

Deep Unto Deep

David Hodges

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www.caldey-island.co.uk

Caldey's Cistercian poet has developed a distinctive style over the years. It reflects both the devotional structure that shapes his life and the context in which that life is lived: an island community off the Pembrokeshire coast. The title poem of his new collection reflects this:

On the world's edge,
The sea is deeper than thought.
Breathing in the ocean breeze,
I watch the movement of the waves,
the waves that lead to you:
silence too full of meaning for words.

The tension between words and silence, leading ultimately to the Word himself, is mediated through the poet's reflection on the natural world. This is clearly expressed in 'Dawn Prayer':

In the quiet of dawn,
the moment intense but empty
as the lonely horizon;
the silent sea
calm and still, mirroring
the silence within.
Yet I feel absent from Him.

Then the remembered Word,
rising softly, nurses
my soul, held in God's love.
The moment continues
inside the mystery;
in silent awareness
there seems no end.

Brother David's language is for the most part spare and unadorned, and yet succeeds in avoiding the potential pitfalls of banality or superficiality.

The short poem 'Into the Deep' is one example of the way in which deceptively simple imagery can elicit a profound response in a reader who reflects on the poet's spiritual experience, and finds that it rings true:

Such turmoil above,
such stillness below;
the stormy sea anchored
by its calm depth beneath.

After the storm,
the calm chant of the tide;
while all hope seemed lost,
down deep, my heart at peace.

The poems in this collection are not, however, limited to the rhythms of Cistercian prayer and island existence. There is a striking meditation on the theme of 'art bringing us to faith' through Gaudi's 'La Sagrada Familia' basilica in Barcelona. Perhaps more unexpectedly, Brother David also includes a thought-provokingly pessimistic reflection on the implications of a future governed by 'AI' (artificial intelligence):

When we have programmed all they need to know,
when we are no longer any use,
useless competitors for the Earth's resources,
how many of us will still be needed
to be kept as curios
in human zoos?
Why would they consider us
in their decisions?
We are deluded
if we think they will include us.

'The Survivor' is a cleverly constructed commentary on another aspect of twenty-first century life. Its subject began as something bright and attractive, 'waiting to be chosen'. It was then forced open, emptied, and thrown on a rubbish tip, but surrendered and 'went with the flow'. The apparent happy ending is subverted by the revelation of what the 'survivor' actually is:

Now safe here from all
that would engulf or crush me,
forever floating in the ocean,
a happy empty water bottle
in the middle of a mass of plastic.

The challenge caused by the increasing pollution of the seas is something of which Brother David, living on an island, is naturally very much aware.

Another twenty-first century crisis is the subject of 'The Lampedusa Cross'. Lampedusa is an Italian Mediterranean island half way between North Africa and Sicily. It is a place which attracts refugees in usually unseaworthy craft, desperately trying to reach Europe. Tragically, large numbers have drowned in the attempt. Brother David's poem is a powerful and angry description both of the plight of these migrants and the way in which affluent Europeans react towards them:

They have faced a journey
few of us could face.
This is what we fear,
that they are braver, stronger,
more resourceful than we are here.
Their crime, to have survived afloat
in a makeshift crowded boat,
at the mercy of the sea.

His concluding plea, with its telling reference to 'our inconvenient neighbour', is particularly powerful:

Who will show them love and mercy,
give them back respect,
apologise for our neglect?
Easy to talk of pressure
on jobs and housing.
It's always a bad time
to hold out a hand in charity,
to stand in solidarity
with our inconvenient neighbour.

However, Brother David's greatest strength as a poet remains his short lyrics: perfect miniatures which linger in the mind. One outstanding

example is the tenderly beautiful and moving 'Butterflies':

Young dancers partying
on Cancer Ward,
like butterflies, subtle, sensitive,
brightly clothed and fragile.

Small Holly Blue,
a Camberwell Beauty,
dancing, prancing,
so beautiful.

Fragile but free,
life so short
but worth living for.
Yes, worth living for.

Another poem that seems simple, and yet which reveals extraordinary depth as it is re-read and pondered on is 'A Winter Eucharist':

Through the window
all is virgin snow
peace and silence

In the purity of this space
entering God's time
when the Word is spoken

Becoming what we hear
Becoming what we eat
Eucharist

I once compared some of Brother David's poems to the early Welsh religious lyrics of *Llyfr Du Caerfyrddin* (The Black Book of Carmarthen), which are also reflected in the remarkable Welsh poetry of the Carmelite Father John Fitzgerald. The key element is their combination of simplicity of language and profound spirituality.

Perhaps the poem in this collection which gave (and continues to give) me the greatest pleasure is the haunting 'Night-Owl Lectio':

On a cool dark night,
in soft moonlight,
across my open window
glides a ghostly shape,
luminous, floating forward
in the silent air,
face towards me, huge eyes
like moons, wide shining,
strangely knowing,
curious, interrupting
my encounter with the Word.
We see each other,
I just sitting with the text
at wisdom's feet.

Deep Unto Deep is a book to be slowly and carefully read and returned to again and again. It is a remarkable collection by a gifted poet with a quality of insight that is all his own.

Patrick Thomas is Chancellor and Canon Librarian of St David's Cathedral, Pembrokeshire, and Vicar of Christ Church, Carmarthen. He is the author of books in both English and Welsh on a variety of religious, literary and historical subjects, and is an honorary member of the Gorsedd of Bards.

Can you help?

In 1987, at the instigation of Donald Allchin, the Rev Keith Claringbull hosted a day conference in London that was planned to be the inaugural event of the founding of the UK Thomas Merton Society. The speakers were Bill Shannon, Ken Leech, Rowan Williams and Donald Allchin. The talks were all taped. If anybody has copies of any of these tapes, or indeed a copy of a programme for the day, that they would be prepared to lend to us so that our own copies can be made to add to the Merton Collection, please contact the editor at:

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