Finding Inspiration

JAMES BARNEY HAWKINS IV*

Finding inspiration for theological reflection and the practice of ministry is all in a day’s work for clergy and lay leaders. As a parish priest and now a seminary professor, I am a constant scavenger for sources, always searching for ways to enrich and inspire my encounter with Scripture and tradition in the course of my daily ministry. I find myself often quoting poetry or referring to a novel or short story to make a point, to tell a story. In our preaching and teaching, our counseling and leading of worship, we attempt to retrieve the scripture of our own lives, to see in the ordinary and extraordinary events of our days the reality of the living and ever-present God who accompanies us on this journey. I have concluded that like many people of faith I am a “praying aesthete”—one whose prayer is inextricably bound up with the human search for art and beauty.

In that search I treasure the ardent spirits, to borrow a phrase from Reynolds Price, who inspire me—those who grace my life with their art, beauty, and words. Priests and preachers who seek to be faithful stewards of the human imagination search for inspiration from an infinite variety of sources. We never write or preach “from scratch.” Rather, we are all connected to the ardent spirits, the artful souls who enliven the imagination—the conversation partners who keep us company as we think, write, preach, and serve. Through our inherited tradition of poetry and art, sacred spaces and music, every Christian collaborates creatively with those who have gone before them, those who have been committed to that which is beautiful, lofty, and inspiring in ages past. We collaborate with poets, novelists, playwrights, writers, historians, film producers, architects, musicians, and all the artists among us.

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As Anglicans who are rooted in a tradition of incarnational theology and spiritual practice, we are always searching for what I would call a “sacramental imagination”: an imagination which reaches into the depths of God’s mission in the world, making real and tangible through art and poetic words the life of the Spirit that is invisible and hidden. The sacramental imagination emerges from an interior life which is “hidden with Christ in God” yet is also very much part of the created world. Through this imagination we are given a creative connection with others who are participating in God’s mission, often in very different ways from our own, and who are likewise searching for what it means to be made in God’s image in this world. When the human imagination becomes a sacrament—a means of grace—we speak about “finding inspiration,” about “being inspired,” about being filled with the Spirit. I have found this grace of inspiration through poetry particularly in my life of prayer, in my priestly ministry, and in my preaching.

The words and images of poets have remained a particularly vibrant and essential part of my prayer life over the years. I seem to find God most readily in the material world, in art and beauty, in nature and buildings, in this world and not the next. Prayer helps me focus my lively aesthetic sensibilities, satisfying my hunger for God even as I fully embrace the beauty of this world and the art of being human. Poets like Mary Oliver keep me company as I pray: I know what she means in her poem “Thirst” when she writes of her “love for the earth” and her love for God having a “long conversation” in her heart. I like juxtaposing her elegant words to my struggling attempt to make plain something which is essential to me. I need her help. In my prayers I travel often with Mary Oliver, as well as with Denise Levertov, W. H. Auden, T. S. Eliot, Emily Dickinson, W. B. Yeats, and the great communion of Anglican Divines. In their poems I find the words I cannot find on my own. Through their poems I can speak the words of truth and love, the praise of beauty and the anguish at suffering my heart knows and longs to articulate in the powerful words and images of the imagination.

The dour Welsh poet R. S. Thomas has also been a great collaborator for me in my life as a priest. He has helped me more than once to read the scripture of my life when I have served with limited vision and made mistakes in ministry. I am his “crippled soul,” one of the priests who is “limping through life on his prayers.” I know from
long experience the deep and painfully profound truth of human vulnerability and failure in the midst of good intentions, which Thomas captures in his poem “The Priest”:

Priests have a long way to go.
The people wait for them to come
To them over the broken glass
Of their vows.

The image of “the broken glass of their vows” gives me the words I need to understand the frailty of my priesthood and the imperfection of the church. I need such images to make sense of my life and ministry, to turn my experience of failure and inadequacy into an experience of sacramental confession and absolution. R. S. Thomas keeps me company when the night is long and cold.

