

RACHEL BOULDING



Companions
on the
Bethlehem Road

BRF CENTENARY CLASSICS



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on the Bethlehem Road



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This book is dedicated to my mother,
Joyce Boulding,
for everything, really.

With thanks
to those who have generously donated
towards the costs of this project

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Introduction

What poets can show us

*And here in dust and dirt, O here
The lilies of His love appear!*

From 'The Revival' by Henry Vaughan (1621–95)

'It's been a journey.' I'm told that this has become the standard reflection of TV talent – and reality-show contestants to describe the change in their life – going from being one among thousands of hopeful performers to becoming a star (for a few minutes, at least). The idea of life as a journey is around everywhere you go. It's an ancient concept, going back many thousands of years and found in many cultures, but it seems to speak to us now more loudly than ever. Perhaps this is because we feel less settled and rooted in any particular place, as more of us have to travel to study and find work; and, of course, computers and the internet have made physical space less important in some ways. I'd like to think that the popularity of the idea could suggest that we are more open to fresh thinking, that we are keen to learn about new places and through encounters with new people.

Also, we have ‘no continuing city, but we seek one to come’ (Hebrews 13:14, KJV).

Inevitably, this could have its downside, if we are a feather for every wind that blows – ‘tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness’ (Ephesians 4:14, KJV) – and susceptible to all sorts of dangerous influences. In this book, though, I want to think about the positive possibilities of hearing from voices that may be old, dead and from the past, but may be new to us and helpful in our journey. They could be famous names but perhaps known only as vague historical figures. So we’ve heard of Shakespeare and Tennyson but we’re not as familiar with their work as we feel we ought to be – and perhaps we haven’t thought that they could be helpful in our faith. We might be able to quote ‘Tis better to have loved and lost / Than never to have loved at all’, but perhaps we don’t know where these lines first appeared, and we’ve never sought them out for spiritual guidance. (I’ve heard these lines quoted to comfort people after breaking up with a girlfriend or boyfriend, which is a long way from their original context.)

I want to suggest that poetry can be enormously helpful in our journey of faith. The poets’ finely honed words have much to say to us, right now. They might come from

very different ages and backgrounds, but they faced the same questions that we do – about God, human love and the problem of suffering, for example. They have often thought about these questions more deeply than most of us do, and their works endure because the fruit of their reflection still speaks vividly to so many of us.

So I'm keen to draw on the craft and expertise of a range of poets, in ways that can inform our faith. This isn't in any way a study of the poets' lives or an examination of their work, but it is a search to see what they can tell us. In many ways, I'm being unfair to them in quarrying their writing for my own purposes, for none of them wrote specifically in order to deepen the faith of 21st-century Christians. They were writing about particular subjects in the way that seemed best to them at the time. But I have found great riches in their work and would like to share these treasures. The poets almost certainly didn't intend their work to be approached in this way, but they might be glad that it is still being read and admired.

I don't want to look at the literary quality of these poems or to study them as if for an exam, but I want to draw on what they have to tell us now about God – and that is a great deal. For example, look at poems such as this (which is also sung as a hymn):

*My soul, there is a country
Far beyond the stars,
Where stands a winged sentry
All skillful in the wars,
There above noise, and danger
Sweet peace sits crown'd with smiles,
And one born in a manger
Commands the beauteous files,
He is thy gracious friend,
And (O my soul awake!)
Did in pure love descend
To die here for thy sake...*

From 'Peace' by Henry Vaughan

When choosing material for the book, I've focused on poems rather than poets, and I've searched for or recalled works that match the Bible readings and the season. So I've surprised myself by omitting many favourites (such as Gerard Manley Hopkins and many current poets) who didn't happen to have written something to fit this purpose. Also, many of us have heard T.S. Eliot and George Herbert quoted in sermons, but I've tried to bring in some others, too. When quoting writers such as W.H. Auden, I'm not trying to judge their life or work as a whole; rather, I want to reflect on their contribution to our spiritual life.

It's fun, too, to claw back some literary figures from simply

being monuments of our heritage. Shakespeare, for example, is celebrated as England's great national poet, but of course it's much more important that he wrote astonishingly moving plays. These are works that stir the soul and reflect our lives and hopes now, as much as when they were written 400 years ago. He does write about God and has startling insights into faith. Here, King Lear creates as good a vision of our spiritual life as I've heard, and this is despite the otherwise hopeless circumstances that the king is in by this time in the play:

*When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh...
And take upon's the mystery of things
As if we were God's spies...*

King Lear, Act 5, Scene 3

I am not bothered about whether we could call these poets 'Christian' in the way we might understand that as a description now. I'm not worried about the detail of their lives, either, but more about the quality of what they wrote, which I think it's fair enough to see in terms of faith. God can speak through all sorts of people, writings and circumstances (as he does in the Bible through figures such as Cyrus the Persian): we can find his word throughout our world.

Some of the arguments in favour of drawing on the witness of poets in this way are like those in favour of using the King James Bible, which I have used for many readings in this book. For the 400th anniversary of the translation in 2011, BRF asked me to gather some short reflections on various passages into a book, *Celebrating the King James Version* (BRF, 2010). When asked to justify using the old version, I found myself saying that it expressed the truths of our faith better and more deeply than some modern translations. This doesn't work for all of it – the epistles can be tough going in the King James Version, for instance – but, alongside newer versions, the old King James has much to offer. It can guide us, right now, in our spiritual lives. And it's the same with poets.

It feels slightly uncomfortable to me to be using these poets – quarrying their work for nuggets of apt quotes, almost as if they were offering Christmas-cracker slogans. Often, I am ripping their lines out of context and depriving their works of the integrity, the wholeness, of the complete text that is an essential part of their life. Certainly I would always rather see a whole play, making sense of its complete story, than a presentation of gems and purple passages from the playwright.

Yet these poems were written to be read. I have enjoyed and benefited from them, and can only recommend and

report on what I find. If, by my drawing attention to some small part of these works, anyone is encouraged to read the whole work, so much the better. For it often seems that it is only in poetry that our deepest yearnings can come to the surface. There are so many aspects of God's love for us and ours for him that are hard, if not impossible, to grasp that we can only catch glimpses of part of the picture. The tangential nature of poems – coming at our experience from a particular angle, not feeling they need to record it exhaustively – means that they are ideally placed to convey the complexity, delight and glory of God's care for his creation.

The New Zealand poet James K. Baxter (1926–72) refers to 'an attitude of listening out of which poems may arise... the unheard sound of which poems are translations'. We can make some headway in analysing this attitude but, in the end, it can never be pinned down. God is with us and in us, but also always beyond us. He created us, but he doesn't need us; his creation is pure gift.

Poems, which go beyond a merely literal description of the world, hint at this unknowability, this state of reaching towards infinity. As the French poet Paul Valéry (1871–1945) noted, 'A poem is never finished, only abandoned.' Poets are content to explore and deepen the mystery of God, rather than being obsessed with resolving it. So,

for example, several poets whom I quote tease out the paradoxes of Jesus' coming from his heavenly kingdom to be born as a defenceless baby – for instance, John Donne (1572–1631) in 'Annunciation' and 'Nativity': 'Immensity cloistered in thy dear womb' (see the readings for 20 December and Christmas Day). They are not studying this paradox as a problem to be explained so much as a mystery to be revelled in.

Reading poetry

Many people find poems hard or offputting, but I hope that, by quoting mostly short chunks and adding some explanation, I can help to make them more accessible. After all, some of the Bible is written in poetry, such as the Psalms and the Song of Songs, and we would hardly want to stop reading it just because the lines stop short of the right-hand margin of the page.

Sometimes with poems, it's useful to remember that they are written in that particular way not to be difficult or to tease us with some hidden meaning (as if the poet was playing a cruel game with us, the readers). Rather, the poems are set down in verse form as the most exact means of conveying a particular feeling or observation. It can be helpful to try to enjoy the music of the words,

at least at first, without attempting to dissect every part of their meaning: let them sink in and play in your head. It's like when you sing a great hymn: you don't expect to grasp it all first time around, but you can repeat its words in your mind. Poetry isn't like a car manual, in which you have to grasp each point before moving on to the next part. And, of course, the words of many hymns are fine poetry.

