
A table of contents for *Anvil* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_anvil_01.php

JOHN DAVIES

The Role of Poetry in Worship

John Davies offers a framework for understanding the various functions of poetry when included in worship. He applies his understanding to four different examples of poems used in particular contexts. He examines the specific role of the poem in each case, and suggests that poetry complements other material in a service and can help to transform the perceptions of congregations when used creatively.

Introduction

in trying to get hold of things mysterious
we try to invent something definite
and mystery can never be defined
or must always be redefined
or better yet
come at newly and indirectly
through stories and things around us
thru parables and food[1]

In trying to define poetry, one thing is largely true – that poetry tends to use few words to express a multitude of meanings, a complex of symbols, which would require much lengthier prose to explain. In the above extract, Corita Kent expresses much of what I aim to say more expansively in this exploration of the role of poetry in worship.

Worship could be defined as an attempt to 'get hold of things mysterious'. This phrase contains that sense in which, in worship, a congregation gathers to express the barely expressible. It addresses the aspect of worship whereby a congregation gathers to give voice to a deeply-felt faith, to reaffirm deeply-held beliefs, or to attempt to feel a tentative faith, to try to make sense of nascent beliefs. By partaking in liturgies which shape these expressions, the 'mysteries' of the faith are encountered and in some way (or various ways) understood. Our encounter with God in worship is a mystery which we attempt to 'get hold of' by 'inventing something definite', by using words in prayer, song and sermon, which *clarify* and *inform*. These doctrinal statements help the believer to find shape in their belief, but cannot express the *whole* experience of that belief.

1 C. Kent, *Footnotes and Headlines: a book of play-prayers*, Herder and Herder, New York 1967, p 18, quoted in S. McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, Fortress, Philadelphia 1975, p 114.

This is only *partially* satisfying because the mystery is too great, and God is too elusive, to ever be held too definitely. 'Mystery can never be defined', the poet writes, 'or must always be redefined / or better yet / come at newly and indirectly'; and this is the role which poetry can play in public worship[2]. Poetry provides a flexibility and distinctiveness of language which can create new possibilities for redefinition. By its very nature, as R. S. Thomas writes, poetry exists in the presence of questions and with the possibility of newness: 'Poetry is born of the tensions set up by the poet's ability to be "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason".'[3] Poems can help worshippers address these tensions, both within themselves, emanating from their 'uncertainties' and 'doubts', and in the mysteries of faith, and thus help them to encounter God in the divine work of re-creation and renewal.

This language comes out in the great liturgies of the church, the songs and hymns which have been sung for millennia, the proclamations of faith whose language exceeds that of what Brueggemann calls the 'prose-flattened world'[4] and instead speaks a 'language of insight'.[5] It also comes out in *extra-liturgical* moments, where poetry is used in its 'purest' form and poems are recited during worship to perform particular functions.

This article will attend in detail to the latter, looking at four specific instances of poems being used in acts of worship, exploring them in relation to their setting so as to help 'flesh out' in some detail the particular role played by poetic language in worship. This will be preceded by a survey of different perspectives on language, outlining a variety of approaches which will help to appraise the role of poetry in worship.[6]

Perspectives on language in worship

The liturgical revisions of the 1960s and 1970s triggered much analysis and debate about the uses of language in worship, in particular the replacement of the Latin by the vernacular in Roman Catholic liturgy, the introduction of the Alternative Service Book within the Anglican church, and the widespread, continuing, development of gender-inclusive liturgical language and Bible translations. A number of different perspectives on language inform this discussion: sociolinguistics, symbolism and the theological perspective.

Sociolinguistics is a perspective on language which focuses on *functions:* Crystal[7] outlines six functions that liturgical language can be said to perform: the *informative*

2 Not exclusively – besides poetry, symbolic actions, gesture and movement can also help 'redefine mystery' in new and indirect ways. Important though they are, these aspects of worship cannot be adequately addressed in an paper of such limited length, which shall maintain a focus on the specific use of poems in worship.