I also converse with any number of poets and artists when I prepare sermons, for the words and images of poets can help convey the experience of sacramental imagination in and through my preaching. Poetry, short stories, novels, plays, movies, works of art—all give me a vocabulary to talk about the ultimate meaning of life. But the poetic imagination in particular helps me go deeper into Holy Scripture, and gives me insight into the story which is our tradition. Poets who love to capture unseen and deeply spiritual truths in simple verse and unexpected images stretch my imagination, making the reading of a poem sacramental. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says: “The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow” (Hebrews 4:12). Words have power. We know that the “living and active” Word of God became flesh, flesh of our flesh and imagination of our imagination. The words of the poets are like icons. We look into them to find God in our experience, to see God in our world.

In the words of the poets I hear echoes of the gospel, whether they are explicitly religious poems or not. I hear new and creative ways of hearing and speaking about the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord. I hear new and creative ways of hearing and speaking about the luminous presence and activity of God in our ordinary human lives. I hear new and creative ways of hearing and speaking about suffering and grief, death and loss, as well as renewal and hope. In the midst of so much that we do not understand and cannot
articulate, we lean into artists and writers as we see what it is like to live at the intersection of the divine and the human.

On Labor Day of 2010 I got the call that a friend had killed himself. He and his wife had been senior wardens in one of the parishes I served. They were “stakeholders” in that parish—people who lived their faith and cared a great deal about the common good. I could not believe the news of his death. There were no words. His family asked me to preach at his funeral. What is the assurance of our faith at such an hour? Do we really believe Romans 8, that *nothing* can “separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord”? It seems that a great deal can separate us from that love. I struggled to preach from the Word of God—knowing and believing that our story of pain and loss must find its place in God’s story of pain, loss, and victory. As I talked about my friend’s complicated life, I reminded the congregation that none of us write our own stories, even with suicide as the last desperate act. Many of them knew the popular poem “Footprints,” so I told my own story of finding “mysterious footprints in the sand” when an unseen God had carried me in the most impossible moments of my own journey, and again now in this time of my friend’s tragic death.

Yes, poets give us a vocabulary which is gracious and lively. But more importantly, they keep us company as we try to absorb the good news that God has defeated the power of sin and death in the resurrection. Poets help us testify that death does not have the last word. Poets provide us with images to open our hearts to hope when the suffering is great and the night is long.

Poets also raise our sights when our joy is complete and when there is rich meaning in the complexity and ambiguity of our lives. Poets employ words from and for the future when we are bogged down in the present. We can find ourselves overwhelmed with the human experience with its heights and depths. Alone we are not able to comprehend the transcendence and greatness of God the Trinity. Poets are artists of revelation and hope. In their own time and in their gifted ways, poets make life art and living holy. Poets practice being in the image of God—and that gives each of us courage to think, to imagine, to write, to live, and to serve. Poets are exemplars, if not sacraments, of being made in the image of God, and they inspire and give grace to our own efforts to convey the grace of God in words.
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Even though I find God in and through the poetic imagination, I am very careful not to read Christ-figures into the words and images of poets. It is dangerous to “Christianize” everything we read or encounter. No, we live with poets because we know they have the capacity to articulate more fully the God we have come to know in Jesus Christ. The poets name grace and identify goodness in ways that would escape us. They are comfortable with exploring dimensions of human experience that the church may avoid. When I find the church limited in its willingness to talk about the emotional, sexual, and material complexities of the sacrament of marriage, for example, I turn to Denise Levertov. In her poem “Face to Face” she writes with great power and simplicity of “our flesh / of stone and velvet” plunging into the “deep river” of intimate connection. This is not something the Book of Common Prayer helps us with. Poets are free to explore the construct of sacraments and love the divine-human encounter in ways which transform and inspire.

Poets live near the heart of God and they take me to that place where God is and where I am most myself. I travel with the poets and preach from and with them because I could not bear this pilgrimage without them. My words need the company of their words. I find myself when I am finding inspiration from the artists and poets who speak to me, even as God speaks to me the fullness of God’s love in Jesus Christ, dividing “soul from spirit, joints from marrow.” I give thanks often for the artful souls who keep making the Eternal Word flesh each new day.