

Good morning:

Monday, June 12, 2023

I'll be leaving in a few hours for Wales via initially a day or so in Ireland to attend the RS Thomas & ME Eldridge Poetry and Arts Festival in the Welsh coastal village of Aberdaron where he was vicar of the Anglican parish there and his wife, Elsi, was an artist.

Here's a link to the Festival (with some interesting videos):

<https://rsthomaspoetry.co.uk/>

Aberdaron is at the end of the Llyn Peninsula (across it is Bardsey Island -the site of a 6th century monastery, also called the "island of 20, 000 saints" – there is apparently little left of the monastery at this point – although pilgrimages are still made there).



In yesterday's sermon as we remembered the continuation of Pentecost in the celebration of the Feast of All Saints, I tried to explore the image presented in the liturgical texts of the "chosen disciples through faith became instruments of the Spirit."

R.S. Thomas, in his Introduction to the Penguin Book of Religious Verse which he edited, said:

"The nearest we approach to God is as creative beings (here he is paraphrasing the poet, Coleridge). The poet by echoing the primary imagination recreates."

He speaks of poets, but of course, the implication is that this ability to "recreate" is possible for everyone.

I am interested in how all of us – given our talents, abilities, and circumstances – whether we are poets

or not – can also be “instruments of the Spirit” and “creative beings” in whatever it is that we are called to do.

Below are the two poems by Thomas that I shared in the sermon.

As I’ve been preparing for this trip, I worked through his volume of Collected Poems and chose those which have a certain meaning for me now – there will no doubt be others that will need to be added to this collection later.

Finally, as we pray for those who travel by land, sea, and through the air I welcome your prayers for me and all those who will be traveling from wherever to attend this Conference, assuming as always that there are “no accidental meetings.”

In thinking of that petition, I am reminded that Thomas especially loved places where the land, sea, and sky came together: Aberdaron seemed to have been the place where this happened in a special way for him. So, in a sense, the means of getting to a place can bring us both to the destination, but also can become the sources for understanding the meaning of the journey.

At least – that's what I hope.

Fr. John

Praise (CP, 318, 1977)

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
to our uses, with the rioting
viruses under our lens.

Groping (1978)

Moving away is only to the boundaries
of the self. Better to stay here,
I said, leaving the horizons
clear. The best journey to make
is inward. It is the interior
that calls. Eliot heard it.
Wordsworth turned from the great hills
of the north to the precipice
of his own mind, and let himself
down for the poetry stranded
on the bare ledges.

For some
it is all darkness; for me, too,
it is dark. But there are hands
there I can take, voices to hear
solider than the echoes
without. And sometimes a strange light
shines, purer than the moon,
casting no shadow, that is
the halo upon the bones
of the pioneers who died for truth.

June 25, 2023

Good morning:

This week I'll be sharing some reflections and images from my recent trip to the RS Thomas and ME Eldridge Poetry and Arts Festival in Aberdaron, Wales.



St. Hywyn's Church, Aberdaron, Wales

<https://rsthomaspoetry.co.uk/>

In yesterday's Sermon I began by exploring the nature of anxiety and travel.

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The Anxiety of Travel on the Way to the Kingdom

Sunday, June 25, 2023

Gospel: **Matthew 6:22-34**

Summary:

- 1) In today's Gospel, Jesus mentions six times about the need NOT to be anxious or worry.
- 2) Every journey can contain within it a certain level of anxiety or apprehension. For me it represents the movement from stability to disorientation and then hopefully – reorientation: knowing where you are, not knowing where you are, and finally discovering the riches and possibilities of being in a "new" place.

But sometimes the fear of this movement can prevent us from ever going on the journey.

- 3) From the perspective of a journey – no matter our initial intent – it is not just to a specific or geographic place that we are heading, but rather to the identification of a deeper place in our own being, within our hearts: the destination is “first the kingdom of God” within us (Mt.6 33; Luke 17:21).

