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Poetry and Faith: The Example of
Elizabeth Jennings

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Elizabeth Jennings (1926-2001) is a pre-eminent example of a writer whose Christian faith and denominational allegiance to Catholicism are repeatedly explored in her poetry over almost fifty years. Although she was reluctant to discuss her own work ("I do not like writing about my poetry," she commented. "Poems, if they succeed at all, are autonomous, they stand alone; no contemporary poem should require footnotes," [Brown and Paterson 132]), her study of religious poetry, Every Changing Shape (1961), contains insights and ideas on her subjects which, retrospectively, may be seen to have abiding relevance to her own writing. Here, she locates the particular "power of poetry" in its capacity to "name," and thereby to "illuminate," and describes "all art" as "a participation in the eternal act of creation" (22, 30). Her phrasing implies a notable confidence in the capacity of language—in its stability and potential to communicate shared meanings—far removed from the shifting ironies of post-modernity. Significantly, too, she writes of the correspondence she sees between the training of poet and priest with their common emphasis on

... self-mastery, the ability to discard what is inessential, the patient waiting during the times when poems cannot be written, the terrible "dark night of the senses" in which everything seems plunged in meaninglessness and obscurity. (Every Changing Shape 107)

From this perspective, the poet, like the priest, is a mediator, a wo/man metaphorically set aside and ordained to utter words that are transformative and repeatedly point to the reconciliation and acceptance that Christians also believe are the very essence of the mystery of the Eucharist. In this context, Michael Schmidt's observation that for Elizabeth Jennings "Poetry is not exorcism but sacrament, a sharing," seems particularly apt (Schmidt
Furthermore, the proposed affinity between poet and priest and the specific emphasis on the vital discipline of patient waiting are notably similar to the views of Jennings’s fellow poet who was also a priest, albeit in a different denomination, R. S. Thomas.2

However, poet and priest are not linked only in this privileged and positive way but also, Jennings suggests, in their particular susceptibility to feelings of spiritual dereliction and abandonment that may be the inescapable other side of vocation and of the gifts and graces of creativity and ministry. This, too, was an aspect of experience on which Elizabeth Jennings was as well-qualified to pronounce as on the art of poetry because of her own mental health problems.

It is perhaps fair to suggest that these two factors—Jennings’s abiding and deepening religious faith and her experience of mental illness—were crucial in determining the kind of poet that she became and the focus of much of her best work. She was first noticed as the only woman popularly, and somewhat improbably, linked with the so-called “Movement” poets such as Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin, and Donald Davie in the 1950s; and, as Blake Morrison argues, she was stylistically influenced by their common aspiration for carefully crafted verse and a less florid vocabulary than the neo-romantics had used (Morrison 22). However, she was also significantly different from her contemporaries, and her life and work followed their own trajectory. While “the Movement writers tended to come from homes in which religion was still treated as a matter of seriousness and importance,” Elizabeth Jennings alone was a practicing Christian (Morrison 227). Her early poems on secular themes never incline to the skeptical or cynical as one finds on occasion in Amis or Larkin, and even in poems expressing doubt or uncertainty of faith she is never irreverent. Following her nervous breakdown in the early 1960s, and influenced by American poetry dealing with similar experience, for a time Jennings addressed the trauma and pain of mental disorder in ways that were at odds with the Movement’s rejection of “the idea that poetry and madness are closely allied” in preference for a style of writing that was rational and controlled (Morrison 278). Thereafter, with the passage of time, Jennings wrote increasing numbers of poems with explicitly religious or theological themes, or which valorize the Christian virtues of compassion and love, and thereby diverged from most other modern verse where unironic expressions of orthodox Christian faith and respect for the rites of the church are uncommon. Martin Booth described Elizabeth Jennings as a poet who “writes very much from the innermost
corners of her privacies” and whose work as a whole “is a corpus of peace,” despite the history of her own personal distress (Booth 178). Paradoxically, these characteristics as much as Jennings’s own withdrawn way of life may have contributed to the marginal critical attention given to her work.

At the heart of Jennings’s faith and of her aesthetic is the Incarnation: she repeatedly returns to the conjunction of the divine and the human in Jesus, the “God-man,” and of the material and the spiritual, the mundane and the mysterious, in the bread and wine of the Mass. In the same way as God made himself present in the world in physical form, so she regards it as the poet’s challenge to find images, symbols, and analogies from the material world to communicate the spiritual. Thus she describes the achievement of the medieval writer of The Cloud of Unknowing as twofold—first, “in its exalted presentation of man’s relationship with God,” and second in

... its entirely concrete, down-to-earth and always precise imagery. If there is a “cloud of unknowing” above our finite beings, there is always firm ground beneath our physical natures. ... (Every Changing Shape 40)

But whereas she drew a comparison between the poet and the priest, she maintains that the artist and the mystic (such as the author of The Cloud of Unknowing or Julian of Norwich) adopt contrasting attitudes to their experience: “… the artist’s desire to share is always a more active, more one-sided affair than the religious visionary’s handing over of his awareness of God to other men” (Every Changing Shape 42). While the mystic is disposed to wait upon God, as Simone Weil put it, the artist “feels that everything must be done by himself and that “dark nights” or barren periods are to be suffered rather than accepted” (Every Changing Shape 42). It is in this compulsive urge to do “everything,” to communicate, that the artist may be most readily understood as the participant in “the eternal act of creation” Jennings describes.