3 R. S. Thomas, ed, *The Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, Penguin, Harmondsworth 1963, p 11 (quoting Keats).

4 W. Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, Fortress, Minneapolis 1989, p 1.

5 McFague, *Parables*, p 92.

6 Space excludes the possibility of addressing 'poetic' liturgical writing, 'poetic' sermonising and poetry-in-song in any detail.

7 D. Crystal, *Liturgical Language in a Socio-linguistic Perspective*, in D. & R. C. D. Jasper (eds), *Language and the Worship of the Church*, Macmillan, Basingstoke 1990.

function which gives information which is new or unfamiliar, the *identifying* function which signals a personal, ethnic, regional or social identity, the *expressive* function which express emotions, the *performative* function which uses words which express a deeper reality, such as in the giving of absolution, the *historical* function formal language which is concerned with record-keeping, summarising the past and preserving it, and the *aesthetic* function where words are used purely for their own enjoyment.

The sociolinguistic approach pays attention to the range of factors involved in language change, and in particular to the factor of social identity. This helps our analysis of poetry in worship, as poetry is often key in introducing change or the possibility of change.

Paul Tillich declares that 'Religious symbols... are a representation of that which is unconditionally beyond the conceptual sphere... Religious symbols represent the transcendent.'[8] He insists that God cannot remain God if we try to describe him by means of concepts, and that 'there is a sickness and confusion of modern consciousness stemming from the decay of images or symbols that once had vital power'[9]. Stephen Platten asserts that symbolism in liturgy seeks 'not merely to describe the divine, but to evoke the response of awe and worship'.[10] Platten is keen to encourage modern liturgists to avoid 'dying or moribund' imagery in their symbolic language, taking care to accommodate cultural relativism, appropriate images and moral concerns in their attempts to keep the 'hardy plant' of Christian language growing. This is a role which poets are particularly equipped to perform.

Some of the above is reflected in Geoffrey Wainwright's essay 'The Language of Worship'.[11] His survey of liturgical language from a theological angle offers particular distinctive categories based on the idea that worship language is about human reciprocal communication with God. While God has spoken many times and in many ways throughout history, particularly in 'the word made flesh', *our* chief vocation is (according to the Westminster Catechism) 'to glorify God and to enjoy him forever'.[12] He categorizes six 'subregisters' of linguistics in worship, which provide helpful headings towards a foundational theological approach. These are *adoration, proclamation, thanksgiving, commitment, petition and intercession,* and *expectation.*[13]

Perspectives on poetry in worship

Much has been written about the interface between poetic language and religious language. There seems to be widespread agreement that the two are closely linked, in various ways. Dylan Thomas goes as far as to suggest that poetry has a religious function *in itself*: 'Poetry is ... a tool ... that can help us to survive, help us heal ourselves and others.'[14] In struggling to define poetry, Thomas suggests that 'all

8 P. Tillich, *The Religious Symbol* in, S. Hook (ed), *Religious Experiences and Truth*, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh 1962, p 303, quoted in A. C. Thiselton, *Language, Liturgy and Meaning*, Grove, Nottingham 1975, p 22.
9 Thiselton, *Language*, p 22.
10 Thiselton, *Language*, p 4.
11 G. Wainwright, 'The Language of Worship', in C. Jones, et al, eds, *The Study of Liturgy*, SPCK, London 1997.
12 Wainwright, 'Language', pp 520f.
13 Wainwright, 'Language', pp 521f.
14 K. Norris, *Finding a Place for Poets in the Church*, The Christian Century, November 19, 1986, p 1053.

that matters is the eternal moment behind it, the vast undercurrent of human grief, folly, pretension, exaltation, or ignorance, however unlofty the intention of the poem.'[15] This comment has assisted those who have argued for Thomas being a 'Christian' poet, based largely on his later expression that 'the joy and function of poetry is, and was, the celebration of man, which is also the celebration of God'[16]. Thomas's high view of poetry comes through his appreciation of poetic language, which he expresses as a combination of 'craftsmanship' and 'the mystery of words'. At its best, such a combination reveals much more than the words on the page: 'The best craftsmanship always leaves holes and gaps in the works of the poem so that something that is not in the poem can creep, crawl, flash or thunder in.'[17]