The Denver Nuggets basketball player, **Nikola Jokić**, whose team recently won the NBA championship for the first time in 47 years, said about the complicated process that can lead to success:

"I think experience is something that is not what happened to you.
It's what you're going to do with what happened to you."

All of a journey's moments and details may have a particular importance and provide certain memories – both good and bad – but the questions eventually emerge:

What are we going to do with what has happened to us?
Where are we now?

- 4) In the poem, “**Prey**,” R.S. Thomas affirms that while we might imagine that we are searching or waiting to discover God's presence, it is – in fact – God who is searching for us. We become

“the prey
of for all time the most
compassionate of raptors.”

- 5) My poem, “**On Getting and Being Here**,” explores the uncertain ambiguities and anxieties of travel – on any level – with the images as observed from the area above R.S. Thomas's retirement home Sarn Plas, where it was written, celebrating that in the end “there is something more to make of it all.”

- 6) It was shared at the Festival gathering.



Bards Around the Fire

Malcolm Guite, Phil Bowen, & members of the poetry workshops

19:30 – 21:00 £7

Celtic Roundhouse, Felin Uchaf, LL53 8HS

Limit:40 people

Malcolm & Phil with the writers from their creative writing workshops will share their poetry and words, accompanied by Dafydd on harp in the unique setting of the Celtic Roundhouse, evocative of the Bardic tradition of Wales. www.felinwales.org

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7) Below is Malcolm Guite's Review of the Festival.

POET'S CORNER

At a festival in Wales, **Malcolm Guite** explores poetic riches in two of the country's jewels

I AM writing this from Aberdaron in the beautiful Llyn peninsula, where I have come to take part in the annual R. S. Thomas and M. E. Eldridge Poetry and Arts Festival. I led some poetry workshops, culminating in a reading of what had been written that day. The watchword I had given my group for the day was: "Begin the song exactly where you are." We were to write with a rooted, particular, incarnate sense of place.

We couldn't have chosen a better place in which to begin that endeavour, for our first session took place in Sarn Plas, the tiny white cottage to which R. S. Thomas retired when he ceased to be Vicar of St Hywyn's, Aberdaron. It is a low white cottage nestled into the hillside, overlooking a bay and with glorious mountain views beyond, the views of which R. S. Thomas wrote:

In Wales there are jewels
To gather, but with the eye

Only. A hill lights up
Suddenly; a field trembles
With colour and goes out
In its turn; in one day
You can witness the extent
Of the spectrum and grow rich
With looking.

We did "grow rich with looking", and some, at least, of those riches found their way into writing.

But, if the start of our day was in one of the jewels of Wales, our evening reading was in another; for we gathered in the Celtic Roundhouse in Felin Uchaf. It is an extraordinary place. Built up over the past 18 years, it describes itself as a "cultural and eco-centre", a cluster of buildings of wood and turf and thatch, not a straight line or a hard angle in sight, but all rounded and curved, all interior beams carved and garlanded with inscriptions of poetry, everything naturally bedded in and arising from the landscape in which it is set.

Parts of it would certainly give you a sense of a Celtic settlement in the sixth century, but it also felt like a wonderful cross between Hobbiton and Lothlórien. The roundhouse in which we read seemed and, indeed, was bigger on the inside than the outside; for, from without, you saw the conical thatched roof rising from surrounding greenery, which covered some of its walls, as

though the house were growing out of the greenery itself; but, inside, its walls and floor had been dug out more widely from the slight slope in which it nestled.

There was a central fire pit beneath the cone of the thatch, and benches were set in widening circles from around that centre. It was like the *ban-hus* that Heaney celebrates in his poem "Bone Dreams":

In the coffered
riches of grammar
and declensions
I found *ban-hus*,

its fire, benches,
wattle and rafters,
where the soul
fluttered a while

in the roofspace.

