

ST NINIAN'S POLLOKSHIELDS
POETRY IN ADVENT – WK 2
WHO IS THIS?

Today I want to look at two poems that consider the time of waiting before Jesus' birth. And once again, we will begin with Mary. Earlier on, I played a setting of a 15th Century poem, 'I sing of a maiden'.

I sing of a maiden that is makeless;
king of all kings to her son she ches.

He came all so still where his mother was,
as dew in April that falleth on the grass.

I'm not sure if you're familiar with the poem but I suspect that the images are recognizable. Here we have a Mary very much at peace with the world. Gently pondering her call. Star clad and regal, child soft as dew-- a precious, Divine gift.

This is the same image of Incarnation that we get in Silent Night – all is calm, all is bright. Or in Away in the Manger – no crying he makes.

Because we are brought to silence by the wonder of the incarnation, the temptation is to silence the Christ child too. We want Christmas to be the happy, unproblematic bit of the story since we know that the crucifixion will come all too soon, and we'll have to face the dark horror of Good Friday.

But the truth is, no human birth comes without suffering.

And certainly not a Divine birth that disrupted every pattern, every expectation that the world had, and caught Mary and Joseph up in a course of events that no one could have imagined.

The poems I have chosen for today stress the complexity of it all. The confusion of this birth, as Mary and Joseph struggled with what it was that was happening. Who it was that was coming to them – and who they were in relation to this child.

Mary's Lament

Who am I
That, chosen, I should travel now in pain
Through darkness?
That I should ride
Upon a simple beast
Along the journey of my travail,
Not knowing when or where
My lying in shall be?

It is cold,
Cold and bleak upon the way –
And my exhausted body
Seeks some other comfort now,
But there is none
And no escaping this.
The final culmination of my time.

Who is this babe
That he should rack me so
With pain upon His coming?
And no rest, no rest.
To succour me on His arrival.
He comes with endless hardship...

But my child is all my hope –
To me a simple child.
Who waits dependently upon my sustenance
For nourishment by body and by love.

So why this fear for him?
Who is he then?
And why, why me
To bring him forth?
I wonder, will the world be kind to him?

The mother in me fears
Some strange pre-sentiment of doom
For him, my unborn son –
That endlessly the world unleashes
Venom on the innocent,
And tears them limb from limb
On small excuse...or none.

What have I done
To carry such a burden
In the hollow of my heart?
How can I keep him safe
Knowing as I do

My love can offer scant protection
From his fate?

How can I keep him safe?
I cannot.

--Margaret Arthurson

At one level, I think this is a poem of very ordinary pondering at the wonder of birth – Mary asks the questions that all new mothers face: Who am I, now that I have become a mother? Who is this child I will carry? What will this do to me? Who will I become? I don't know if these questions are universal, but they are natural. The birth of a child turns a mother's life upside-down, and things will never be the same again.

But is that all that is going on here?
There is a wonderful ambiguity as to whether Mary's concerns are just the normal concerns of an overly pensive mother, or if she really does have a sense of what is to come – her 'strange pre-sentiment of doom' that the world will do it's worst to her son, that it will unleash 'venom on the innocent' and bring him to harm.

Of course, we are supposed to see the cross in that.
Mary's foreknowledge of the pain and suffering that will come.
But I wonder – does it have to be that complicated? Did she really know?

I imagine that fear of doom, Mary's trembling before the horrors of the world, has been echoed a thousand times of late – by the woman of Fallujah, by the women of Afghanistan. By all those who carry a child knowing that there will be no safety, no rest, no way to prove their innocence. And even if there were, they know their innocence doesn't matter.

I am not trying to take anything away from Mary's foreboding – but the very ordinariness of the poem asks us to cast the net wider – to remember those for whom Christ came. To remember why it is that we need a saviour, as much now as ever.

It seems to me that the hidden question of the poem – behind ‘who am I’ and ‘who is this babe’ -- is ‘can I bear this?’ Does Mary have the strength to finish this journey, meet the culmination of her time, bear with all the hardships of bringing a child to birth in a world that is so seldom kind. And by analogy therefore, can we? Can we bear with Christ, bear Christ, in a world where so many reject his presence.

