

Poetic imagination and the gospel

Notes from GCAMM seminar with Barry Whatley

- Where is the poetry in our Evangelical world?
- The impact of the enlightenment

The thinkers of the Enlightenment spoke of their age as the age of reason, and by reason they meant essentially those analytical and mathematical powers by which human beings could attain (at least in principle) to a complete understanding of, and thus a full mastery of, nature.

- “Separate the knowledge of Nature, from the colours of Rhetoric, the devices of Fancy or the delightful deceit of Fables”
- The Romantic Response...

Nature assumed ultimate significance and became the supreme object of adoration, the only source of comfort and salvation, and the final arbiter of values (Abraham Heschel)

- The fundamentalist response

Theology felt itself forced to choose between and increasingly vague and amorphous liberalism, happy to keep reinventing the faith, and an increasingly strident fundamentalism, which tries to treat the subtle poem of scripture as a single scientific treatise whose every word is literally and only literally true (Guite)

- Our challenge as Evangelicals

... the challenge for us is to recover the value and the treasure of the imagination and of its great ally, poetry, without falling into the error of either an untethered subjectivism or a rigid legalism

- Moving beyond propositional language

Besides being useless as any definitive description of God, such language is simply not adequate for the intense and sacred spiritual turmoil that so many contemporary people feel (Christian Wiman)

- Recovering the place of the poetic imagination

When science seeks to master the knowledge of things with weights, measurements, mathematics, statistics, poetic knowledge humbly understands the world as “vast, immeasurable, impenetrable, inscrutable, mysterious”... poetry leads to wonder, admiration, enthusiasm, devotion, and love (John Henry Newman)

- Imagination our greatest gift!

Imagination is the greatest gift given to us and ought to be devoted entirely to Him (Oswald Chambers)

- Imagination our greatest asset!

... the highest unity the imagination can conceive is that which joins the finite and the infinite... the joining is supremely carried out by God himself in assuming human nature into unity with his divine Word (Aidan Nichols)

Human imagination is not simply our means of reaching out to God but God's means of manifesting himself to us (Christian Wiman)

- Imagination under threat

Poetry is a place where we can preserve our imaginations, and resist, "the pressure of the real", that "incessant drumming in of information, of news, of terrible events and realities" (Wallace Stevens)

- Power of poetry in healing and nurturing our imaginations...

... the preservation of the imagination, contemplation, what I would call drifting, is not a luxury. It is vital to our survival (Wallace Stevens)

Poetry... deepens our capacity for experiencing ourselves as well as others, thereby deepening our capacity for personhood, our achievement of humanity (Matthew Zapruder)

- Power of poetry in healing and nurturing our imaginations...

Reading poetry is for me an act of the most immense intimacy, of intimate immensity. I am shocked by what I see in the poem but also by what the poem finds in me. It activates my secret world, commands my inner life (Edward Hirsch)

Poetry alerts us to what is deepest in ourselves—it arouses a spiritual desire which it also gratifies. It attains what it avows. But it can only do so with the reader's imaginative collaboration and even complicity (Edward Hirsch)

- Power of poetry in healing and nurturing our imaginations...

Whatever its actual content and overt interest, every poem is rooted in imaginative awe. Poetry can do a hundred and one things, delight, sadden, disturb, amuse, instruct—it may express every possible shade of emotion, and describe every conceivable kind of event, but there is only one thing that all poetry must do; it must praise all it can for being and for happening (WH Auden)

Poetry, like the other arts, no matter how dark their subject, is in some way an invitation to fall in love with life again but a little deeper (Mark Oakley)

- Power of poetry in healing and nurturing our imaginations...

Every poem I write... must have a genuine body, it must have sincere energy, and it must have a spiritual purpose. (I want) every poem to "rest" in intensity. I want it to be rich with "pictures of the world." I want it to carry threads from the perceptually felt world to the intellectual world (Mary Oliver)

- Poetry... beauty through savouring

... poetry brings us back to older ways of reading and understanding both the Word and the World, and to a way of reading, currently being revived in many churches, called *lectio divina*: a slow savouring of the text, a rich meditation on meaning that begins with the senses, with taste and sound (Malcolm Guite)

- Scripture and poetry...