Heaney deftly alludes in that poem to the passage in Bede in which a sparrow flits for a moment through the roofspace of just such a hall, and is likened to our own soul. Astonishingly, during our recitations, a swallow did just that, flitting in under the thatch eaves at one end of the roundhouse, enchanting us for a moment, and flying out through the other. There couldn't have been a better place to recite poetry.

Prey

by R.S. Thomas

Grateful always
 that not always
nor often, but that
 at times he came.
This in one known
 primarily for
his absence was
 to a poor man riches
beyond call, a pearl,
 discovered in the soul's
shallows, to sell everything
 to possess; this
the reward for disciplining
 the tongue, for waiting
upon silence, for pausing
 to ask why the heart
loitered when acceleration
 was the rule. Thinking
to lie in wait, I
 was laid in wait
for, and praying
 I was made the prey
of for all time the most
 compassionate of raptors.



On Getting and Being Here

by Fr. John

Aberdaron/Sarn Plas, Wales (R.S. Thomas's Retirement Home)

June 16, 2023

The need to know in advance,
the fear of the false step,
the wrong word,
the uncertain turn and movement,
the tangled loose ends,
the exhausting preparations for all possibilities,
can keep you close to home,
close to the predictable, reliable, and
comfortable place and path.

Yet the view from the top,
the pushing and pulling of the cleansing
sounds,
the single boat,
the hills and mountains,
whose lightly sketched forms are elusive
and fading away,
confirm not just that you are here,
or the reality of that which has happened,
but celebrate that there is something more
to make of it all.



Good morning:

We'll celebrate the Feast of the Apostles Peter and Paul this evening with a Vespertine Liturgy at 7 PM.

1) AN "APOSTLE" IS ONE WHO WILL BE "SENT OUT." This Feast marks the end of God's annual effort in Jesus and through the Holy Spirit— which began, in a sense, on the first of the Lenten Preparatory Sundays – to prepare us all in the ways most appropriate for each of us to be sent out, to become "through faith instruments of the Holy Spirit" – to identify our possibilities as apostles.

But of course it is not the end, but the beginning of God's efforts. Since the Feast of Pentecost – the time when we celebrate the Gift of the Holy Spirit – we measure our days in the "Sundays after Pentecost" – in the time of the Spirit. This week will be the Fourth Sunday.

2) **THE SHAPE OF THE SPIRIT WORKING IN US:** I often feel that the Christian life and the work of the Holy Spirit have a complementary movement and shape: something like an oval or a wave – a going out and coming back – each time being pushed out a little farther and returning a little deeper within.

The community of St. Hywyn's Church (pronounced - "Howen") in Aberdaron, Wales which dates from the early 500s was R.S. Thomas's last parish. The structure, located at the edge of the land and sea, was built in the 1100s and expanded in 1400s. At one point in the 1800's without a sea wall it was felt that the building would be destroyed by the water and was abandoned. A new church was built farther inland, but it was ultimately felt to be too far out of town and a sea wall was built and the parish returned to St. Hywyn's.

The most lasting surprise for me from my trip was the continuous sound of waves that could be heard within St. Hywyn's (Howen's) Church in Aberdaron throughout the services I attended there.

Thomas frequently returns to the sound of the waves in his poetry. I now understand that he not only heard it as he walked along the beach or saw the waves from the view of his retirement home, but it was present with and for him – constantly in his experiences of prayer and worship within St. Hywyn's: it was filling him all of the time.

I imagine the sound of the waves and the elliptical shape of the Spirit to work as a means of cleansing, of healing, and of expanding our spiritual awareness both outwardly and inwardly.

For Thomas the image of the wave provides a eucharistic context:

The breaking of the wave
outside echoed the breaking
of the bread in his hands.

But the repetitive sounds which he heard through the night, reminds him of both of prayer and of God also being awake and his

"letting our prayers break on him,
not like this for a few hours,
but for days, years, for eternity."

Fr. John

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The breaking of the wave
outside echoed the breaking
of the bread in his hands.

The crying of the sea-gulls
was the cry from the Cross:
Lama Sabachthani. He lifted

the chalice, that crystal
which love questioning is love
blinded with excess of light.