Over thirty years later, these ideas resurface in “Seers and Makers” where “Artists and men of prayer” are said to share a common eagerness “… to disappear / Within the words, paint, sound, and praying,” and also the “energy” with which they pursue their ends (New Collected Poems 296). But where the saint’s prayer reveals “his concentration,” “Great art shows / Impatient feeling,” and while both aim for perfection, and will not flinch from “Any wound or hurt” incurred in striving for this end,
... seers accept while artists cannot bear
To leave their work untouched. Some detail's wrong
In poems, buildings or a catch of song.

Thus the attitude of patient withdrawal characteristic of a mystic contrasts
with the importance for the artist of the physical, the emotional and the
sensory which, far from being inimicable to apprehension of the numinous,
are approaches to it. Even the artist's awareness of the insufficiency of her
or his own chosen medium, which Jennings regards as a consequence of our
fallen nature, is not a deterrent but serves to stimulate new beginnings "if
he's an honest maker" ("After a Painting is Finished" New Collected Poems
178). Or as she wrote in a Poetry Society bulletin: "I am never satisfied
with any of my poems for long. It is the one which seems just ahead but
tantalisingly hidden that really interests me" (Brown and Paterson 135).

In another late poem, "Touch," Jennings ponders further the paradoxical
nature of earthly materiality and the importance of sensory experience in
all aspects of life: "Touch. How much it starts and how much ends. / Each
sacrament demands it, and all love. ..." (New Collected Poems 301) The poet
maintains that the positive power of touch originates in God whose own
"touch" "Stirred" "The whole universe" into being, giving it "Shape and
substance." Conversely, a "disobedient" touch precipitated the Fall—"the
potent tale of our reverse"—and yet it was this event which "somehow brought
/ God-man to us and put him at our will." The closing lines draw out the
cumulative significance of the related stages in the poem and illustrate how
touch both facilitates theological understanding and is indispensible to the
practical expression of love which is the essential commandment of Christ:
"Touch can demonstrate an arcane thought // And love surrenders when its
power goes still." Yet there also seems to be an implicit recognition of
the limitations of language here because although words may describe
the power of "touch," they cannot of themselves replicate its virtues.

The question of the limitations of language reappears in a particularly
interesting way in "At Mass (11)." This poem offers a powerful affirmation
of the Mass as a sustaining, timeless, cleansing and joyful sacrament that
perpetually highlights both the directness and the intimacy of God's dealings
with humankind, initially at the Last Supper and subsequently in the Mass.
The celebrants may begin with "A book" which "tells us how to be // A part
of all the wonder happening," but they quickly "realize the awe / We ought
to feel," and as the Mass proceeds, "Nothing matters but this Holy Meal"
In the seventh and eighth stanzas, Jennings endeavors to convey not only the inexplicability and intense emotional power of the Mass but also the way in which it both simplifies and clarifies the participant's perception of life's priorities and transforms hope into assurance:

Every moment of enchantment we've
Ever known joy here is present and
Our best love is shown when we receive
God so simply. We can understand
Less than we believe.

For here all intuitions gather to
Show our hopes are valid and made clear.
Passion falters. Love alone will do
As God shows his creation need not fear
Great wishes won't come true.

For the believer, the words spoken in the celebration of the Mass facilitate the sacrament but do not limit it; and in the same way the Mass eludes understanding in that its significance can never finally be verbalized in intellectual or rational terms and because, without belief which does not balk at the possibility of the supranatural, its profundity and healing potential remain unrealized.

As is apparent, the mysterious, even miraculous, dimension to such deeply personal heartfelt experience locates it, by its very nature, on the periphery of what can be communicated in words. Therefore the poet invites the reader who wishes to engage with her in this poem to interpolate his or her own "moment[s] of enchantment," "joy," "hopes," and so on, as a necessary way of approximating her feelings; but we are also guided back in the final stanza to the everyday world of "usual things"—now, however, a world in which the individual rising from the Mass sees those "usual things" "shining with right purpose," which has been restored to visibility as a direct result of the "rite" that has taken place.

What seemed luck
Is given while our hurt creation sings
And there is no more lack.

The poet's sensitivity to the resources of language lead her to the "luck" / "lack" rhyme, which produces a deliberately self-canceling effect, while
the intervening line discloses a crucial point: the redemptive effect of the Mass, which amounts to much more than mere "luck," is known in time and amidst all the evidence of a fallen world and overcomes human "lack." Donald Eadie writes that "It is as if the eucharist is happening within the world all the time. The bread and wine are simply signs of what is constantly provided as a gift within the commonplace. The liturgy simply makes this visible" (Grain in Winter 26). While a Catholic like Jennings might dispute this Protestant view of the elements as "simply signs," she would recognize Eadie's emphasis on the significance of the Eucharist in transforming perceptions of "the commonplace" and enabling us to see and know the ambient world afresh.