The heavens declare the glory of God,
and the sky above proclaims his handiwork...

In them he has set a tent for the sun,
⁵ which comes out like a bridegroom leaving his chamber,
and, like a strong man, runs its course with joy.

⁶ Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them,
and there is nothing hidden from its heat (Psalm 19)

Acquiring the taste for poetry

- Finding a great poem...
- A great poem is a living thing
- Great poems treasure words
- Great poems sound good
- Great poems are beautiful
- Great poems are not moralizing... (as beauty can never be)
- BUT... great poems call us to task...

How to read a poem?

- Hold it close and listen
- Taste it
- Get comfortable with it
- Meet it half-way
- Explore it
- Let it shape you!

Sitting down at the table!

But there are others who welcome the transport poetry provides. They welcome it repeatedly. They desire it so much they start to crave it daily, nightly, nearly abject in their desire, seeking it out the way hungry people seek food. It is spiritual sustenance to them. Bread and wine. A way of transformative thinking. A method of transfiguration. (Hirsch)

God's Grandeur by Gerard Manley Hopkins

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
 And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
 Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
 And for all this, nature is never spent;
 There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
 And though the last lights off the black West went
 Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
 Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
 World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

The Agony by George Herbert

Philosophers have measur'd mountains,
 Fathom'd the depths of seas, of states, and kings,
 Walk'd with a staffe to heav'n, and traced fountains:
 But there are two vast, spacious things,
 The which to measure it doth more behove:
 Yet few there are that sound them; Sinne and Love.

Who would know Sinne, let him repair
 Unto Mount Olivet; there shall he see
 A man so wrung with pains, that all his hair,
 His skinne, his garments bloudie be.
 Sinne is that presse and vice, which forceth pain
 To hunt his cruell food through ev'ry vein.

Who knows not Love, let him assay
 And taste that juice, which on the crosse a pike
 Did set again abroach; then let him say
 If ever he did taste the like.
 Love is that liquour sweet and most divine,
 Which my God feels as bloud; but I, as wine.

Despised and rejected by Christina Rossetti

My sun has set, I dwell
 In darkness as a dead man out of sight;
 And none remains, not one, that I should tell
 To him mine evil plight
 This bitter night.
 I will make fast my door
 That hollow friends may trouble me no more.
 'Friend, open to Me.' —Who is this that calls?
 Nay, I am deaf as are my walls:
 Cease crying, for I will not hear
 Thy cry of hope or fear.
 Others were dear,
 Others forsook me: what art thou indeed

That I should heed
 Thy lamentable need?
 Hungry should feed,
 Or stranger lodge thee here?
 'Friend, My Feet bleed.
 Open thy door to Me and comfort Me.'
 I will not open, trouble me no more.
 Go on thy way footsore,
 I will not rise and open unto thee.
 Then is it nothing to thee? Open, see
 Who stands to plead with thee.
 Open, lest I should pass thee by, and thou
 One day entreat My Face
 And howl for grace,
 And I be deaf as thou art now.
 Open to Me.'
 Then I cried out upon him: Cease,
 Leave me in peace:
 Fear not that I should crave
 Aught thou mayst have.
 Leave me in peace, yea trouble me no more,
 Lest I arise and chase thee from my door.
 What, shall I not be let
 Alone, that thou dost vex me yet?
 But all night long that voice spake urgently:
 'Open to Me.'
 Still harping in mine ears:
 'Rise, let Me in.'
 Pleading with tears:
 'Open to Me that I may come to thee.'
 While the dew dropped, while the dark hours were cold:
 Despised and rejected by Christina Rossetti
 'My Feet bleed, see My Face,
 See My Hands bleed that bring thee grace,
 My Heart doth bleed for thee,
 Open to Me.'
 So till the break of day:
 Then died away
 That voice, in silence as of sorrow;
 Then footsteps echoing like a sigh
 Passed me by,
 Lingered footsteps slow to pass.
 On the morrow
 I saw upon the grass
 Each footprint marked in blood, and on my door
 The mark of blood for evermore.