[from his collection: *The Echoes Return Slow*]

The Other

There are nights that are so still
that I can hear the small owl
calling
far off and a fox barking
miles away. It is then that I lie
in the lean hours awake listening
to the swell born somewhere in
the Atlantic
rising and falling, rising and
falling
wave on wave on the long shore
by the village that is without
light
and companionless. And the
thought comes
of that other being who is
awake, too,
letting our prayers break on him,
not like this for a few hours,
but for days, years, for eternity.

June 29, 2023

Yesterday I shared some thoughts about Aberdaron and the image and sounds of waves that were ever-present in the spiritual life and work of R.S. Thomas.

1) **BARDSEY ISLAND:** The one place I was especially interested in seeing was Bardsey Island which I imagined at least from maps as being visible from Aberdaron. But, unfortunately, the peninsula blocked the view and it would have required a several hour walk to reach a viewing point.

But, something unexpected worked out at the last minute, and I'll share that at the end of this reflection.

Bardsey Island is only two miles from the mainland. During the 5th century it became a refuge for persecuted Christians and a small Celtic monastery was established. St. Cadfan arrived from Brittany in 516 and, under his guidance, St. Mary's Abbey was built. For centuries the island was important as "the holy place of burial for all the bravest and best in the land." Bards called it "the land of indulgences, absolution and pardon, the road to Heaven, and the gate to Paradise," and in medieval times three pilgrimages to Bardsey Island were considered to be of equivalent benefit to the soul as one to Rome.

Many people went there as the pilgrimage towards the end of their lives.

It has been called "the island of 20,000 saints."

The English name, "Bardsey" suggests the "the island of the Bards," but the Welsh name, "Ynys Enlli" means, "the island of tides, or in the current."

Aberdaron was the last site for the pilgrims to receive lodging and support, and there was a particular well along the way to the boat at which the pilgrims longed to stop. I learned, as well, that there is an important even pre-Christian history to the connection between Welsh pilgrimages and wells (which moves from a practical to spiritual significance).

The Dissolution of the Lesser Monasteries Act of 1536, on the orders of Henry VIII, resulted in St Mary's Abbey being dissolved and its buildings demolished in 1537, and some parts of buildings were brought to other places.

Yet, though people still make the journey, it is not always easy to get there – or to return easily. I would have loved to have gone, but I could not risk getting stuck.

The island was declared a national nature reserve in 1986, and is part of Aberdaron Coast and Bardsey Island Special Protection Area. It is now a favorite bird-watching location, on the migration routes of thousands of birds, including puffins which I would have loved to see.



Bardsey became the first site in Europe to receive the designation of an International Dark Sky Sanctuary, joining just 16 other sites in the world.

As I was about to leave Aberdaron, I mentioned to my new friend, Peter, who was providing a ride to the train station that seeing Bardsey Island was one thing still in my “bucket list.” He replied, “So, let’s go and look at it before we leave.”



And so we did:

2) **THE VERACIUS AND SENACUS STONES:** These burial markers for two fifth century Christian priests with connections to the Bardsey monastic community were found in the 18th century at a nearby farm and are located within the Church of St. Hywyn in Aberdaron.



2) **SAINT MAELRHYS'S CHURCH:** R.S. Thomas also served a small church located just outside of Aberdaron called, "Saint Maelrhys" (the only one in the United Kingdom dedicated to this saint, a cousin to both St. Cadfan and St. Hywyn who accompanied them to Wales from Brittany). Much of the church is medieval; the font dates back to the 15th century.



It is in this cemetery that his wife, Elsi and their only child and son, Gwydion, are buried.

R.S. later remarried and is buried elsewhere – although there is currently an effort to bring his remains here.

As in most of the churches in this area, there is not much imagery, but I was moved by this view from the altar that R.S. would have observed as he served the mass.