The central moment of religious drama in the Mass, the consecration of the elements, is itself the subject of "Consecration (1)," where Jennings contemplates what occurs as

A few words
Are spoken. Such tiny words
Full of more than this world can ever contain
In its random occasions, its pell-mell actions which we
Have brought about. (New Collected Poems 306)

This is the mystery at the heart of the Eucharist and of the doctrine of transubstantiation whereby, incomprehensibly and inexplicably, God's grace, mediated through the words of consecration uttered by the priest, not only "change[s]" the "Round of bread" but also "what we see/ And hear ..."—the same claim that was made at the end of "At Mass (11)." The interaction between the divine and the material that occurs when the bread is consecrated is a reaffirmation of the Incarnation itself, of Christ's voluntary acceptance of human life—"he became for a time what all of us are / All the time" in order "to free / Our trammelled spirits"—and of the way "His words go on echoing where / Any will listen" and will liberate those who choose to respond to him with a "simple breath of prayer." Here we see again Jennings's faith-based belief in the unique and irreducible power of words and in their indispensable role in approaching the mysteries of religion that provides a marked contrast to the ironic, ludic, and skeptical attitudes of many modern writers who have variously sought to contest and demystify the traditionally accepted authority of particular codes, such as the language of liturgy and religion.3

Finally, in "A Full Moon," which is heavily influenced by the example
of one of Jennings's most admired poets, George Herbert, the moon itself becomes

... the Host held up
For everybody’s eyes
To see and understand the high and deep
Salvation in the skies. (New Collected Poems 314-15)

As well as proposing a visual similarity between the full moon and the elevated host, the metaphor also enables the poet to elaborate contrasts between the universal visibility of the open-air “Mass,” which draws all eyes up to it, and the custom “In usual Masses” when worshippers “withdraw” their “stares” as they “bow down.” The particular wisdom and aptness of the conventional Mass, which are ascribed to “The Godhead,” lie in its intimacy, accessibility and power to affect even “the most simple, the most skeptical” with “regret” for the suffering brought upon Christ as a consequence of the fall of man that necessitated his atoning sacrifice, and in the opportunity of renewal by grace which is the very essence of the Eucharist. These lines seem to retreat from the dramatic opening metaphor, emphasizing instead the contrasting privacies of the Mass, but the sentence that spans the end of the third stanza and the opening of the fourth acts as a fulcrum on which the poem as a whole turns. In it, Jennings confronts the universal predilection to stray from the very grace that is imparted through Christ’s sacrificial death and embodied in the Mass:

It seems we cannot bear for long
A simple goodness but must choose the wrong
Because it looks so sweet.

This leads to the invitation to “look again” at the “Host-like moon” that “shines where / All can see him” and be reminded that “Christ took on all pain / Beyond time’s arbiter.” The strategic repetition of the verb “look” toward the end of one sentence and then at the start of the next one, within the same line and with an adjustment of meaning, eases the movement into the final stages of the poem; and the reiterated “all” reinforces the sense of the universal significance and efficacy of Christ’s life and death, and, by extension, of the Mass itself in which this belief is continually renewed. In this sense, then,
That moon in silence can  
Elevate us till we long to know  
The Trinity's whole plan.  
Nature was fashioned for this purpose. See  
A moon remind us of God's ministry.

In the Mass, the priest elevates the host so that all may see it and believe, and this is now shown to have a parallel in the way the moon attracts our eyes and confronts us with the mystery of life itself. The phrase "God's ministry" (which is reminiscent of the "secret ministry" of frost in Coleridge's poem) may be understood to signify both his imparting of insight and also his care for us in which, the poem persuade us, the world of nature in general and the moon in particular, are his active agents. In her chapter on Gerard Manley Hopkins in Every Changing Shape, Jennings located the poet's originality in his "double vision of the relations between God and man—God both substantially present in the centre of each man's soul, and God also pervading the whole universe" (Every Changing Shape 97). Her own poem, "A Full Moon," shows this same "double vision," and it seems that the wisdom of God is evident not only in the personal intimacies of the Mass as the second stanza suggested, but, as it were, promiscuously and openly in the eyes of everyone through the phenomena of nature.

"Full Moon" is a striking example of Jennings's conviction that whatever comprehension of the mysteries of religion we may reach is dependent on the power of visible or tangible symbols which inspire the imagination and stimulate multiple associations. "I need to cast around / And find an image for the most divine / Concepts," she declares in "Act of the Imagination" (New Collected Poems 297). As far back as 1961, Jennings saw that the particular challenge for the Christian artist in a secular age, when religious images and metaphors are no longer accessible to many people, was to discover new ways of communicating the insights these sources of rich association embodied. "What tradition did once," she wrote, "only the individual artist can do now—that is, fashion a context in which those images may not only live again but be relevant again" (Every Changing Shape 95). The difficulty of this challenge forms the basis of the poem "Notes for a Book of Hours" where, punning on the verb, she comments: "Within a single word / I want the christening, the flowering flame" (New Collected Poems 41).4

It is met by the artist's primary resource, imagination, which also helps in overcoming doubt in matters of religious faith because it is the well-
spring of metaphor, generating connections between the abstract and the spiritual, and the human and material world in which we live. According to James Wood, “Theologically, metaphor acts like language,” “insist[ing] on relationship”; but, he argues, “to compare one thing with another is also to suggest non-relationship, for nothing is ever like anything else. Metaphor always creates the danger of a wandering away from relationship” (45). Elizabeth Jennings's contrastingly optimistic view of metaphor derives directly from her particular understanding of the nature of imaginative creativity which has much more in common with Sara Maitland's assertion that “The production of art is quite simply a particular participation in the divine; it is a specific and vital form of theology—defined simply as the capacity to tell stories about the divine, and of course the capacity to hear them …” (121) than with Wood's post-Christian skepticism.