By its finely-crafted nature, such heightened language demands, encourages, creates a response in the listener. For Dylan Thomas, language itself is the key, not the character or concerns of the poet. For him, the ultimate experience is 'the mystery of having been moved by words'.[18] This is a religious function without a supporting framework of beliefs. By contrast, Coleridge's high view of poetic language is closely associated with what Tillich calls 'the language of ultimate concern', i.e. religious language.[19]

The person reading or hearing scriptural stories, or participating in liturgies, does so engaged with their meaning only through their understanding of metaphor and symbol, which poetry (above any other form of language) promotes.

Poets 'hover between images',[20] writes Coleridge, meaning that they work with words in ways that recognize that, within a frame of reference, meanings can shift over time, like 'components in a field of force that take their value from the charge of the field as a whole.'[21] Poets work with the *intention* of shifting words and images so as to create newness. The purpose of 'hovering between images' may be 'to reconcile opposites and qualify contradictions'. If successful, the result will be 'the substitution of a sublime feeling of the unimaginable for a mere image'.[22]

Other poets may seek goals other than the reconciliation of opposites and qualification of contradictions, but the process will be the same. For Coleridge this process represents the primary response to language, which he calls 'fiduciary'. This means that it produces *activity* within the community which hears it, as that community takes on the metaphors or symbols and *enacts* the claims they make.[23]

Wallace Stevens' poem *It Must Be Abstract* echoes Coleridge's concept of the generative power within the specialized language of poetry:

> The poem refreshes life, so that we share
> For a moment, the first idea. It satisfies
> Belief in an immaculate beginning
> And sends us, winged by an unconscious will
> To an immaculate end. We move between these points.[24]

15 C. Fitzgibbon, *Life of Dylan Thomas*, J. M. Dent, London 1965, p 335
16 Fitzgibbon, *Dylan Thomas*, p 336.
17 Fitzgibbon, *Dylan Thomas*, p 336.
18 Fitzgibbon, *Dylan Thomas*, p 336.
19 J. Coulson, *Newman and the Common Tradition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1970, p 20.
20 Coulson, *Newman*, p 10.
21 Coulson, *Newman*, p 10.
22 Coulson, *Newman*, p 11.
23 Coulson, *Newman*, p 4 (my italics).
24 W. Stevens, *It Must Be Abstract*, from *Selected Poems*, Faber, London 1970.

The creative poetic act links the recipients back to creation ('the first idea') and simultaneously enables re-creation to take place. Sallie McFague expresses this in terms of rebirth, and suggests that metaphor 'recreates the possibility for revelatory participation':[25] 'The goal is not simply the "renewal" of traditional symbols but, more radically, the creation of an encounter situation which will, as Wilder says, give "that certain shock to the imagination", helping people to say "Yes", not simply with their heads, but with commitment to be lived out in their entire lives.'[26]

Thus, while rejecting the idea that poetry can be *of itself* 'religious', we can see how poetic language, with its heightened form and use of metaphor and symbol, helps to generate imaginativeness in those who read and hear it. This is especially pertinent to its use within religious settings where respondents to energising poetic language can justifiably feel that they have been energized by the creative, imaginative, energising God. Their participation in these poetic moments can energize their creative, imaginative, life.

Text – source and context

Questions remain about the source and setting of such poetry. There is little credibility in the idea that only *Christian* poets can produce poetry which will function effectively in the re-creative way described above. Many Christians, despite their best intentions, can and do write *very bad* poetry; and conversely many who are not self consciously 'religious' nevertheless can and do write poetry which energizes and engages profoundly with 'the language of ultimate concern'.

