

Contents

Preface	vii
Introduction	xi
Faith and Grace	1
Hope and Perseverance	25
Love and Forgiveness	51
Justice and Peace	73
Continuing Your Prayer With Poetry	99
Brief Biographies of Poets	105
Credits	115
Index of First Lines	121
Index of Authors	125

Introduction

And the Word became flesh.

JOHN 1:14



WITH THESE POETIC WORDS, the Scriptures announce that God, the origin of life, took on physical human life as Jesus of Nazareth. In the streets of Jerusalem and the shores of the sea of Galilee, God's kingdom was revealed as Jesus shared meals, forgave, healed, and invited. His death by crucifixion led to his resurrection and God's victory over the silence and isolation of death. God's kingdom continues to come when men and women forgive, reconcile, and work for peace amid discord and injustice, but to live in this way requires more than goodwill.

In a society in which many voices compete for our time, talent, and treasure, human needs and wants can become ends in themselves. Yet amid all the accumulation and accomplishment, a hunger remains. After many years, people realize their spiritual anxiety can be quieted only by something beyond, yet within reach

of, each of them. This is when we feel the call or invitation to probe deeper into the Mystery of life.

Poetry expresses human stories in their essence, which may be why it can open our hearts to God. Poets tell stories about citizens who find community in a time of loss and about justice in the face of poverty. Poets gather joy, beauty, sorrow, and bitterness and communicate their overall mystery in the fewest words possible.

Poets don't pull punches or shade the truth. They write about war, lost opportunities, peace, and courage. They teach about honesty, hard work, and sacrificing for a greater good. Most important, poets remind us we are connected to each other, to nature, and to God.

A poem's message is often not immediately evident, and absorbing it may require you to keep a calm mind as the day's demands hammer on. But after meditating on a poem, you will find the images staying with you throughout the day. Memorize the poem, and the lines will be with you long after you put the book away.

There is no correct order in which to pray and meditate on these poems; only your soul can say what is most important to you at any moment. These poems are for those who want to go beyond the formula of familiar prayers and let the flow and images of poems challenge

them to listen in a new way. And this *will* happen—a good poem often holds opposites in tension, like the words in John’s Gospel, “And the Word became flesh.”



When should you use these poems? Read one at night before bed or to finish your morning prayers. Meditate on a poem before Mass. Take this book on vacation or on a hike through the woods; take it to work and reflect on a poem during lunch. Follow your feelings, and you will soon find a poem that will make a difference to you, that will become like an old friend, calling you back to its company again and again.

How can you use a poem as a meditation or prayer? Read one aloud, slowly. Read it again, aloud, and a few minutes later do the same. Slow down as you read it; let the message of each line build on the previous lines. Let the message of each stanza build on the next. Listen for the message beneath or behind the written and spoken words, and be sensitive to the placement of those words. Poems use imagery—sometimes symbolic and other times direct—and the significance of the poem can lie within the meter and phrasing.

Group readings can open the meaning of a poem in a way that enriches everyone. Participants actively

listen to each reading, letting the image or phrase sink into their hearts. After several moments of quiet, someone may share what they heard and relate it to an event or insight about faith, justice, or a loving act. Poetry is often easier to understand when we read it ourselves, but when we listen to someone else read a poem we grow as we reach beyond ourselves to listen.

When one enters the words of a poem, there is a loss of control as contradictions come together: a place of rest in a world of change, a persecutor as a promoter of justice, a man of great wealth with an empty heart.

The poets in this book carry their experiences of life into their writings. They reflect on the struggles and joys of life and, in many instances, plainly express their faith. Others tuck their spirituality into the edges and corners of their work. A few shed light on the harshness that can happen in the world, for God is revealed as much in suffering as in glorious depictions of nature.

May this book give men and women the chance to hear the stirrings of their hearts put into words. It is our hope that this practice can help each person connect with the Mystery that is beyond us, yet within reach.

GRETCHEN L. SCHWENKER

MATHEW J. KESSLER

This World is not Conclusion

This World is not Conclusion.

A Species stands beyond –

Invisible, as Music –

But positive, as Sound –

It beckons, and it baffles –

Philosophy – don't know –

And through a Riddle, at the last –

Sagacity, must go –

To guess it, puzzles scholars –

To gain it, Men have borne

Contempt of Generations

And Crucifixion, shown –

Faith slips – and laughs, and rallies –

Blushes, if any see –

Plucks at a twig of Evidence –

And asks a Vane, the way –

Much Gesture, from the Pulpit –

Strong Hallelujahs roll –

Narcotics cannot still the Tooth

That nibbles at the soul –

EMILY DICKINSON

The Church of a Dream

Sadly the dead leaves rustle in the whistling wind,
Around the weather-worn, grey church, low down the vale:
The Saints in golden vesture shake before the gale;
The glorious windows shake, where still
 they dwell enshrined;
Old Saints by long-dead, shrivelled hands,
 long since designed:
There still, although the world autumnal be, and pale,
Still in their golden vesture the old Saints prevail;
Alone with Christ, desolate else, left by mankind.
Only one ancient Priest offers the Sacrifice,
Murmuring holy Latin immemorial:
Swaying with tremulous hands the old censer full of spice,
In grey, sweet incense clouds; blue, sweet clouds mystical:
To him, in place of men, for he is old, suffice
 Melancholy remembrances and vesperal.

LIONEL JOHNSON

God's Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS

A Meeting

In a dream I meet
my dead friend. He has,
I know, gone long and far,
and yet he is the same
for the dead are changeless.
They grow no older.
It is I who have changed,
grown strange to what I was.
Yet I, the changed one,
ask: "How you been?"
He grins and looks at me.
"I been eating peaches
off some mighty fine trees."

WENDELL BERRY

Brief Biographies of Poets

Anna Akhmatova (1889–1966) Known for maintaining her artistic integrity during Stalin’s dictatorship, this distinctively Russian poet (born near Odessa, Ukraine) is known for her clear, precise writing. Her poetry was banned for many years. Her poem “Crucifixion,” from her work *Requiem*, attests to Stalin’s reign of terror, which included the imprisonment and/or execution of her son, two husbands, and close friends.

Wendell Berry (1934–) From Kentucky, where his family has farmed for at least five generations, Wendell Berry still has his own farm. His poetry, essays, novels, and short stories reflect his Christian faith and sense of stewardship for God’s creation. Berry emphasizes our interconnectedness and gives voice to human loss and the passage of time.

Emily Brontë (1818–1848) A clergyman's daughter, Brontë grew up in the parsonage at Haworth, Yorkshire. She is best known for her novel *Wuthering Heights*. She and her sisters, Charlotte and Anne, published a book of poems under male names to avoid prejudice against women. Her work is both mystical and reflective of the harsh beauty of her home region. Emily Dickinson so loved Brontë's poetry that she requested "Last Lines" to be read at her funeral.

Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) This reclusive poet spent most of her life at her home in Amherst, Massachusetts. During her lifetime, she published only seven of about two thousand poems, the rest of which were published after her death. Dickinson never married. However, it was the men in her life, especially Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who helped her realize her poetic gift, although Higginson felt her poems were "not strong enough to publish." Her poetry often touches on the themes of living and dying.

D. M. Dolben (1848–1867) English poet Digby Mackworth Dolben attended Eton College, where he veered from his Protestant roots and considered becoming Roman Catholic, even claiming allegiance to the Benedictine order. At age seventeen he met Gerard Manley Hopkins, who wrote two poems for him. His life was cut short when he accidentally drowned at age nineteen. His poetry was published after death.