

ST NINIAN'S POLLOKSHIELDS
POETRY IN ADVENT – WK 1
ANNUNCIATION

Advent is one of the most symbolically rich – symbolically complex—times of the church year. We are asked to hold together images of Christ's coming as an infant, and his coming as King. The starkness of John the Baptist, with the fullness that is Christ. The solemnity of preparing to face God with the chaos and frivolity of the holiday season.

Somehow, I think the meaning of Advent is in those contrasts, in that bewildering array of images that we have to live with and ponder and make sense of.

And I say that by way of warning.

My goal over the next few weeks is not to simplify the meaning of Advent for you. It is not to steer a clear path through conflicting images.

If anything, I suspect I'll increase the conflict – throw even more images at you – all in the hope that at some point, something will strike you. You will hear or read something that makes you think of Christ's coming in a new way. Or that makes you engage more deeply with the wonder of the incarnation.

For the next four weeks, I will offer reflections on a range of poems – some well known, others less so. Some straight forward, others perhaps more complex.

So let me get something out of the way right now:
I do not believe that we read poetry in order to understand what it means.

No poem worth its ink can be reduced to a simple meaning – a ‘right answer’ that someone can tell us or that we can cleverly deduce for ourselves.

No. Poetry exists in the flux of meanings, the abundance of meanings. And it may be that you will see things that I don’t – or that you can’t see things that I do.

So, I hope we can suspend judgement about ‘right readings of the text.’ ... That we can put away all thoughts of school exams, and teachers telling us what to think. in instead that we can come to the poems fresh, letting them speak to us, letting them confuse us at times – seeing what comes, as we follow Mary and ‘ponder these things in our hearts’.

Today we will consider two poems on the annunciation. On the ‘easy – difficult’ scale, I’m afraid these are more difficult – at least for me. I say that only so that you don’t think that next week will be even worse.

Two poems – both on the annunciation.
The first by Edwin Muir
The second by Rilke.

I’m simply going to read them, one at a time, and talk you through what I see in them. Offer them as a way of considering what the annunciation means.

Muir: The Annunciation

The angel and the girl are met.
Earth was the only meeting place.
For the embodied never yet
Travelled beyond the shore of space.
The eternal spirits in freedom go.

See, they have come together, see,
While the destroying minutes flow,
Each reflects the other's face
Till heaven in hers and earth in his
Shine steady there. He's come to her
From far beyond the farthest star,
Feathered through time. Immediacy
Of strangest strangeness is the bliss
That from their limbs all movement takes.
Yet the increasing rapture brings
So great a wonder that it makes
Each feather tremble on his wings.

Outside the window footsteps fall
Into the ordinary day
And with the sun along the wall
Pursue their unreturning way.
Sound's perpetual roundabout
Rolls its numbered octaves out
And hoarsely grinds its battered tune.

But through the endless afternoon
These neither speak nor movement make,
But stare into their deepening trance
As if their gaze would never break.

Edwin Muir

For me, the power of this poem comes in the intensity of the encounter between Mary and the angel. The sense of totality in the meeting – the moment in which heaven and earth are met.

See, they have come together, see
While the destroying minutes flow,
Each reflects the other's face
Till heaven in hers and earth in his
Shine steady there.

As Mary and the angel stand rapt in their attention for one another, each one is changed— she is left with the impression of his – what? spirituality? divinity? Angel as divine messenger? Angel as the face of God... While he is affected by the fullness of her humanity.

In that moment's meeting, Muir points us to the truth incarnation—
where humanity and divinity are held together – so that the meaning of each is known most fully only in their union.

And there are strange contrasts here between the stasis of the encounter – time frozen in their gaze. The distance, the sense of awe – 'the bliss/ That from there limbs all movement takes' and the intense physicality of their rapture – 'so great a wonder that it makes/ each feather on his wings tremble'

Somehow Muir is playing with this moment of divine conception:
How does the Spirit come to Mary?
As a Word?
As a feeling?
As a physical encounter?
How does annunciation bring about virgin birth?

And then, we have this contrast between that divine moment – when time stops, when the eternal one takes on temporal being – and the rush and noise of the ‘ordinary day’ – the endless people who go on with their tasks, oblivious to what God has done.