And the answer comes through the juxtaposition of Mary’s hardship with her immense hope. Right in the centre of the poem – two lines across the stanzas:

He comes with endless hardship...
But my child is all my hope.

The natural thing for a mother to do – for us all to do – is to hope that love can prevent suffering. So we rail against pain. We think, ‘who am I – what have I done – that I should have to bear this?’ And we think that Love should protect us –

that a mother’s love can protect a child
that a God of Love can protect his children.

But the poem turns when Mary finds that love simply doesn’t work like that
not in safety and protection but in infinite risk.
She learns that the very one who brings her pain is the only hope for life. That this child brings the hope that Love is stronger than death – for Mary, and for us all.

Now, for Joseph. This birth wasn’t exactly easy for him either.

What Child is This?
Joseph reflects on the Annunciation

‘An Angel came to me’, she said;
Glimmer of glory in the wrap of wings.
Greeting her gladly, with strange salutation,
That she, a virgin, should bear a son.
‘The Son of God’, she said.
What fantasy is this?
She is to be my wife – my cherished ornament
Close to my heart in love and honour bound.
What shame must sound from such a revelation—
Two families disgraced – the pain of pride – the
bitterness of loss.
What can I say of her – that she is mad?
That witless she may wander through the world—
Yet, witless, innocence may still be hers?
How can I turn against my beloved
Whose brightness lies so breathless on my heart?
How can I brand her whore
Whose hand is in my hand while life may last?
What mystery is this,
That she who is my wife, within her womb,
Carries creation’s child, and brings to birth
The promises of God?
I cannot understand what work is here –
Yet, as my fingers fashion at my trade,
I trust that all is well – I feel the tools strike true,
And in the fall of shavings glimpse a drift of wings.

– Jill Jenkins

If the last poem showed us something of Love expressed in suffering, this poem offers love in utter faithfulness and loyalty. -- Though it might not seem like it at first.

I wonder how you found that on first hearing.

Have you ever thought about what it was like for Joseph, to face the horror of Mary's pregnancy – his betrothed, a virgin with child. I know the gospel gives us the story of his concern, the Angel coming to him in a dream saying, 'It's all right. God wants it this way. Just go along with it.' But that's a long way from the brutality of 'How can I brand her whore?'

But how could he think anything else? The whole history of the universe taught him that this was impossible. That a virgin cannot be with Child. It was her word against his every scrap of common sense. And he was faced with a stark choice – he could cast her off as faithless. Declare her mad. Or risk sharing in her disgrace, risk being a fool for believing her. It's not an enviable position to be in.

So how does Joseph move from his anger and bewilderment to the acceptance of Wonder and Love?

Early on in the poem the conflict seems to be between honour and love. Mary's wonder at the 'Glimmer of Glory in the wrap of wings' seems delusional. And if she is lying, then the promise of love and honour is undone.

And it might have ended there.
Many relationships have ended for less.

But for that one small fact --that it is not only her honour and love that are in questions – but his own. And ultimately, God's.

Joseph cannot condemn Mary, because his love for her is too great.

How can I turn against my beloved,
Whose brightness lies so breathless on my heart?

He cannot think her mad – or if she is, cannot leave her to suffer madness alone. Love is not like that.

And as Joseph confronts the fact of his own loyalty – his promise to love her, to stay with her – he seems to catch an echo of God’s loyalty – God’s faithfulness and loving kindness, God’s love that does not go away.

And with that ‘fantasy’ becomes ‘mystery’. Joseph opens himself to the possibility that she is truly bringing ‘to birth the promises of God.’ That the promise will be fulfilled.

And we are offered a model not of understanding, but of trust. A sense of the inherent ‘rightness’ of things, as his tools strike, as he sees the angels wings in the shavings of wood.

And this, more than anything, is what moves me in this poem. That glimpse of angels wings in the fragments of dust. The truth of God, seen in the things we cast off.

We can’t often tell where a trick of light ends and an angel wing begins.

However God comes to us, it will involve risk.
Joseph was wiling to risk being made a fool
for a hunch
and the promise of love
and the unshakable conviction
that God’s faithfulness is worth the risk.