3) **THE SMALL WINDOW:** Finally, this is from R.S.'s retirement home, "Sarn Plas, Rhiw" where from this spot it was felt that he wrote his poem, "**The Small Window.**"



The Small Window

by R.S. Thomas

In Wales there are jewels
To gather, but with the eye
Only. A hill lights up
Suddenly; a field trembles
With colour and goes out
In its turn; in one day
You can witness the extent
Of the spectrum and grow rich
With looking. Have a care;
The wealth is for the few
And chosen. Those who crowd
A small window dirty it
With their breathing, though sublime
And inexhaustible the view.

June 30, 2023

Good morning:

1) **ONE MORE REFLECTION ON BARDSEY ISLAND:** Here is R.S. Thomas's description of his first trip to Bardsey which he made in the early 1950s with his wife, Elsi, and son, Gwydion.

I like the response of the boatsman, Wil Evans, to the question on the return trip about the increasingly frightening conditions: "Is this all right, Will?" Will looked at him and spat, "It'll get worse soon," he said dryly. And worse it was.

R.S. Thomas's First Trip to Bardsey Island
(from his autobiography: **Neb** ("No-One"))

Having said goodbye to their new friends, the Thomases went on to Aberdaron to catch the small boat to Bardsey. Will Evans was the boatsman and within the hour he was ready to start from the beach. There was quite a crowd wanting to cross with their belongings, and Will also brought the cattle-boat, to share the load. Unfortunately, while they were busy loading the boats, the cattle-boat was taken by the current and was holed by one of the rocks. No-one was sure how serious this was, so they started, with Y Benlli pulling the other boat.

The rector (Thomas) and his son (Gwydion) and some others were in the cattle-boat, and they hadn't gone far before the water began to rise in it. Signals were made to draw Wil's attention, and he started to head for Port Meudwy. By the time they got there the water had nearly reached the gunwale, to the point where it was a miracle that the boat didn't sink. In Y Borth they set about putting a patch over the hole, and away they went again. It was, mercifully, a fine afternoon and everyone arrived safely.

But alas! When people started to unload the cattle-boat, it was found that everything was soaking wet. The sea had got into the boxes and the food tins, and it was all ruined; the bread was like porridge, and the fruit and sugar and so on a sight to be seen. Wil had to cross again the next day to fetch replacements. But after the trouble everyone settled down to have two weeks' holiday in a unique place, and to learn something about the birds that went past and the ones that were drawn by the lighthouse on stormy nights. There was another boy staying at the observatory and Gwydion got on well with him, both pretending that they were famous ornithologists.

The two weeks passed quickly enough and the Saturday came when they had to return to the mainland. Unfortunately the wind was quite fresh and the rector doubted whether it would be possible to cross. He went to Ty Pelf to ask Will, "Are you going to cross today?" Wil spat, looked up at the sky and said, "I'll give it a go." Cold comfort for an inexperienced man like the rector. What if he failed? Would he be able to turn the boat around and come back?

They left the small bay and began to struggle across the sea. The boat began to jump like a billy goat and wave after wave washed over it. One of the party, who had come with his newly wedded wife, took fright. "Is this all right, Will?" he asked. Wil looked at him and spat again. "It'll get worse soon," he said dryly. And worse it was. The little boat floundered in the big wave for an hour or more, creeping slowly over Bardsey Sound; and the lad at the helm had to slow down now and again to avoid hitting a

big wave full in its face and perhaps filling the boat. The rector became worried at the thought that he had put his wife and child in danger like this. But, of course, unknown to him, Will was accustomed to such a crossing and was quite used to getting loaded to the skin.

At last Porth Meudwy came into view once again, and the party landed, more thankful than ever before in their lives. As he said goodbye to Will, the rector felt that he would never again risk it. But despite that he went many times again, until he knew every corner of this enchanting little island.

