

Church of the Good Shepherd and St. John the Evangelist

22 Pentecost
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Fr. Bill McGinty

“Poems, Prayers and Promises!”

The Hebrew Scriptures are full of poetry. It flows through so much of their literature, whether it is the joyful praise of God or a sad lament for their troubled situation. The poetic writings of Israel are a continuous flow of words; a musical accompaniment to their relationship with their God. Those words are the heartbeat of a Hebrew nation in love with its God.

We can think of Psalms like Ps.23 “the Lord is my Shepherd” or David’s prayer to God, on becoming King in 2 Samuel 7:18. The majesty of the words transcends the centuries and leaves us even today in a prayer mood.

We all need poetry in our lives, just as we need prayer. It is man’s best expression of God’s creation and captures our emotions and what is going on with us. Whether we have that gift or not, our ears pick up when we hear it. It is as though we wish to empathize with its rhythm and the very words have power over us. We love the flow of the words; the rat-tat-tat of the alliteration, the beat of the pentameter, the enrichment of chant.

Perhaps, it has something to do with the way poetry speaks for our Spirit. Lines which are so classic elevate our prayer and we are happy that they do. If you are preparing hymns for weddings, funerals or memorial services you can probably bet on the choices coming from around twenty hymns that people of every generation return to again and again.

“Be thou my vision o Lord of my heart
All else is naught to me, save that thou art
Thou my best thought, by day or by night
Waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.”

The music comes from Ireland in the C7th, but the words originate with the Psalms.

It does not seem to matter that the words are antiquated; our need to praise, pray to, or communicate with God is what becomes important to us. And we seem to know that the familiar, the tested, the poetry of the ages does it for us. Nor at times does language and understanding matter. I can still melt like butter when I hear these words I heard first at nine or ten:

“Salve Regna, mater misericordiae, vita de caedo, express nostros salvae.”

There is a sort of inverse discrimination against poetry and verse these days, as if it has no place in our fast paced lifestyle. Yet, look at the facts. Children learn verse at a young age. Nursery rhymes teach them quicker than anything else can.

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A whole culture has sprung up today among our teenagers on the ability to rhyme, rap and use words strung together to express feelings.

Expose a child in those critical teenage years to an English teacher who loves her craft, appreciates the poetic moment, and a child's life is forever transformed.

Eddie Fox stood 6 foot tall with jet black hair and a wicked scar on his right cheek. He taught English and regarded every class as a performance. Instead of coming into the room and asking us to open "Henry the Vth" at page one; he bounded into the room, as if on stage at the Globe theater reciting:

"O for a muse of fire that would ascend the mightiest heaven of invention.
A Kingdom for a stage, princes to act and monarchs to behold the swelling scene.
Then should the warlike Harry like himself assume the Port of Mars and at
his feet leashed in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire crouch for
employment. But, tarry gentles all..."

By that time, he had us in the palm of his hand, so that by the time we got to the Battle of Agincourt and Henry's great speech: "Today is called the feast of Crispian." We were not just ready to battle, we were already knee deep in blood ready to kill, kill, kill.

Was it then that we all learned that words have color? They paint a mental picture' they set a mood,' they can create a tension, anticipation, or even fear.

Take the lyrics out of musicals like "the sound of Music" and you are left with something rather bland. Rather than," Raindrops on roses, and whiskers on kittens. Snowflakes that fall on my nose and eyelashes, Brown paper packages tied up with string; these are a few of my favorite things."

And least we are tempted to turn up our noses at teenagers' rap today; listen to this from our generation in 1963.

"It has been a hard day's night and I have been working like a dog;
It has been a hard day's night; I should be sleeping like a log.
But, when I get home to you, I find the things that you do,
Make me feel alright.
It has been a hard day's night."

The truth is that whether we are listening to the Beatles, Rap or Anne Murray, lyrics and words are something we meditate on and for us they become a kind of prayer.

Prayer is the one constant in the Old Testament. The prayer of people striving to serve their God. And prayer is the one subject people want to know about. It is the question most asked. "How do you do it? Which prayer is best? Why can't I pray?" These are not easy questions to answer, not because there are no answers, but rather because there are many answers.

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Any one of these stain glass windows can be a prayer if you think about it long enough. Knit or Crochet and you have probably prayed intensely and for a long time.

