

## **The Honest Trek of R.S. Thomas**

*A sermon delivered at Hatfield College chapel, Durham, Easter Term, 2009*

### **Job 38, 1-11 (New International Version)**

Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm. He said:  
"Who is this that darkens my counsel  
with words without knowledge?  
Brace yourself like a man;  
I will question you,  
and you shall answer me.  
"Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?  
Tell me, if you understand.  
Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!  
Who stretched a measuring line across it?  
On what were its footings set,  
or who laid its cornerstone-  
while the morning stars sang together  
and all the angels shouted for joy?  
"Who shut up the sea behind doors  
when it burst forth from the womb,  
when I made the clouds its garment  
and wrapped it in thick darkness,  
when I fixed limits for it  
and set its doors and bars in place,  
when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther;  
here is where your proud waves halt'?"

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### **Matthew 6: 1-8 (New International Version)**

"Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.

"So when you give to the needy, do not announce it with trumpets, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be honored by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

"And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you. And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.

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**This sermon began** with the question: what is a Christian, and what is Christianity? But I may as well have asked: what is a human, and what is humanity? It was clear that I would have to narrow my subject.

I do not think that Christianity is a simple solution. When Jesus is asked by a lawyer, “what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus replies with a question of his own: “what is written in the law? How do *you* read it?” The lawyer must look within his own mind in order to answer his question: and of course he already knew the answer anyway. This story, from Luke, tells me that we must look for answers in our own questions, and not merely rely on external sources the whole time, as if God was Wikipedia. The Bible can tell us many things; there are some things that it cannot directly tell us, because they cannot be put into words.

The Welsh poet R.S. Thomas tried to put some of the indescribable nature of God into words, and his poetry has had a large influence on what Christianity is for me. Thomas was not a conventional Christian – whatever a conventional Christian is. This is a man who wrote: “life is too short for religion<sup>1</sup>” – an alarming statement for a Christian, but even more alarming for a vicar. Yet vicars are people as well – and it is as human being that R.S. Thomas wrote his poetry, not as a vicar. This he kept separate, pushing the Church’s views in his sermons, but keeping out his own ideas.

I, on the other hand, am not a vicar, but a student, and free to voice Thomas’ views in this sermon: not to preach them as a doctrine, but simply to show them as one approach to Christian ideas. It may not be a conventional approach, but they are as Christian as anything that is officially approved of. The tension between what he preached and what he felt was part of Thomas being Christian. “I like the challenge,” he said, “to make sense of Christianity.”<sup>2</sup> In one early poem, Thomas reflects on religious service, and his role in it. This is called “Service”:

We stand looking at  
Each other. I take the word ‘prayer’  
And present it to them. I wait idly,  
Wondering what their lips will  
Make of it. But they hand back  
Such presents. I am left alone  
With no echoes of the amen  
I dreamed of. I am saved by music  
From the emptiness of this place  
Of despair. As the melody rises  
From nothing, their mouths take up the tune,  
And the roof listens. I call on God  
In the after silence, and my shadow  
Wrestles with him upon a wall  
Of plaster, that has all the nation’s  
Hardness in it. They see me thrown  
Without movement of their oblique eyes.<sup>3</sup>

The only action that matters in this poem is internal. Prayers are handed back unopened by the mind, and songs are sung by the mouth alone. C. G. Jung wrote of “the shadow” as part of our unconscious minds, made up of weaknesses and instincts that we purposefully try to ignore. In the service described, the closest experience of God is performed with this type of shadow, let out in the silent parts of the ceremony. Sometimes the parts of a service when nothing happens are also the parts of the service when everything happens. *When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.* This meeting with

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<sup>1</sup> “No Answer,” *Collected Poems: 1945-1990* (London: Dent, 1993) 214.

<sup>2</sup> Byron Rogers, *The Man Who Went Into the West: The life of R.S. Thomas* (London: Aurum, 2006) 11.

<sup>3</sup> “Service,” *Collected Poems*, 174.

God is internal, not external. What is that we are actually hoping to achieve with this: the music, the prayers, all of us sitting like this, waiting for something. Why are we all gathered here tonight? Are we hoping that God will come crashing in through the window like Tom Cruise on a zip-wire? Thomas speaks of this desire in the poem “The Empty Church.”