2) THE ART OF BEING A FLANEUR – AN IDLE STROLLER – IN DUBLIN:

I began and ended my journey in Dublin – connected to Wales and the port city of Holyhead (pronounced: “Hollyhead”), Wales by the Irish Ferry. On the way out I was on the “Ulysses”



which is appropriate because it was near the time of the celebration in Dublin of James Joyce’s novel,



Ulysses which was to have taken place on one day: June 16 (now known as “Bloomsday”). I recently saw an article in the NY Times entitled, “The Art of Being a Flâneur” (an idle stroller) and Dublin is a great wandering city.

Fortunately, I had two chances to get lost and find my way again and around: here are some scenes from what I found along the way.

The Liffey River runs through the city and is crossed by many bridges. Sometimes I just walked back and forth across the bridges.

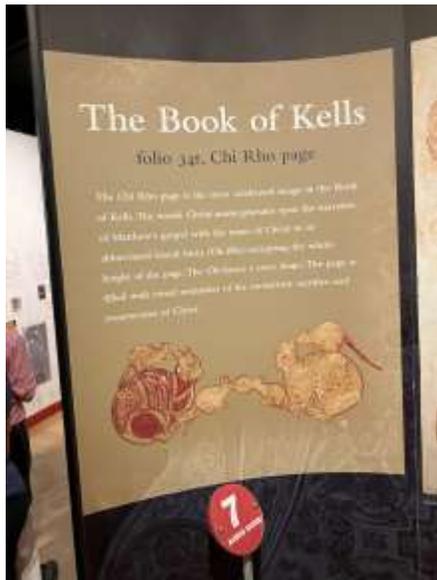


I was happy to learn about the work of Jack Yeats (brother of the poet, W.B. Yeats). Here is his painting at the National Gallery, “The Liffey Swim” (1923) – a scene of competitive swimming races in the river.

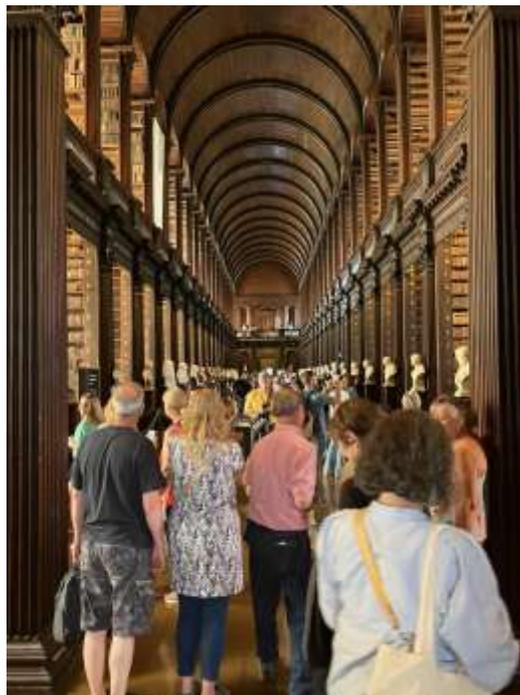


I stayed in the center of town, near Trinity College, which allowed easy access to the Book of Kells (the illuminated Gospel manuscript, believed to have been created around 800 and having a connection to the Iona community in Scotland). The exhibit was very interesting, but unfortunately we were able to

see only 1 page of the actual book – which is replaced every few weeks (and we weren't allowed to photograph it).



The end of the tour leads into the Long Room of the Old Library, which is being renovated – each of the



more than 200,000 books is being cleaned and the library is being updated for safety purposes.

The Long Room also contains one of the most famous harps in Ireland – The Trinity College harp, also known as "Brian Boru's harp." It is dated to the 14th or 15th century and was used as a model for the coat of arms of Ireland and for the trade-mark of Guinness stout (which as Dan McGowan told me from his recent trip here – “tastes much better in Ireland.”



I always enjoy attending the Anglican service, Evensong (a kind of Vespers). Here in Dublin it was at



the Christ Church Cathedral:



Finally, I managed to discover or remember where there were some excellent gift, pastry, and chocolate shops – as well as a few dining areas.

Here's the last morning:

