

Prayers, Poetry, and the Formation of Virtue

All Souls Anglican Church, October 23, 2022

Some properties of “poetry”

Versification
Regular meter (rhythm)
Symmetries (parallelisms, oppositions, rhyme)
Figural speech (metaphor, analogy)
Concision, density of thought
Beauty, elegance (a “musical” quality)
Repeatability, memorability (both worth memorizing and easy to memorize)
Emotional force, elevated sentiment
Perception-guiding (heart vision: Eph. 1:17–18¹)

N. T. Wright’s translation of Colossians 1:15–20:

He is the image of God, the invisible one,
the firstborn of all creation.
For in him all things were created, in the
heavens and here on the earth.
Things we can see and things we cannot, –
thrones and lordships and rulers and powers –
all were created both through him and for him.

And he is ahead, prior to all else and in him all
things hold together;
and he himself is supreme, the head over the
body, the church.

He is the start of it all, firstborn from realms of
the dead; so in all things he might be the chief.
For in him all the Fullness was glad to dwell and
through him to reconcile all to himself,
making peace through the blood of his cross,
through him – yes, things on the earth, and also
the things in the heavens.

“Part of **growing up** as a Christian is learning to take **delight** in the way God’s truth, whether in physics or theology or whatever, has a **poetic beauty** about it.” (*The Prison Letters*, 149).

¹ I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power.

My thoughts could stray, too strained or undefined,
But proverbs teach me density that schools
Such thought to churn and thicken in the mind.

Micheal O'Siadhail, *The Five Quintets*, p. 73.

Conclusion: Summary of points about poetry in the BCP

Poetic discourse is characteristic of the Bible: the Psalms, the prophets, Jesus' teaching.

Poetic language, because of its crafted character and its beauty, has potential durability. It is memorable in both senses of the word.

Character is by nature durable. The word comes from a Greek word for "etch" or "engrave." The person of character is reliable, steadfast, resistant to moral derailment.

Good character is constituted of right thinking and right caring. The prayers of the BCP have been formulated with orthodox thought about God and the world, and express caring in the terms of that orthodox thought. Through regular use, the prayers become templates of character.

The beauty and attractiveness of poetic language is congruent with the positive affective tone of Christian life: the beauty of God, the goodness of the good news (praise, joy, thanksgiving, hope).

Repetition of the same prayers can ingrain their thought in our minds, shaping our dispositions to perceive ourselves and the world. Over the years, the prayers interact with our experiences of life, and this churning (stirring, mixing) of the two "thickens" the thoughts into character.

Authentic praying of set prayers requires attentive "putting on" the desire they express, adopting (following), in desire and thought, the attitude of the prayer.