Sallie McFague acknowledges this, but insists that the more helpful of these writers will be those 'who, although not Christian, have been deeply influenced by the parabolic mode',[27] which is her term for the symbols and metaphors employed in scriptural traditions. However, McFague insists that truly 'Christian' poetry is distinctive:

> The 'test' of a *Christian* poet is whether or not the reality with which he or she is dealing is the transformation or recontextualization of the ordinary by the graciousness of God. It is not impossible to separate the Christian poets who have been concerned with this process from those who merely use Christian symbols because they provide a rich tradition for their own perspective. [28]

A 'genuine Christian poet' uses the images, symbols, and stories in Scripture as 'signposts which help us to read our way and for which the poet must provide new contexts, create new metaphors, in order that they may be read at all'[29].This is illustrated by Gerard Manley Hopkins' *The Windhover*, a poem which uses no religious language at all and yet succeeds in being a radically charged expression of Christ's passion. The poem is a *parable*, inexhaustibly offering 'the possibility of helping us to encounter the crucifixion'.[30] Thus, truly 'Christian' poetry need

25 McFague, *Parables*, p 93.
26 McFague, *Parables*, p 94.
27 McFague, *Parables*, p 95.
28 McFague, *Parables*, p 97.
29 McFague, *Parables*, p 97.
30 McFague, *Parables*, p 97.

not employ any explicit 'Christian' symbols but will be founded on a profound understanding of the 'parabolic form', the inheritance of signs and symbols and poetic language from the scriptures and tradition.

This suggests that for Christian poetry to be most effective it relies not solely on *form* but also on *context.* The *reader* must understand the 'parabolic form' on which the poem is founded, and the metaphors through which the 'parable' is filtered. This requires that the poem knows its context. *The Windhover* provides an example of this. It uses metaphors from an early morning vision (daylight, dawn, air, wind), from royalty (minion, falcon, kingdom, dauphin), and horsemanship (riding, rein). If used in a context where, for example, the language of royalty is obsolete, its metaphors fail to communicate and it loses much of its impact.

Language works best, or perhaps only ever, in a tangible context. This is perhaps especially true for poetic language used in the context of worship. We turn now to look in turn at four particular examples of this.

Turn again to life – Mary Lee Hall

(The First Reading at the funeral service of Diana, Princess of Wales, Westminster Abbey, 6 September 1997)

> If I should die and leave you here awhile,
> Be not like others, sore undone, who keep
> Long vigils by the silent dust, and weep.
> For my sake – turn again to life and smile,
> Nerving thy heart and trembling hand to do
> Something to comfort other hearts than thine.
> Complete those dear unfinished tasks of mine
> And I, perchance, may therein comfort you.[31]

This poem, read by Princess Diana's eldest sister, Lady Sarah McCorquodale, provided a dramatic opening to the 'word' section of Diana's funeral service. After a week of saturation media comment, in which the life, times and tragic death of Diana were endlessly recycled, this service was the focus of international attention. It was intended to hold the formality of a state funeral together with a recognition of the 'informal' character of 'the people's princess'. It was designed to do justice to a woman portrayed as a 'non-establishment' figure who lived nevertheless at the heart of the establishment.

The poem's opening had real impact following the ceremonial entrance into the cathedral of the cortege, the bidding, the national anthem and Diana's self-chosen wedding hymn *I Vow to Thee My Country.* That hymn resonated with echoes of Diana's explicit commitment to 'her' people, the fraternity she was perceived as sharing with her 'subjects', and following it the poem's opening words impacted; because this was a poem written in the *first person singular.* At this service it was the *voice of the deceased* speaking to the assembly – *her* voice.

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31 *Turn again to life,* www.internet-esq.com/diana/index.htm

This made the major function of the poem *identifying*. Through the voice of Lady Sarah McCorquodale the listeners were involved in a dialogue with Diana, her voice speaking in intimate terms to each, asking them to turn from their mourning back to life, to put their hearts and hands into continuing *her* work, and to expect her to comfort them as they did so. Through the poem, they could feel that they were in close relationship with her.

The poem was also *performative*, Diana's 'voice' serving to bring *her* into the ceremony, directly, seeming to cut through the 'mediated' Diana of the newsreels to the 'real' Diana. Its purpose was also perhaps intended to help perform the act of helping a nation to 'turn again to life' after a week of obsessive grieving. This is a *fiduciary* intention – to produce in the community of mourners the activity of completing 'those unfinished tasks of mine'. As the spoken poem transforms 'the silent dust' of a dead princess into a voice of real comfort, so the hearers are energized into 'revelatory participation'.[32]

This does beg a question about the nature of the 'revelation' encountered on this occasion, as it is not a revelation of God. This is a secular poem written by a 'religious outsider', used in this context to function as the voice of a secular 'saint'. There is no mention of God in these lines, no authority in the poem save that of the voice – Diana's. There is little to suggest that Mary Lee Hall is operating with 'the parabolic form' as her base.

Assessing it in McFague's terms, the poem in this setting *does* achieve a 'transformation or recontextualisation of the ordinary'. It connects the hearer intimately to the loved, lost princess and helps them to 'turn again to life'. But rather than achieving this 'by the graciousness of God' it offers instead a somewhat cautious secular comfort: 'And I, perchance, may therein comfort you.'

Poem for Benjamin Tomkins – John Davies

(Funeral of Benjamin John Tomkins, Ridley Hall Chapel, 17 March 1999)

now breathe
great breaths of heaven
move well
for pain has gone
cry joy
and sing
your heart beats strong now
cherished little one

Another funeral poem, in a very different context. Benjamin Tomkins died after merely two weeks of a life of struggle with a multiplicity of physical problems. The poem was originally written as a private expression of grief and solidarity with the parents Ian and Deborah, but they included it in the service because 'it said everything about him, and our feelings at that time'.[33]

32 McFague, *Parables*, p 93.

33 This and the following quotes in this section are from Ian Tomkins, interviewed on 28 March 2000.

The service was held at Ridley Hall chapel, a service full of Anglican ordinands and their families, alongside the Tomkins family and friends; a predominantly 'believing' congregation, well familiar with McFague's 'parabolic form' and thus able to connect the largely non-religious language in this poem with its informing metaphor of the resurrection of the dead.

This is an *identifying* poem linking mourners to the deceased, but in the opposite way to the Diana poem, in that here the voice is of the *mourners*, extending their blessing and hope to the deceased. It is also *identifying* because it assumes the mourners' knowledge of the baby's sufferings, and invites them to share in them. Each line describes an aspect of Benjamin's physical struggles – breathing problems, lack of movement, pain, a weak voice, the heart problems which ultimately ended his short life. These were the *symbols* of Benjamin's struggle with which the mourners, through these words, would identify. Alongside this, in the 'parabolic' context, the poem was *performative:* as the mourners read it, their hopes were realized: 'The poem made real our feelings of devastation, but we also knew that he was healed. This was a way of saying it: the poem pulled the hopes and the pain together.'

The poem performed a number of *theological* functions. There was an aspect of *intercession* to the poem in that setting; it expressed the mourners' *commitment* to the deceased and (in accepting the underlying faith metaphor) to God; it also voiced *expectation* about Benjamin's future and in so doing could also be defined as *proclamatory:* using the language of 'surprising hope' in what on the surface seemed a hopeless situation.

The poem was not spoken in the service, but printed on the cover of the service sheet and suggested to the congregation as a focus for a time of silent reflection at the centre of the service. This exercise permitted a transformation to take place in the hearts of those who participated in it: 'It gave people space and made it an extraordinarily personal time. The poem took us through Benjamin's life, death and resurrection in just a few words, and went straight to and from the heart.'

