

Poetry and Resurrection – a Sermon on Acts 17: 22-31 for Sunday 17 May, 2020

Spokesperson for the Department of Positive Thinking (at time of lockdown) says:

*“... but let’s not dwell on all that.
Now is hardly the time for tears or frowns.
We would like to share with you the latest figures
which show shoplifting is down.”*

So begins a poem by Brian Bilson, the so-called poet laureate of Twitter. His wry humour suits today’s moods. Poetry in general is said to be making a comeback as the preferred communication in lockdown. Some people think of poetry as ‘hard’, until they discover how poetry can speak words we can’t find for ourselves. Poetry observes, identifies, focuses and distils. Poetry looks inside us, untangling emotions, pin-pointing our moods and reassuring us that we not alone in our feelings. Poetry goes on to make surprising connections and reveal unexpected perspectives. Someone suggested poetry is the new religion, but actually poetry is a great way of expressing faith. It always has been, going right back to the Psalms of the Old Testament – from the lofty ‘heavens declare the glory of God’ (Psalm 8) to the reflective ‘O Lord, you have searched me and known me’ of Psalm 139, to the lament ‘you have bottled up my tears’ (Psalm 58). The Psalms have words for every mood.

Poetry gives new ways look at the world and even spy out the divine. Over my desk I have pinned RS Thomas’s poem The Bright Field, which contains the lines:

*... Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.*

When St Paul engaged with the philosophers of Athens, he was not afraid to use poetry to make his point. For most of his missionary preaching, Paul visited synagogues and talked with those acquainted with Judaism. But here in Athens he has to find a different approach. They don’t know the Scriptures, so he uses their poetry to express himself in terms their culture understands. He quotes two Greek poets. I had to do a bit of research to find out who they were. The first, who wrote, ‘In him [God] we live and move and have our being,’ is the 6th century BC poet Epimenides of Cnossos. The second, who coined the term, ‘We are his offspring,’ is the 3rd century stoic Aratus of Cilicia. You and I may not be much the wiser for knowing this, but these two held considerable cultural currency in 1st century AD Athens. The point is, there is common ground between us. Christians then and now agree with these ancient Greek poets that God is not distant but is intimately connected with who we are as human beings. But then Paul springs the surprise. All this, he says, has only led you so far – to worship at the altar of ‘the unknown god’. So, he says, I can take you further. ‘What you worship as unknown I will make known to you.’ But to do so, he’ll have to talk about something they’ll find hard to accept.

Paul was not afraid to use poetry to draw his audience in. He was not afraid to shock them either. Now he heads straight for the heart of the matter, the heart of Christianity, and the one thing that was controversial and even incomprehensible to his audience: the resurrection of the dead. He could not hold it back, even though to talk of resurrection risked mockery and rejection. The place where Paul was talking was the Areopagus, a cross between a courtroom and a debating chamber. It was at the founding of the Areopagus that the poet Aeschylus has Apollo speak these words: ‘Once a man has died, and the dust has soaked up his blood, there is no resurrection.’ Paul has thrown down the gauntlet: you say there is no resurrection, but I say God has raised a man from the dead. That ordinary people agreed with the poets can be seen on tombstones commonly found across the ancient world – an epitaph that sums up life and death very simply:

‘I wasn’t, I was, I am not, I don’t care.’

The poets and the people were of one voice: death is final. Resurrection is ridiculous. Paul insisted resurrection is true. It has happened to the man Jesus Christ, and that has changed everything.

The claim of resurrection is stupendous. It requires all forms of writing to defend and explain it. Paul’s longest exposition comes in 1 Corinthians 15, where he answers history’s demand evidence. He lists the eye-witnesses to the appearance of the risen Jesus: Simon Peter, the rest of the apostles, a gathering of 500 people, Jesus’ own brother James, and lastly Paul himself, ‘as to one untimely born.’ The historical facts are established. Such a momentous event clearly must have momentous meaning, and for this, Paul writes theology. For him, Christ’s resurrection does not only open up eternal life to individual believers, but it also sets in motion the beginnings of a whole new creation. But after the theology, he cannot resist adding poetry – a poem which is like a great chant of triumph:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.

Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15: 54-55)

So, here’s a challenge for time in lockdown: why not have a go at writing a poem – a poem about what the resurrection of Jesus means to you – an Easter poem? You’ll probably say, ‘I can’t write poetry!’ But it’s not about being clever with rhyme and meter. It’s more like throwing words on a page and mixing them around until you come up with what you’re really thinking. It might turn out as a song of praise, or it might be a whole lot of questions and doubts – they’re fine. You might try imagining meeting the risen Jesus on that first Easter morning, or it might be about what it’s like to meet the living Jesus today. There’s no need to be clever with it – it’s just for you (unless you want to share). Have a go: it will be worth it. You want word of inspiration? Try Easter hymns:

Love is come again, like wheat that springeth green (John Macleod Campbell Crum)

I know that my redeemer lives (Samuel Medley)

Thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son (Edmund Budry, trans R. Birch Hoyle)