

The splash of words

Believing in poetry

Mark Oakley



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Mark Oakley offers 30 poems with short chapters that release meaning and delight (for those who may struggle to engage with poetry), as well as use the poems as a springboard for profound reflections on the nature of believing and living faithfully today. You could even read the chapters without the poems - this is not a distillation of Radio 4 sophistication. Oakley is personal, passionate and determined to settle for nothing less than the truth – or, at least, an approach to the truth. For he indicates that the deepest aspects of life (and of God) are too multivalent to be captured in systematic theology. “Truth needs to be shared before it is understood”. Oakley stresses that the best poetry is truthful, moral and engaging. Adrienne Rich speaking of the relationship that is required between poet and reader (as between preacher and listener): “That we both know we are trying, all the time, to extend the possibilities of truth between us” (p174). And poetry is moral in the sense that it captures in words our *mores*, our behaviour, with such clarity that we are required to be honest about ourselves, allowing the truth to challenge and upset us. GM Hopkins: “description is revelation”; Seamus Heaney: “In order that human beings bring about the most radiant conditions for themselves to inhabit, it is essential that the vision of reality which poetry offers should be transformative” (p 151). Oakley reflecting on Hopkins: “If creation’s grandeur is not to be missed then a life needs to develop serious habits that humble the self before its divine source. You need to sell everything you have to gain the pearl of greatest price” (p 184). So, Oakley offers an approach that is interactive (with God in Christ), draws on (but is not limited to scripture) and points us towards transformation (of ourselves and of the world).

Oakley does not offer a theory of poetry, nor a definitive list. This book worked for me in ways that reminded me about how the Bible should (and sometimes, does) work. It is a resource; it surprises; it points to as-yet-unknown depths; it urges the reader to internalize (which is so much more than merely memorizing the words). Moreover, most of the poems bear re-reading – or, indeed, one poem leads to reading a different one. In other words, the book conveys hope: that there is a chance to break free from past behaviour, and in experimenting with ‘new life’ an opportunity to find future grace. “Living in my head too much means God can quickly become an object that I chatter about and have opinions on, rather than the subject to whom I am to relate most deeply in order to shape a life around trust and love” (p 153).

The chapter on RS Thomas’s poem ‘Raptor’ is superb, based more on his personal long-term engagement with RS Thomas than on this particular poem. It gave me hope; it helped me recognize fundamental patterns in my ministry (which are seldom acknowledged and affirmed in much church discourse today). “I don’t know how or when we became so spiritually illiterate – this mental contagion so doubtful that Christian spirituality might actually inform the mind, might deepen the human heart, and might even have civic resources to contribute” (p 74). Exactly! In the same chapter, he quotes two people with whom he had conversations while working as a Director of Ordinands. One said, “I suppose I want to help people have that relationship with God that I only wish I had myself”; the other: “I was ordained in order to stop the rumour of God disappearing from the face of the earth” (p 80).

Truth echoes in the soul; hope is restored.