Advent themes

Advent – the three or four weeks before Christmas – is more than just a preparation for the festive season. It is a distinctive time in the church's year, with its own features, which are a rich blend of different themes. Like Lent, it is a time of penitence, a time to prepare ourselves inwardly for a great festival at its end by reconsidering where we have fallen short. In this respect, it offers a wonderful chance to examine ourselves, to review our lives in a way that we seldom bother to do. We can try to look at ourselves honestly, to probe our sins and repent of them.

It forms a fascinating interplay with the secular calendar. Advent, the beginning of the church's year, is when we look both backwards and forwards – just as the secular world does at its New Year, although it concentrates that

mood in the few days around 1 January. But much more than this, the special themes of Advent give it a unique focus, and one that is all too rare for most of us to think about now: death and judgement. The traditional concerns of the four weeks of the season are death, judgement, heaven and hell. This focus also links with the way that, as part of our preparation for the first coming of Jesus at Christmas, churches have traditionally considered its connections with the second coming at the end of time. We look at how the people of God have prepared for Jesus' coming – through the patriarchs and prophets, and on to those directly involved in the events of the nativity: John the Baptist and Mary.

Part of our preparation today involves self-examination and penitence, which are sharpened up by our sense of our ultimate end. No matter that most of us manage to put off all thoughts of the end – usually until death becomes an immediate prospect. This season presents a unique opportunity to think about what ultimately matters. It need not be gloomy: the judgement of God offers redemption for the wrongs we have suffered. In the Old Testament, the poor of Israel look forward to it eagerly, as the time when they will be vindicated. The Advent Bible readings refer to this redemption specifically: for example, Zechariah's song for his son, John the Baptist, says, 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for he hath visited

and redeemed his people' (Luke 1:68, KJV: see the reading for Christmas Eve).

During the weeks of Advent, we will be considering these themes but then moving on to ideas about Christmas. Not surprisingly, another part of the point of Advent is to think over Christmas itself, the coming of God into our world – Jesus' becoming one of us and taking on our flesh in the incarnation. The implications of this are staggering, and it should take a lifetime to ponder them. To take just one example, it means that God loves every aspect of our world (as John 3:16 suggests). Jesus entered fully into our humanity; he didn't just visit briefly or dip in his toe. He was not like the Ancient Greek gods who popped down to earth, mainly to cause trouble. Also, we often hear about how incarnational theology should influence our attitude to our planet and to our fellow creatures, human and animal. If God loves the world that he has made, enough to come and be part of it, we too should cherish it and the other creatures in it. So Advent isn't just about our soul and inner peace: we are only one small part of his whole creation, all under the rule of God into eternity.

About this book

The readings are all drawn from the lectionary, the official pattern of Bible passages set down by the Church of England and other churches for their daily worship. This means that we will always be reading verses alongside other Christians, even if we are on our own. It can be very moving to think that thousands of others are pondering the same parts of scripture, as well as to know that the passages have been specially chosen for this day in the year as part of a carefully thought-out plan to cover the most important aspects of our faith.

The book runs all the way through Advent and the beginning of the Christmas season, right up to the Epiphany on 6 January. Its readings can be used in any year, although it was first written with Advent 2012 in mind.



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This book of daily Bible readings and reflections for Advent and Christmas is based around spiritual insights gleaned from some of the best-loved poets of the past – T.S. Eliot, George Herbert, Tennyson and Auden, among others. While they come from different ages and backgrounds, they wrestled with the same questions that we do, about God, love, hope and suffering.

This book is not a literary study of their work, but a quest to see what they can tell us about life and faith today. Their poems are quoted in short sections, with suggestions about what they might mean for us now. There are so many aspects of God's love for us and ours for him that are hard to grasp. While we can glimpse only part of the picture, it often seems that, in poetry, our deepest yearnings can come to the surface. As we travel the road to Christmas in the company of these great poets, we will find our minds enlarged and our hearts touched with something of the wonder and joy of this special season. The Bible readings are drawn from the lectionary.

Rachel Boulding was deputy editor of the *Church Times*, having previously worked at Church House Publishing, where she helped to produce the Common Worship materials. Before her death in April 2017, she contributed regularly to BRF's *New Daylight* Bible reading notes, and also wrote *Celebrating the King James Version* (BRF, 2010).