Jennings appears to have “heard” such stories in the works of the many painters and poets whom she celebrated in specific poems: Caravaggio, Turner, Goya, Chardin, Mantegna, Mondrian, Cezanne, Rembrandt, Klee, Bonnard, Michelangelo, Palmer, Chagall, and Giotto; Hopkins, and Traherne, as well as Herbert—all were her subjects. Whether in their visual or their verbal images, she saw the presence of “the christening, the flowering flame” that she herself “wanted” bringing the kind of imaginative order to experience which, Jennings believed, appeals to an unsatisfied spiritual need or desire.

Thus, in “Order” she interprets even its most mundane manifestations, such as the common quest for order and tidiness in gardens, as symptomatic of our longing for the perfection lost when Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden:

After we
Were driven from that garden, we’ve shown how
There must be patterns. We lost liberty
Of one kind but we’ve fashioned others. Now

In our wild world of misrule we insist
On shapeliness and balance. (New Collected Poems 298-99)

It is also notable that in what seems an almost Augustan sentiment she equates the achievement of order—of what in the context of art would be called form—with liberty, whereas untamed nature is regarded as anarchic,
akin to a state of mind or emotion over which the individual has no control. For Jennings herself, mental illness was just such a state of disorder, of lost "shapeliness and balance," while her recovery was affirmed in an important way by the disciplined mastery of her most powerful poems about illness and the experience of being in the hospital. The struggle as well as the triumph involved in such work is hinted at in the title of her 1966 collection, *The Mind Has Mountains*, which alludes to Gerard Manley Hopkins's great sonnet, "No worst, there is none," where he, too, both contains and releases his anguish through his mastery of form and language. "Tormented and battling as much of [Hopkins'] work is, the battle always takes place on solid ground and in a world of order," Jennings wrote in *Every Changing Shape* (99). She herself maintained that

> there is tension at the heart of all great poetry, but this tension is the source of life not of impotence or death. The poems which satisfy most are not those which simply give a sense of reconciliation and order, but those which show life and order as the fruits of conflict; and we need to feel this tension even in the most triumphant and reconciled poems. Poetry is not rationalization but revelation and what is healing in it, both for the poet and his readers, is the ability to depict conflict at its most vulnerable point. … (*Every Changing Shape* 108)

In a spirit that is consistent with these comments, "I Count the Moments," a poem in which Jennings declares her vocation as a poet and her hope that her work "may … heal // The pain of silence for all those who stare / At stars as I do but are helpless to / Make the bright necklace," concludes:

> Words come and words go
> And poetry is pain as well as passion.
> But in the large flights of imagination

> I see for one crammed second, order so
> Explicit that I need no more persuasion. (*New Collected Poems* 139)

This is perhaps as succinct a statement as Elizabeth Jennings ever made of her conviction that poetry has the potential to light upon moments when the words are so wholly articulated and ordered through the imagination that they possess unforeseen but utterly believable revelatory truth akin to a conversion experience.
The idea is approached differently in “An Age of Doubt,” where she records how a youthful crisis in her faith (“My mind, so wide once with imagined kingdoms, / Shrivelled and shrank to doubt of my own existence, / Let alone of God’s or of another’s”) was gradually healed through reading the Romantic poets whose “potent song” encouraged her own writing and her recognition of

Such a little
But so authentic a power, it altered my poems
Whose rhythms sometimes moved to the tide of creation
And felt the touch of a God. (New Collected Poems 247)

This is the process that Jennings spoke of as the way “Poets work upon and through each other,” but the metaphors she chooses to describe the alterations to her own work once again hint at her belief in a God of incarnation who continues to be active in human life and activity (New Collected Poems xxi). Elsewhere, in “A Metaphysical Point about Poetry,” she proposes a more explicit connection between the creativity of the poet and the immanence of God in the world, declaring, “I wish to say that God / Is present in all poetry that’s made / With form and purpose” (New Collected Poems 322).

That affirmative, even celebratory, note also characterizes most of the poems in which Jennings explores specific aspects of the Christian story and its theology, but while this may mean that she has less to reveal to the reader about times of religious doubt and questioning than, say, Hopkins or R. S. Thomas, she has the capacity to surprise and illuminate by the individuality of her perspectives. As she wrote in “Act of Imagination,”

... let faith be loud

With the best imagining we have.
This is how I approach
My God-made-Man. (New Collected Poems 297)

This “approach” is well illustrated in her “Christmas Suite in Five Movements” and “An Easter Sequence,” which are not only extended reflections on the foremost seasons of the Christian year but also indicative of Jennings’s response to the challenge she defined in Every Changing Shape of “fashion[ing] a context” in which ancient faith-based truth might be reclaimed for the modern age.
Thus, the first “movement” of the former poem, “The Fear,” begins with a relatively conventional focus on the paradox of the humanity and vulnerability of the infant Christ that explicitly links the very simplicity of the nativity with the child’s openness to “the wide/ Dark, the starless night” of the world of time, before which the familiar sources of power and authority, wealth and learning, become redundant (New Collected Poems 143). The claims of “Philosophy” and “Logic,” the formal language-based disciplines that aspire to interpret, explain, and hypothesize questions of meaning and existence are inarticulate when confronted with the silence of “The Word” (in its Johannine sense of logos). This understanding leads to the lines which form the very heart of the poem:

This God fears the night,
A child so terrified he asks for us.
God is the cry we thought came from our own
Perpetual sense of loss.