They laid this stone trap  
for him, enticing him with candles,  
as though he would come like some huge moth  
out of the darkness to beat there.  
Ah, he had burned himself  
before in the human flame  
and escaped, leaving the reason  
torn. He will not come any more  
to our lure. Why, then, do I kneel still  
striking my prayers on a stone  
heart? Is it in hope one  
of them will ignite yet and throw  
on its illumined walls the shadow  
of someone greater than I can understand?

Notice the gap. We can't understand God anymore than an ant can understand us. God speaks to Job, but he speaks “out of the storm,” and He furthermore tells Job that he cannot fully understand His character. There is a gap. There is always a gap.

And in the book I read:  
God is love. But lifting  
my head, I do not find it so.<sup>4</sup>

This is as honest as Job. *How painful are honest words!*

Thomas said: “If you see a bird of prey, its great beauty and speed, how much more beautiful it is than its prey, how do you equate that with the God of love?”<sup>5</sup> William Blake saw the splendour of God in the majesty of the free tiger; but Thomas sees the other side of God in a trapped tiger. “It was beautiful as God/Must be beautiful” but with “A body too huge for the cage in which/It has been put.” As a result the tiger in this poem breathes “as you can imagine that/God breathes within the confines/Of our definition of him.” The God of mere theology is:

Crumbled in their dry  
minds in the long sentences  
of their chapters, gathering dust  
in their libraries [...]<sup>6</sup>

– Not really God at all. It is no wonder that “life is too short for religion,” if that is what religion means.

Rather than try to pin God down to a tangible presence, that we can trap and manipulate to our will, Thomas instead describes God as “that great absence/in our lives, the empty silence/Within.” We cannot record God with words anymore than we could film Him

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<sup>4</sup> “Which,” *Collected Poems*, 297.

<sup>5</sup> Byron Rogers, 11.

<sup>6</sup> “The God,” *Mass for Hard Times*, 26.

on tape: but we have His absence that is felt so strongly that it is like a presence. The silence that meets Thomas on the other side of prayer leads him to feel the invisible power that catches him by the sleeve.<sup>7</sup>

The most effective description I can use for R.S. Thomas is “honest.” He was a riddle of contradictions which were a natural part of his honest character. Some say that he was a kindly and attentive vicar, but it is also said that he vaulted church walls after funeral services, leaving mourners standing at the grave. He wore the dog collar and preached the Church’s views, but once he retired he burnt his cassocks on the beach, and then he wrote his poetry.

It has struck me that I should be honest as well. I cannot pretend that there is not a natural great gulf between myself and the infinite creator of space and time, who set the cornerstone of the world and shut the sea behind its doors. It would be arrogant to say otherwise. But because I am so aware of that gap, I know that there must be a presence on the other side of it; and even the largest gulfs can be crossed with the right bridge.

There does not appear to be a way to fill that gap in R.S. Thomas’ poetry, but then it is not the role of poetry to present answers. Thomas is rather pointing out the difficult nature of God, and our divide from him, saying: “look. It is there. This is what it is to be human.”

Jesus said “no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” He is the bridge towards God: but Jesus did not say that the road would be easy. Sometimes it can be a personal trek. There is no ski-lift to Heaven. Sometimes we can be helped along the way by services such as this. But we must also be honest – even if we would rather not.

God may appear to hide. He is certainly mysterious. Thomas was honest about this mystery, grappling with God’s apparent absence. But as well as all the poems of doubt and anguish, there are also poems of praise:

I praise you because  
you are artist and scientist  
in one. When I am somewhat  
fearful of your power,  
your ability to work miracles  
with a set-square, I hear  
you murmuring to yourself  
in a notation Beethoven  
dreamed of but never achieved.  
You run off your scales of  
rain water and sea water, play  
the chords of the morning  
and evening light, sculpture  
with shadow, join together leaf  
by leaf, when spring  
comes, the stanzas of  
an immense poem. You speak  
all languages and none,  
answering our most complex  
prayers with the simplicity  
of a flower, confronting  
us, when we would domesticate you

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<sup>7</sup> “The Presence,” *Collected Poems*, 391.

to our uses, with the rioting  
viruses under our lens.<sup>8</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> "Praise," *Collected Poems*, 318.