We walked on to Emmaus – John Davies

(performed at Cafe Emmaus jazz worship event, Ridley Hall, 7 May 1999)

We walked on to Emmaus
With a man who came from nowhere
Knowing nothing except that which he was told
And his friendship was an excuse
For our telling of these tales
Which comforted us, though our hearts were cold

We walked on to Emmaus
Full of all the fondest memories
And our kindling of them made us feel more bold
For the questions that he asked us
Were bread to feed our thoughts
And a comfort to us, though our hearts were cold

We walked on to Emmaus
And we told him about Mary
Giving some small hope to which our hearts could hold
And we talked of resurrection
And the strange scene in the garden
Which comforted us, though our hearts were cold

We walked on to Emmaus
And were shocked by his insistence
That all these things had been foreseen of old
And the fire of his persistence
Was bread which fed our souls
A breaking fire which purged our hearts of cold

This poem assumes in its hearers a knowledge of a particular biblical story – Luke 24.13-35, the appearance of Christ to two of his disciples on the Emmaus road. Its context was an 'experimental' act of worship 'with jazz and blues' in a 'jazz cafe' setting, with food and wine being served to the tables of the congregation.

It is the only poem selected in this paper which explicitly references scriptural metaphors and symbols, and it was written to serve a particular liturgical purpose – to prepare a congregation who had earlier heard the biblical story and seen it enacted, for a eucharistic 'encounter' where bread would be served at their tables and broken during the singing of *The Lord's Prayer.*

It is thus a poem 'in uncertainty', to use R. S. Thomas' phrase, or 'hovering between images' (Coleridge) in anticipation of an act of imaginative engagement with a 'root metaphor'. As Christ became known to the disciples (who provide the voice in this poem) in the breaking of the bread, so he may become known to the *Cafe Emmaus* congregation in *their* breaking of bread. This fulfils McFague's definition of Christian poetry in its role of recontextualising the images of the tradition, using metaphor that 'recreates the possibility for revelatory participation'.[34]

The poem relies on a conscious use of *symbol* to enable this to happen. Three symbols predominate: *fire* (of the Holy Spirit, at work in us), *passion* (Christ's and ours), and particularly, *bread* (the bread of life, Christ – broken for us, feeding our thoughts and our souls).

This is not *performative* because nothing happens here, but it *anticipates* a transforming moment – when the bread is broken later in the service, 'souls will be fed' and the 'breaking fire' of God 'will purge hearts of cold'. Ultimately this poem is concerned with the reconciliation of opposites – the comfortless feeling of distance from Christ and the comfort of reconnection, a 'breaking fire' of excitement in the Spirit replacing a feeling of being (out in the) cold. This is an attempt to redefine mystery by *'coming at it newly and indirectly ... thru parables and food'*.[35]

34 McFague, *Parables*, p 93.

35 McFague, *Parables*, p 114.

Holy City – Stewart Henderson

('Liverpool Celebration' service, Liverpool Anglican Cathedral, 6 November 1995)

How holy sits this city
Blessed with people
We, the offspring of funeral famine
And market forces slavery
We, the grandchildren of now-closed chapels
And sandstone suburbs
Here in this city of resignation and – over the water – aspiration.

How lonely sits this city
Bruised with people
In England, but not of it
Feeling ourselves punished and shamed
Talking to the world through soap operas,
Drag queen comics and peroxide footballers

City in deep mourning
Looking back, sore with nostalgia
For our first communion
When we were dressed pure
And knew nothing but that moment of absolution and acceptance
The body of Christ
The blood of Christ
And the ham tea afterwards

How anxious sits this city
Stubbed with people
Smoking our evenings through pub quiz nights
Swaggering home in the dark
Having had a few
Remembering our childhood
And those glossy coloured plastic windmill thingys on a stick
You could buy at West Kirby

Sentimental city
Not right with itself

How holy sits this city
Blessed with people
Nowhere near paradise
But not far from it
On probation, on drugs, Honor Blackman

That's us – a joke for every occasion
A quip at unsuitable times
Unruly – but helpful
Like: broadcasting the Laughing Policeman
in a mortuary to cheer everyone up

City of philosophers
Lacking any formal training

Surrealists without a paintbrush
Knowing there are too many gaps in the world
As we pray before the bleak altar:
'Christ flayed raw to pay our toll
Have you ointment for our soul?'