So thoroughgoing is God’s solidarity with humans in the Incarnation that the Christ-child’s fears become indistinguishable from our own and he “asks for us” for comfort. The implication of his feelings in what we previously believed was merely “our own / Perpetual sense of loss” leads to a radically revised understanding of the nature and basis of our relationship to God. However, the poem concludes with two unanswered and unanswerable questions. The first—“Can God be frightened to be so alone?”—reverses the perspective of the previous lines, which emphasized God’s close involvement in humanity, and ponders the sense in which God can be understood to know fright and loneliness. It also points forward to the second question—“Does that child dream the Cross?”—which may anticipate the mounting anguish and dereliction of Christ between the Garden of Gethsemane and his death, and certainly projects the nativity story forward to its conclusion as well as speculating on the possibility of the infant’s divine foreknowledge of his mortal end finding expression in his “terrified” cries. Jennings’s particular success in this poem lies in the degree to which she has not only articulated the idea of the God-child but also has engaged so imaginatively with the implications of the Word made flesh.

In contrast to “The Fear,” “The Child,” the second poem in the suite, has the simplicity of a carol and emphasizes the choice individuals have in accepting or rejecting God. It is in this sense that “… if God begs, / Then
we all hold // Him in our power”—just as when a baby “begs,” the adults have the “power” to respond (New Collected Poems 143). For Elizabeth Jennings, the consequences of this freedom of choice are wider because it is re-enacted endlessly in the way we conduct our relationships and the attitude we take toward others. Elsewhere she gently urges the primacy of compassion, healing, and reconciliation, while “A Litany,” which follows “The Child,” complements it because it is a prayer to Mary as mediator, enabler, and figure of “solace” and “mercy,” petitioning her to accept “our hope” and “our hands” and to “give us grace” and “a relish for / The renewal of love,” which will encourage precisely the kind of positive response to God’s “begging” mentioned in the previous poem (New Collected Poems 144). As the mother of Christ, Mary is by tradition the iconic caring female, uniquely responsive in her acceptance of God’s will and in fulfillment of the maternal responsibilities placed upon her, and she is therefore the supremely apt focus for this prayer. The fourth movement, “The Despair,” casts back to “The Fear” by returning to the Christ who “broke/ Into our history” and whom “History drives … on” (New Collected Poems 144-45). Here, however, the focus is upon the way in which Christ’s life transformed love (“Love before this was dust …”) by his redemptive suffering: his “empty hands / Have scars upon them,” but he has “made amends / For all wrong acts. …” In its second half, the poem proposes the idea that in spite of what Christ did, not only are there those who “make war” on him but also that his followers “feel helpless, are not free/ To struggle” for him; however the notion that “the universe” has turned from Christ is rejected in favor of an allusion to the Christmas season for which this “suite” of poems was written and which initiates the annual re-enactment of his birth and journey “Back to the blighted, on to the thriving Tree.”

The triumph implicit in the reference to “the thriving Tree” is affirmed in the final poem, “The Victory,” where the poet draws together the widest significance of the Incarnation. The emphatic triple repetition of the word “down” in the first three lines announces the obeisance due to “that littleness,” “that / Crying and hunger,” “that tiny flesh / And flickering spirit” of the Christ-child (New Collected Poems 145). This is then balanced against the repetition of “Here” at the start of lines 4-6, which introduce the homage of kings, farmers, and wise men.

A similar pattern of strategic repetition and emphasis is employed in the second and final stanza:
This manger is the universe's cradle,  
This singing mother has the words of truth.  
Here the ox and ass and sparrow stop,  
Here the hopeless man breaks into trust.  
God, you have made a victory for the lost.  
Give us this daily Bread, this little Host.

The first two lines return us to the focal points of the baby in the manger and his mother and reaffirm their significance. The third line then represents the conventional image of the stable scene, but the fourth enlarges the vision with its assertion of the impact of the nativity on "the hopeless man" who "breaks into trust." The unexpected verb here may hint at the sudden and unforeseen change that takes place in him—an idea reinforced in the penultimate line—while the poem as a whole closes by setting the nativity in the context of the whole Christian story through its allusion both to the prayer of Jesus and to the bread of the Eucharist, which in turn originates in the Last Supper. The pun in the final phrase cleverly brings together references to the small Eucharistic wafer and to the infant Christ, the "Host" through whom the hopeless and the lost are welcomed and may now achieve their "victory" by communing with him when they receive the elements during the Mass. This is a wonderfully achieved example of how poetic language that is simple and economical may also release numerous associations and generate complex meanings, and of Elizabeth Jennings's ability to use words creatively to refresh or re-present essential Christian beliefs and hopes deriving from the Incarnation with great gentleness and with no trace of dogmatism.

