

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

January 6, 2020

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



The Bright Field

I have seen the sun break through
to illuminate a small field
for a while, and gone my way
and forgotten it. But that was the
pearl of great price, the one field that had
treasure in it. I realise now
that I must give all that I have
to possess it. 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.

R. S. Thomas¹

Reflections

It is a new year, new decade, and a brand new covenant period at St. Stephen's. *Wellspring* happily returns!

It is important to mention that today marks the Feast of the Epiphany, the end of the 12 days of Christmas and the first day of a new liturgical season—Epiphanytide—which lasts until Ash Wednesday and is devoted to a recalling of miracles, from the wedding at Cana to the Transfiguration. Epiphany is a Greek word meaning “manifestation” or “appearing” and the church now turns its attention to the showings of Christ's divinity.

And so, it is against that backdrop that I offer this poem—beautiful on any day, I think, but particularly evocative on this one and through a lens colored by miracle.

There is the ghost of a sonnet here and its 14 lines, though metrically irregular, recall a gentle iambic cadence. The final two lines (which act as close to a Shakespearean couplet as any

¹ “The Bright Field” by R. S. Thomas from *Laboratories of the Spirit*, MacMillan, 1975.

with the *youth/you* rhyme), also present the most sonnet-like element of this particular form: the *volta*, or turn. It is here that the poem clarifies for us a truth it has already discovered—that what was once forgotten or fleeting or faraway is, after all, neither future nor past but eternal, permanent and present.

The certainty of that brightness, the truth of the sentence (the longest of the poem) as it unfolds and finishes, counters the softness of the form; it is fitting that this lyric—whose subject is about the often-imperceptible and unnoticed—be more amorphous, less exacting than the rules to which a sonnet generally adheres. We almost fail to notice that it is indeed a sonnet, almost fail to perceive what is not so bright as to blind us.

Typically, the structure of a sonnet is part proposition, part resolution and it is the *volta* that signals the turn toward that resolution—in other words toward clarity, toward fulfillment, toward epiphany. I cannot help but remark on the twinning of this poem with the other readings appointed for us on this feast day; the most widely celebrated manifestation of Christ, and the one that has been historically celebrated by Christian churches in the West, is Jesus revealed as Christ to the three wise men, the Magi, from the East, who followed the light of the Star of Bethlehem. It was a breaking through of light of a different kind—not the sun illuminating briefly a small field, as in Thomas’s poem, but a small child illuminating eternally the whole world. Both miracles, and more alike than not.

As the days lengthen minute by minute and the light comes ever nearer, lasting longer, may the year that awaits us be full of miracles in every direction, a brightness on the field of every heart.

✻ About the poet

R. S. Thomas (1913-2000) was a Welsh poet and Anglican priest who spent much of his early life in British port towns. When he was ordained a deacon in the Anglican Church, he moved to the mining village of Chirk, the first of several posts he would hold in rural communities throughout Wales. Thomas’ poems are largely about the human spirit, the quest, struggle, and joy of religious life. As he recounts in an article he published for the *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, he writes, “Some people were curious to know whether I did not feel some conflict between my two vocations [as poet and priest]. But I always replied that Christ was a poet....” He was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Though he is reputed to have been misanthropic, ascetic and cantankerous, his biographers and those who knew him best say he was deeply compassionate, humorous and kind, a lover of birds, beauty, and God.



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