The intensity of Mary and the Angel’s gaze
is contrasted with our blindness
our not noticing –
our inability to perceive the magnitude of what has happened.

But our heedlessness doesn’t alter the fact
heaven and earth have met
their gaze will never break
In that meeting all time exist and finds it’s meaning.

(read poem again.)

Right. Draw breath. Begin again. I want to go on to a second poem for the sake of contrast. Muir offered us the whole of time, stopped in the intensity of the gaze between Mary and Gabriel. Rilke offers a sense of time rushing on – the way in which the annunciation holds within it the fulfilment of the cross.

Rilke: **Annunciation** (Words of the Angel)

You are not nearer God than we;
he’s far from everyone.
And yet your hands most wonderfully
reveal his benison.
From woman’s sleeves none ever grew
so ripe, so shimmeringly:
I am the day, I am the dew,
you, Lady, are the Tree.

Pardon, now my long journey's done,
I had forgot to say
what he who sat as in the sun,
grand in his gold array,
told me to tell you, pensive one
(space has bewildered me).
I am the start of what's begun,
you. Lady, are the Tree.

I spread my wings out wide and rose,
the space around grew less;
your little house quite overflows
with my abundant dress.
But still you keep your solitude
and hardly notice me:
I'm but a breeze within the wood,
you, Lady, are the Tree.

The angels tremble in their choir,
grow pale, and separate:
never were longing and desire
so vague and yet so great.
Something perhaps is going to be
that you perceived in dream.
Hail to you! for my soul can see
that you are ripe and teem.

You lofty gate, that any day
may open for your good:
you ear my longing songs assay,
my word -- I know now -- lost its way
In you as in a wood.

And thus your last dream was designed
to be fulfilled by me.
God looked at me: he made me blind . . .

You, Lady, are the Tree.

Rainer Maria Rilke
(trans. J. B. Leishman)

If Muir pointed to the magnitude of the incarnation by the intensity of Mary and Gabriel's gaze, Rilke does it through the sense of bewilderment –the angel's confusion after crossing all that space, the sense of distance between Mary and angel, between both and God. Our own confusion as he names Mary 'Tree'. Even the uncertainty of the angels – those most wonderful lines:

never were longing and desire
so vague and yet so great.

Throughout the poem, the Angel is making sense of what it is he has been called to do. What does annunciation mean?

He is clearly out of his depth.

Is it resentment at first that he must stoop down to reach this woman? Is that what's behind his desire to explain that she is no 'nearer God than we'

And yet, he is taken with her – surprised by what he sees – by his recognition of God's presence in her.

He is so bewildered he almost forgets his message—
but then there's the sense that it might not matter.

The thing is already begun.

Her house so overflows with presence—
filled with his dress—

that she can barely perceive him.

Unusual portrayal this – not a Mary who is bowed in fear, or stunned by angels words, but an angel who is amazed by Mary’s stillness, her solitude. Her quiet acceptance of what grows within her.

I think it is that very recognition of her passivity – her solitude, her dreaminess, her lack of surprised response – that allows the angel to know his own purpose.

Remember I said that I think this poem is about the angel making sense of things?

Well, this is what I think he sees.

In Mary’s quietness, the angel sees the acceptance of her task. Her acceptance of what it means to be God bearer, to bear Christ’s body in her own.

But even at the start, he names her tree.

The one who bears Jesus is the mother of God

but also the tree, the cross –

And the all at once birth and death are bound together.

Jesus’ birth through Mary, leading inextricably to the cross.

Jesus’ death on the cross bearing in it our only hope of life.

And what is the angel’s blindness? ‘God looked at me and made me blind.’

Perhaps if he had seen too soon what it was he was called to do, he would have hesitated. Would not have wanted to bring this announcement – not only of birth, but of death. Not only of joy but of suffering. I don’t know. I like the poem better for not knowing.

Somehow, the poem speaks to me of acceptance –
Mary's acceptance of her task in bearing Christ
the angel's acceptance of the message he carries
Christ's acceptance of the cross
and our acceptance of the complexity of life and death, joy and
suffering –
all of it held in a pregnant moment of anticipation
as the angel comes to Mary
and she is filled with the presence of God.

(read again.)