Unsurprisingly, Christ's redemptive love is again a core concern in the eight poems that constitute "An Easter Sequence." The poems also make repeated connections between the coming of spring and the Easter season—something which Jennings exploited elsewhere in, for example, "Springtime and Easter," "A Litany for Contrition," and "For Easter 1986"—and continue the insistence on individual choice and responsibility that was evident in "A Christmas Suite." "The Start of Holy Week," which begins the "Sequence," sets the context for the poems that follow. Its opening question—"How to be sad ... ?" in the face of spring flowers, birdsong, and nest-building—is not directly answered at first; instead, the stanza ends with a one-line reflection that initially might seem unrelated: "Yet this could have been the end" (New Collected Poems 238). The brevity of this sentence and its monosyllabic bluntness and plainness of language distinguish it from the
richer associations and expansiveness of the previous images of spring and help to establish the contrast that runs through the rest of the poem, and is embedded in the "Sequence" as a whole, between the exuberance of the season in the natural world and the grim solemnity of the events at the end of Holy Week. In terms of the Christian narrative, this is the contrast between the "quick excitement," the "enchantment" and "shouting" of Palm Sunday and the "King who knew and tried to tell / That darkness comes." While not rejecting the idea outright, the poem declines the solace of the view that "It's all part of a plan," preferring to acknowledge "that life is mostly inner war / Until next Saturday when the stones will ring / On this beleaguered star." This position is again consistent with Jennings's focus on the humanity of Christ and on his full entry into human experience, given which, a preordained "plan," even if it exists, does not remove the "darkness," the "suffering," and the road to death.

Holy Week is also projected as a time of renewal, as the next poem, bearing this title, emphasizes. Here, multiple references to life-giving water ("Time of water"—the phrase is used twice; "Sprinkles;" "Good drenchings," "rain") are complemented by expressions suggestive of spiritual renewal and rededication ("doubt / Flowering to faith"; "the spirit climbs beyond the sky / And touches a true Heaven"; "All prayers fly"; "we confess"; "once again / Renew our trust, make promises we hope / To keep") (New Collected Poems 239). The final phrase of the poem clinches the relationship between the types of revival the poem celebrates and the suffering of Christ through the metaphor of his "wounds flowering with pain." The same verb also provides a link to "The Eternal Cross," which opens by referring to Christ "blossoming" on the cross and with a metaphor of him as "the flower upon a hurting bough" (New Collected Poems 239-40). The latter phrase is doubly suggestive: not only does it point to Christ's pain on the cross but it also may imply that the cross itself suffers, which is an idea in the spirit of the Anglo-Saxon poem, "The Dream of the Rood." In addition, the mutual suffering of Christ and the "bough" affords Jennings a further way of implicating the natural world in the events of Easter through the allusive potential of the metaphors she has chosen.

"The Eternal Cross" develops the meaning of its title by implying that Christ is repeatedly crucified in every failure to use "the liberty // This God-man gave us ... only for / Kindness and gentleness," and it makes an uncompromisingly forthright declaration of the responsibility of personal choice bestowed on every individual: "Christ lets us use our fatal liberty /
Against himself.” This, in effect, derives straight from the theology of Matt. 24: 31-46. Our freedom of choice is “fatal” because of our propensity to misuse it, and thereby to wound Christ; but, conversely, as the poem shows in its closing lines, the same liberty expressed in

one move
Of selflessness sets free

The whole of mankind whom he saw at play
And work as he hung dying, when his side
Was pierced. That spear was how we fail to say
We love someone, but each time tears are dried
It's Resurrection Day.

As in the previous poem, Jennings brings together the twin strands of thought in “The Eternal Cross”—specific details of the biblical Easter narrative and modern analogies to them—with compelling economy and suggestiveness.

The theme of Christ recrucified is taken up again in the fifth poem in the “Sequence,” “Crucifixion,” but with a different nuance. Remembering, perhaps, Paul’s words in Rom. 7:14-19, Jennings observes the contradictions in human nature and conduct—“Within all our bad wills / Our better chances echo”—which lead us to displace blame and responsibility onto other people or circumstances yet also to have “refreshing spells of doubt / And hate the subtle war // We wage within ourselves” (New Collected Poems 240-41). She locates the vital importance of Easter in its power to make us “look out” through the perspective of Christ’s suffering, sacrificial love “to the place where other men / Copy the God of saving and take on / The unjust agony:” The possibility of spiritual renewal leading to greater compassion in our relationships is as integral to the theology of Easter as new life and growth are to the spring season, and this “compels us to/ Honour this world that’s not beyond repair.”

“Holy Saturday” marks the liminal interlude between Good Friday and Easter Day when recollection and anticipation are in the balance. The “open doors” of the tabernacle and covered statues betoken what the poem calls the “emptiness” and “vacuum” left by death, but flowers are already in bloom and the Paschal candle will follow (New Collected Poems 240). For contemporary believers, it is a time to “brood on what // the spirit freed from flesh can really mean / And how a resurrection happened,” and these
reflections are set within the modern context of conflict in the Middle East ("where Christ hung not long ago") and the deaths of young soldiers feigning bravery to conceal their fear. In the light of these thoughts, the optimistic conclusion to "Holy Saturday" ("Our thoughts of death will soon be out of reach / And all sin washed away") seems much less persuasive than the imaginative synthesis of ideas in the previous two poems, or in "Crucifixion," which follows it, and is more an expression of a pious hope than an affirmation earned by the logic of the poetry.

