day is never an object of our knowledge but the cause of all our wonder.

The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas once said in an interview:

I fell in love – that is the only expression I can think of – and am still at the mercy of words, though sometimes now, knowing a little of their behaviour very well, I think I can influence them slightly and have even learned to beat them now and then, which they appear to enjoy. I tumbled for words ... There they were, seemingly lifeless, made only of black and white, but out of them,

out of their own being, came love and terror and pity and pain and wonder and all the other vague abstractions that make our ephemeral lives dangerous, great, and bearable. (New Verse, 1934)

As I write this, I am more than conscious that this is not an easy time for words. It's been said that the political current in the USA at the moment can be summed up as: 'If you're not at the table, you are probably on the menu.' One of the very evident things about the current administration is its use of language. President Trump campaigned in graffiti and now governs in tweets. With excited talk of 'fake news' we rather get distracted, it is hoped, from fake politicians or populist slogans, generalizations that smooth over, at best, complexity and at worst, the truth. This is not new, of course, it's just particularly bad at the moment – and such abuse, a sort of 'truth decay', spreads across our globe very quickly. It leads to confusion in society about what we believe, what we want and what is possible. Consumerism makes words seductive not truthful, while technology gives us too many words, our care for them decreasing as they

proliferate. The first one to draw a breath is declared the listener. George Steiner argues that we are living in the aftermath of the broken covenant between the word and the world. The challenge is that the same doubtful or gullible ears that listen to politicians, salespeople and news commentators are listening to the Christian, to the preacher.

Doris Lessing's novel *Documents Relating to the Sentimental Agents in the Volyen Empire* is a parable about how language is debased as an instrument of competitive consumerism and power, words being infected by testosterone poisoning. Language in Lessing's empire has become so turgid that citizens often suffer from the condition known as 'Undulunt Rhetoric', requiring Total Immersion cures in the 'Hospital for Rhetorical Diseases'. During an attack of Rhetoric, the victims' eyes glaze over, breathing becomes heavy, temperatures rise to a fever, and out of the mouth issue symptoms of intoxication. Both Orwell's 'doublespeak' in his novel *1984* and W. H. Auden's *New Year Letter*, written eight years before Orwell's novel, identify this same danger of

language cynically employed where truth becomes as much a casualty as those who still venture to speak it.

The American poet John Ciardi wrote that 'we are damned for accepting as the sound a human being makes, the sound of something else, thereby losing the truth of our own sound'. Place your ear close up to the shell of humanity and listen. What do you hear? You can't hear? What's in the way? Other words, pretending, in stereo. Ciardi abhors language that removes us from ourselves. It isn't just politicians who learn such languages alien to the heart, of course; many professions have a tribal insiders' language that is a sort of conspiracy against everyone else. I think the present Church of England suffers from this, employing words and phrases that identify you as a sound and trustable member, appointable even, part of the club, but which frankly voiced outside the initiated circle fail to mean much at all. But these words, sanctioned by internal sources of power and influence, move in to dominate the scene, the culture, our conversations, budgets and priorities. They solidify into a check-list vocabulary, the echoes of which don't reach

anywhere much except its own users' distant caves that lie quite a long way from Nazareth and from our present homes and lives. At worst this can lead to theology being a sort of hobby rather than what it is – survival. This sort of cold language will always say it is seeking relevance but won't see that it does it at the expense of resonance and therefore is the opposite of the preacher's language, for she looks for resonance in each word and gesture and is very wary of relevance, common sense, the obvious. The preacher must stay true to human experience and avoid at all costs any triumph of the deceptively simple over the honestly complex.

In my book *The Splash of Words*, I tell the story of Tom, a Shropshire shepherd out in the field. Tom's in his eighties and one 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.' It's an important image for the Christian and person of faith – and essential for a Christian communicator. We try to draw 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. For this we need a language worthy of the vocation.

So, in this world of bruised, weaponized, and camouflaged language, a time when we can have low expectations of words, we take a deep breath and look for words disengaged from power games and distraction, searching for words that listen, words that hear the pulse, words that read between lines, words that distil, words that distrust first impressions, words from which we can't retreat, words of receptive insight, words without razor blades in them, with no chemical additives but with some natural nutrients, words that help us migrate towards the things that matter, words that dispel illusions without leaving us disillusioned. This language is called preacher's poetry. As R. S. Thomas writes, poetry 'is that which arrives at the intellect by way of the heart',