And though, even now,
As happy powder changes hands
Not far from here
Yet still

How holy sits this city
Blessed with people.[36]

'Holy City' was commissioned for a service which opened the 'Jesus in the City' UK Urban Congress, a major gathering of Christians united by their commitment to urban mission and ministry, motivated by a 'bias to the poor' ethic. The service was the first in a series during the congress in which representative groups each celebrated their home city in worship. Stewart Henderson is a Liverpool-born poet who performed this poem at the start of the service to a congregation of congress delegates and invited guests representing the 'great and good' of the city of Liverpool. It followed preliminaries including 'welcome' addresses from the Lord Mayor and Bishop of Liverpool.

'Holy City' is a poem which seeks to *identify* the hearer with the subject: 'we', 'ourselves', in 'this city'. The native members of the congregation would intuitively relate to this function of the poem; the visitors may not, but would perhaps have found it functioned on an *informative* level, giving insight into the nature of the place and the people they were visiting.

There is an underlying narrative at work here, about the nature of Liverpool and its people. It is mainly assumed, though it sometimes surfaces, for example in the selective socio-historical survey of the opening stanzas, and lines which make explicit certain Liverpool characteristics: 'a joke for every occasion'.

The narrative identifies a religious basis to the city's culture. 'Our first communion' is all-embracing, suggesting that Christian faith is foundational to Liverpool people. The way the poem employs *symbols* suggests that this faith merges seamlessly with the more 'folksy' aspects of life in the city – 'body, blood, ham tea'.

This is a nostalgic poem from an exiled Liverpudlian which harks back to childhood and sentimentalizes the people and their historical struggle without providing any great insight into their present character or predicament. Stewart Henderson is *concerned* with their re-creation, recognising that a 'sentimental city' is 'not right with itself'. He sees the people as a source of *blessing* and in his portrayal of them as a religious people hints that their Christian faith may resource their renewal.

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36 *Holy City*© 1995 Stewart Henderson. Used with the author's permission. Cannot be used or reproduced in any format without written agreement from the author.

The poem 'leaves holes' in a manner which satisfies Dylan Thomas' analysis – gaps which allow something not explicit in the poem to enter in. Of particular importance here, are the hole between the two words in the provocative phrase 'holy city' and the holes in the phrase 'nowhere near paradise / but not far from it'. These holes promote the suggestion that there is a latent potential, somehow rooted in Christian faith, that exists in the city.

Conclusion

I think that each of these four poems has demonstrated that there is a specific role for poetry in worship. Each performs functions which other forms of liturgy or acts of symbolism could not. The 'Diana' poem brought the voice of the deceased direct to the congregation; the 'Benjamin' poem explicitly linked the pain of a baby's earthly life with a certain heavenly healing; the 'Emmaus' poem helped a congregation to anticipate in a very real way, a transforming quasi-eucharistic act; the 'Liverpool' poem suggested in wit, satire, sentimentality and *in what it left unsaid* a way forward for the city's people.

Each of these poems *complemented* the liturgy, songs and prayers which accompanied them in each particular setting and helped to *transform* the perceptions of the congregation, to move them into a different place. Because of the directness, denseness or clarity of the poetic form this was achieved in each case where other linguistic forms would probably have failed.

From all of this we can see that, when well used, poetry can heighten the experience of worship for all who hear it. This paper has been narrow in focus, but what has emerged here about the poem's potential to 'transform the ordinary by the graciousness of God' may equally apply to liturgies, prayers and songs which are consciously 'poetic' in style.

Poetry is a language form concerned with redefinition, rooted in the tangible but aware of the mystery which coexists there. In the service of an incarnational God, with all the mystery and tangibility that suggests, it is a lasting and valuable tool, a source of challenge and change when used imaginatively in the context of worship.

The Revd John Davies is assistant curate at Holy Trinity, Wavertree, Liverpool and a member of the Iona Community.