The sixth and seventh poems, "Easter" and "Easter Morning (Mary Magdalen)," both approach the subject of the Resurrection. In the former it is represented as the sudden, irruptive phenomenon which breaks into a world of "Doubt," "disbelief," "war and its cold partner, death," and "argument" with transforming effects that are similar to the arrival of spring despite the fact that "Many think [death] is/ The absolute, cold end" (New Collected Poems 241-42). Following this qualification, it is difficult to see why, as the next lines claim, "even atheists feel hope and trust / And almost understand / Creation, order, purpose manifest," or on what basis such an assertion rests other than wishful hoping. The weakness here echoes that already seen in "Holy Saturday," while the prayer for the healing of conflict, heartbreak, and suffering with which the poem ends draws once again on the now familiar spring associations, which are also implicated in the climax to "Easter Morning." This work, however, contrasts with "Easter" because, uniquely, it focuses on the experience of an individual other than Christ himself in the sequence of events. The emphasis is, first, on the "little hope" that precipitated Mary Magdalen's visit to the tomb, although "She could not know of life beyond our scope / Would raise him up"; then on the liberating effects of her recognition of "Her Lord and great forgiver," and on his injunction "not to touch him"; and finally on how "This huge event/ Lit Nature up" by rebutting the supposed finality of death and affirming the triumph of life (New Collected Poems 242). The capitalized "N" in "Nature" raises its meaning to include all created life and contributes to the series of connections between life in the natural world and human life implicit in the language of the final stanza:

And so it is each year when Spring's about.
The Cross that flowered with pain must show a death,
A saving one to take away our doubt.
At Easter each breeze is a sweetened breath
When Christ comes walking out.
Just as the biblical narrative follows the Resurrection with the Ascension, so Jennings concludes her Easter sequence with a poem on this subject, acknowledging its mystery and inexplicability on the one hand, and on the other the church's creed that "declares / God made the planets, space and you and me / Then every obstacle yields thoroughfares" (New Collected Poems 243). The poet's own faith and her subscription to the teaching of the church are encapsulated in her assertion that "Affairs // Against all reason, mysteries, miracles / Happen when we believe." This may be the most overt testimony to personal faith in "An Easter Sequence"; however the quiet but unqualified confidence that informs it underlies all eight of its constituent poems, as the reader realizes retrospectively.

Taken together, therefore, these two sequences clarify the poet's own fidelity to conventional Christian beliefs and at the same time show how by her choices of language, metaphor, and reference she sought to touch—and this seems the appropriate verb here—not only her fellow believers but also those outside belief, with the mystery, hope, and enduring moral vitality of those beliefs. According to Michael Schmidt, Elizabeth Jennings "compared making poems to the practice of prayer, which reconciles an individual with the world outside," but there are also occasions in her work where a poem is itself a prayer (New Collected Poems xxii). "The Lord's Prayer," for example, isolates the phrase, "Give us this day," which is then used as the starting point for an alternative version of the traditional words, petitioning for resilience in the "night" and growth like that of a flower "for whom the earth and air are bread," and finally—and in characteristically tactile metaphors—affirming the power of prayer to "Finger our doubt and run along our breath" (New Collected Poems 100-01). In another reworking of scripture, Jennings reverses the opening of Psalm 130 ("Out of the depths I have called to thee, O Lord"), and prays instead "Out of the Heights" for God's protection from arrogance, foolhardiness, and self-delusion, and for "The innocence we do not understand, / The darknesses to which we must descend" (New Collected Poems 103-04).

Once again, the confidence Jennings shows here both in the efficacy of prayer itself and in the adequacy of language as the vehicle of prayer contrast sharply with the linguistic skepticism of a writer like R. S. Thomas whose disposition in prayer is to wait in silence rather than to rely on words. However, in "The Nature of Prayer," (subtitled "a debt to Van Gogh's Crooked Church"), Jennings questions whether "every prayer / We say" is not bound to be "oblique, unsure, seldom a simple one, / Shaken as your stone tightening
in the air” precisely because “Our homes / Of prayer are shaky and, yes, parts of Hell / Fragment the depths from which the great cry comes” (New Collected Poems 104). This acknowledgement of the inevitable limitations of prayer, of its imperfections and contradictions, and of our inability ever to articulate ourselves completely is comparable to the idea explored earlier that no work of art, however fully achieved it may seem to a third party, will ever measure up to the vision of its creator. It is also linked to the poet’s understanding of the flawed nature of humanity, which perpetually comes between aspiration and realization in prayer as much as in art, but in spite of which both remain indispensable human activities.

Elizabeth Jennings’s Christianity was deeply implicated in her poetry throughout her career, and her Catholicism commonly determined her emphases on specific aspects of her faith. In his “Introduction” to A Choice of George Herbert’s Verse, R. S. Thomas wrote that

The bridge between [Christianity and poetry] is the Incarnation. If poetry is concerned with the concrete and particular, then Christianity aims at their redemption and consecration. The poet invents the metaphor and the Christian lives it. (15)

