

The Cross and Poetry - St Gregory's, Stratford-upon-Avon - 5 April 2025

Anonymous (7th - 10th century)

The Dream of the Rood

see separate sheet

St Robert Southwell (c 1561 – 1595)

Jesuit priest martyred for his faith at Tyburn in 1595 – canonised by Pope Paul VI as one of the forty martyrs of England & Wales in 1970.

Christ's Blood Sweat

Fat soil, full spring, sweet olive, grape of bliss,
That yields, that streams, that pours, that dost distil,
Untilled, undrawn, unstamped, untouched of press,
Dear fruit, clear brooks, fair oil, sweet wine at will!
Thus Christ unforced prevents in shedding blood
The whips, the thorns, the nails, the spear, and rood.

He pelican's, he phoenix' fate doth prove,
Whom flames consume, whom streams enforce to die:
How burneth blood, how bleedeth burning love,
Can one in flame and streame both bathe and fry?
How could he join a phoenix' fiery pains
In fainting pelican's still bleeding veins?

Elias once, to prove God's sovereign power,
By prayer procured a fire of wond'rous force.
That blood and water and wood did devour,
Yea, stones and dust beyond all Nature's course:
Such fire is love, that, fed with gory blood,
Doth burn no less than in the driest wood.

O sacred fire! come show thy force on me,
That sacrifice to Christ I may return.
If withered wood for fuel fittest be,
If stones and dust, if flesh and blood will bum,
I withered am, and stony to all good:
A sack of dust, a mass of flesh and blood.

Christina Rossetti (1830 – 1894)

Sister of the artist Dante Gabriel Rossetti – Poet and connected with the Pre-Raphaelites - author of the Christmas carol: "In the bleak mid-winter"

Good Friday

Am I a stone, and not a sheep
That I can stand, O Christ, beneath Thy cross,
To number drop by drop The blood's slow loss,
And yet not weep?

Not so those women loved
 Who with exceeding grief lamented Thee;
Not so fallen Peter weeping bitterly;
 Not so the thief was moved;

Not so the Sun and Moon
 Which hid their faces in a starless sky,
A horror of great darkness at broad noon -
I, only, I

Yet give not o'er,
 But seek The sheep, true Shepherd of the flock,
Greater than Moses, turn and look once more
 And smite a rock.

R S Thomas (1913-2000) - anglican vicar of remote parishes in West Wales
The Musician

A memory of Kreisler once:
At some recital in this same city,
The seats all taken, I found myself pushed
On to the stage with a few others,
So near that I could see the toil
Of his face muscles, a pulse like a moth
Fluttering under the fine skin,
And the indelible veins of his smooth brow.

I could see, too, the twitching of the fingers,
Caught temporarily in art's neurosis,
As we sat there or warmly applauded
This player who so beautifully suffered
For each of us upon his instrument.

So it must have been on Calvary
In the fiercer light of the thorns' halo:
The men standing by and that one figure,
The hands bleeding, the mind bruised but calm,
Making such music as lives still.
And no one daring to interrupt
Because it was himself that he played
And closer than all of them the God listened.

George Herbert (1595 – 1633) - anglican priest and contemporary of John Donne

Extract from "Easter"

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part
 With all thy art.
The crosse taught all wood to resound his name,
 Who bore the same.

His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key
Is best to celebrate this most high day.

Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song
Pleasant and long:
Or since all musick is but three parts vied
And multiplied;
O let thy blessed Spirit bear a part,
And make up our defects with his sweet art.

R S Thomas
In Church

Often I try
To analyse the quality
Of its silences. Is this where God hides
From my searching? I have stopped to listen,
After the few people have gone,
To the air recomposing itself
For vigil. It has waited like this
Since the stones grouped themselves about it.
These are the hard ribs
Of a body that our prayers have failed
To animate. Shadows advance
From their corners to take possession
Of places the light held
For an hour. The bats resume
Their business. The uneasiness of the pews
Ceases. There is no other sound
In the darkness but the sound of a man
Breathing, testing his faith
On emptiness, nailing his questions
One by one to an untenanted cross.

Denise Levertov (1923 – 1997) - British born American poet, associated with civil action in California. Originally an atheist who became a catholic in later life

On a theme from Julian's Chapter XX

Six hours outstretched in the sun, yes,
hot wood, the nails, blood trickling
into the eyes, yes –
but the thieves on their neighbor crosses
survived till after the soldiers
had come to fracture their legs, or longer.
Why single out this agony? What's
a mere six hours?
Torture then, torture now,
the same, the pain's the same,
immemorial branding iron,

electric prod.
Hasn't a child
dazed in the hospital ward they reserve
for the most abused, known worse?
This air we're breathing,
these very clouds, ephemeral billows
languid upon the sky's
moody ocean, we share
with women and men who've held out
days and weeks on the rack –
and in the ancient dust of the world
what particles
of the long tormented,
what ashes.(1)
But Julian's lucid spirit leapt
to the difference:
perceived why no awe could measure
that brief day's endless length,
why among all the tortured
One only is 'King of Grief'.
The onening, she saw, *the onening*
with the Godhead opened Him utterly
to the pain of all minds, all bodies
– sands of the sea, of the desert –
from first beginning
to last day. The great wonder is
that the human cells of His flesh and bone
didn't explode
when utmost Imagination rose
in that flood of knowledge. Unique
in agony, infinite strength, Incarnate,
empowered Him to endure
inside of history,
through those hours when He took Himself
the sum total of anguish and drank
even the lees of that cup:
within the mesh of the web, Himself
woven within it, yet seeing it,
seeing it whole, *Every sorrow and desolation*
He saw, and sorrowed in kinship.