Anything that God seemed to have touched seems to inspire us to praise it in words. I suppose we just recognized that certain kinds of beauty and love are God -sent. So the Irish poet William Butler Yeats reaches deep inside himself to try and remember the love he has for his birth place in Sligo in the West. It's probably as close as you can get to a prayer about a place.

“I will arise and go now and go to Innisfree
And a small cabin built there of clay and wattles made,
Nine beans rows will I have there and a hive for the honey bee,
And live alone in the Bee loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there,
for peace comes dropping slow
Dropping from the veils of the morning
to where the cricket sings.

There midnight's all a glimmer
and noon a purple glow
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

It's a prayer in as much as it is anything. It expresses all the longing of a man in love with his past and the place of his childhood.

Love and prayer are intrically entwined, whether they are expressing joy or sadness. It is almost as if it is our soul that needs to speak when we are at our happiest or our saddest. So the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas prays and mourns his dying father.

“Do not go gentle into that good night
old age should burn and rave at close of day.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.
And you my father, there on that sad height
Curse, bless me with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Young men, no more than boys, penned poem after poem, line after line in the trenches of the First World War to express the horror, the madness, and the terror of the death that was all around them. Their words sound like a prayer of desperation, a hope against hope that something, be it only words can survive this madness. So the eighteen year old Wilfred Owen wrote:

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“What passing bells for those who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifle’s rapid rattle.
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers on bells.
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells,
And bugles calling for them from sad Shires.”

These poems from Trench Poets have sometimes been called a “Testament to Youth.” Long after the nightmare of that conflict was forgotten they alone have survived like a prayer of remembrance, to make us think of white crosses dotting the fields of a foreign land where our boys sleep the sleep of death. They make us think of a world at peace and how precious that is. They force us to pray for an end to conflict as a way of protecting our young.

For all of us who live lives of constant doing, moving, working and worrying, there has to be a time for prayer and God. My suggestion to you this morning is that like the Hebrews in the Old Testament, we use music and poetry as prayer. If we feel that at times our prayer is inadequate, we can allow charmed words to flow over us and speak to us of God and his creative love.

There is nowhere that I can think of where I feel God presence more powerfully than when I am walking along the seashore. What is it about the sea, the surf, the rocks, the wind and the solitude that turns our minds to God? Is there something primal that draws us, refreshes us and constantly brings us back to where we believe God talks to us at our deepest level.

The poet John Masefield knew of this urge, like so many of us he felt the pull of the sea and the call to his deep heart’s core.

You can find it in his poem “Sea fever”:

“I must go down to the again, for the call of the running tide,
Is a wild call and a clear call that cannot be denied.
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the seagulls crying.

So many of us believe that man is by nature religious, the sea is just one thing that brings it out.

God’s word is no less powerful or effective in bringing to our mind the things of the Spirit. You only have to open the New Testament to read some of the most inspiring words ever written. We all have our favorite verses that come to mind at moments of stress and moments of sorrow.

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Perhaps they galvanize us more because they are directed towards us. From that first call of Jesus to his disciples on the shores of the Sea of Galilee: “Come follow me,” we feel involved as if he is actually talking to us.

Or Jesus saying to Nicodemus:

”You should not be surprised at my saying:” you must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sounds, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

In a sense the words are the poetry of our lives. We follow Jesus thro’ his ministry keeping pace with his words. They are familiar but we cannot stop the way they reflect and make us feel about our own lives.

“I am the Resurrection and I am life,” Jesus tells Martha, “and he who believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Like that old English teacher, Jesus’ words capture us. We want to cry out, “Yes.” We long to participate so that when he says: “I no longer call you servants; I call you friends, for a friend does the bidding of his master.”

Now we feel that we belong and we are a part of the Gospel. These are the poems and prayers and promises of our lives. They deserve that we spend the time with them, meditating on them, allowing God to touch us through them. There is so much prayer here to go around. In truth, God is shouting to us from every page. All we need do is pause to listen, listen to God in the words that pour out into our life.

We hunger for God, the Old Testament poet says: “We hunger for God like a dry weary land without water.” When we seek to hear his word, we find that living water, and as Robert Frost concludes: “that has made all the difference.”

As the evenings darken, and winter approaches, let us resolve to pray more, to read more and to draw ourselves into God’s life; rather than throw God a few crumbs of our time. Let us make prayer our language, the Bible our book and allow poetry and music to bring us closer to God.

Amen+

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