These words might be applied just as aptly to define the position of Herbert’s great admirer, for whom the Incarnation was equally crucial. Belief in the Incarnation, in the God who entered fully into the world of history and mortality in human form, not only defines the relationship between the deity and people; it illuminates the material world—even in the face of adversity, injustice, and conflict—with the hope born of the conviction that beneath and beyond everything there is a providential purpose. Elizabeth Jennings reiterated this conviction in many poems, but perhaps nowhere more gracefully and movingly than in “Assurance Beyond Midnight,” which concludes both her final published volume and her New Collected Poems. Here, the poet offsets what she “knows” with what she does not “know,” yet accepts with quiet confidence: she does not “know how” “everything around / Fits in a meaning,” but she does “know rich purpose with a sound / Of settlements suggests itself”; she does not “know why” the natural world “makes / Seasons a mood,” but she “know[s] well that now my spirit wakes / And is assured” (New Collected Poems 360). Assurance in this context seems to incline towards the Wesleyan sense of knowing that one is saved, an impression reinforced by the even, almost wholly monosyllabic movement of the line which, although enjambed, momentarily holds back.
the quiet confidence of the final verb. "Imagination is / Rich," she declares, highlighting its importance in the penultimate and shortest sentence in the poem before revealing what follows from that claim through the harmonies of sense and sound and the rising notes of peaceful optimism in the final lines:

Helped out of sickness and heartbreaks

I feel in touch with everything that's peace
And later on there will arrive with dawn
A bold assurance and a synthesis

Of what waits for me not much further on;
But near enough to tell me faith is bold
And proves itself in all that has been done

To me and for me in a golden world.

Elizabeth Jennings once described writing a poem as "a gratuitous gift," likening it to "mystical experience" and noting the impossibility of summoning it to order (Brown and Paterson 135). In this respect, imaginative creativity is similar to faith, an equally unbiddable "gratuitous gift"; and for her, the "gift" of writing poetry was commonly the very means by which she explored and expressed her knowledge and experience of the sustaining power of faith.

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NOTES

1Jennings’s first collection, Poems, appeared in 1953; her last, Timely Issues, was published in 2001.
2For an elaboration of this point, see Peter Abbs.
3That said, it should be re-emphasized that Jennings clearly accepted that some experience may be beyond language. This is exemplified in her treatment of the story of Lazarus, which she deals with in “Lazarus,” “After Dark,” “Lazarus Again,” and “A View of Lazarus” (New Collected Poems 48, 303-04, 309, and 311 respectively). Like Tennyson before her (see “In Memoriam” poem 31), Jennings is intrigued both by the lack of questions Lazarus faced after his resurrection and also
by his own silence on the subject. Her speculative conclusion to “Lazarus Again” also points to the limitations of language itself:

It seems more likely that you could not say

What after-death can yield and mean and show,
    That there were no words for
That place and time when human spirits know
This whole vast what? There was no metaphor.

For Protestants the sacrament of communion is a metaphorical act, carried out in obedience to Christ's command to his disciples at the Last Supper, and “in remembrance” of him “until [he] comes again”; but for Catholics the consecration of the elements has both metaphorical and literal significance. Christ's assumption of human form and his institution of a sacrament involving the consumption of bread and wine gives the participants in the Mass the means of encountering profound spiritual mystery through the material elements. This is the opposite of the experience of Lazarus, whose withdrawal from the physical world in death cut him adrift from any means of sharing meaning with his fellow humans after his return to life. It is in this sense that “There was no metaphor.”

It is also worth remembering Jennings's ambition for poetry and her affirmation of its recuperative power, which are well illustrated in the following stanza from “Considerations” (New Collected Poems 87):

... poetry must change and make
    The world seem new in each design.
It asks much labour, much heartbreak,
Yet it can conquer in a line.

Examples of such poems are: “Sequence in a Hospital,” “Night Sister,” “A Mental Hospital Sitting Room,” “The Interrogator,” and “A Game of Cards” (New Collected Poems 62-67, 74, 72-73, 73-74, 71-72, respectively).

Another poem, “Meditation on the Nativity” (New Collected Poems 101) also highlights the importance of the simplicity of the nativity as the key to its mystery, wonder, and power.

Other poems that encourage compassion and reconciliation are “Living by love,” “Comfort,” “Night Sister,” and “The Prodigal Son” (New Collected Poems 263-64, 126, 74, and 204-05, respectively).

In “At Mass (1),” Jennings revived this idea in the following lines: “Time ceases when the gold ciborium's lid / Is lifted and Christ comes to us still // As he was at his birth” (New Collected Poems 302). In two poems in her final collection, Timely Issues, she again returned to the new beginning, the fresh opportunity “to mend our ways / And build our broken world again” which is generated through the
celebration of “A little child ... / Forgiving sin, relieving pain” (“New Year Song” in New Collected Poems 357. See also “Carol for 2000” on 356-57).

"Resurrection," subtitled “An Easter Sequence,” by the Irish poet, W. R. Rodgers, also follows the period from Palm Sunday to Easter Day, and culminates in a poem about the meeting in the garden between Mary Magdalene and the risen Christ. Radically different in style and structure from Jennings’s sequence of poems, it is the work of a one-time Presbyterian minister and was originally written as part of a radio broadcast from various parts of Europe on Easter Sunday 1949. Where Elizabeth Jennings repeatedly suggests parallels between the signs of the spring season and associations of Easter, Rodgers proposes that there is a sympathetic bond between Christ and the natural world in several of his poems. Rodgers also emphasizes the transforming and affirmative power of Christ’s sacrifice and resurrection. For the text of “Resurrection,” see Rodgers; for a discussion of the poem, see Sloan, 138-40.

WORKS CITED


