



Clifton Cathedral
“Poems in Many Tongues”
Poetry Exhibition
Spring 2019
A Report
by
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Basic Information

The exhibition took place on five week-ends between March 16th and April 14th 2019, to enable interested members of the cathedral congregation to visit, either before or after attending their usual Mass.

It was held on the cathedral balcony and consisted of poster-poems selected from the website of a project called "*Poems for...the wall*" - <https://poemsforthewall.org>

On behalf of a small charity called "Hyphen-21", I have been running "*Poems for...the wall*" since 1998, funded by the Arts Council, the NHS, the FCO and the John Lewis Partnership, among others. Usually its poems are displayed in schools, libraries or healthcare settings. The poems go all over the world. Many of them are bilingual, with fifty different languages represented.

I lived close to the cathedral at the time and attended mass regularly. I suggested the exhibition in recognition of the range of nationalities and mother-tongues spoken among the cathedral's congregation and by Roman Catholics across the world. I thought the poems would bear eloquent witness to this, even as they spoke too of humanity's commonality despite our differences, fears and frictions.

The bilingual posters are set out as posters, with the original non-English text on the one side, its English translation on the other. The languages I chose for the exhibition were as follows : Arabic (Palestinian and Syrian), Austrian, Bengali, Burmese, Ewe, Farsi, French, German, Hebrew, Hindi, Hungarian, Igbo, Japanese, Latin, Mandarin, Polish, Punjabi, Somali, Tamil, Urdu.

Also displayed were poems selected from the project's collection on mental disturbance. In 2018, during Mental Health Awareness Week, two local schools had exhibited some of these poems around their premises, as a way of opening, facilitating and stimulating discussion on a difficult subject.

The exhibition's poems were displayed at different sizes, some at A0, several at A2, several more at A4. The materials used were foamex paperboard and card. The larger sizes were mounted on the balcony walls and also on large screens already available there ; the smaller sizes were pinned on the screens as well and also in glass cabinets along the wall. The poem enlargements were paid for by the charity Hyphen-21.

How the Exhibition Went

I estimated that around 60-70 people attended the exhibition over the four-week period it was open, in my presence.

Most belonged to the cathedral congregation, and visited the exhibition during Sunday mornings, on either side of the various regular celebrations of Sunday Mass. But Saturday morning openings also yielded a steady trickle of visits and we were fully justified in opening on those morning too. A few people “from outside” also visited the exhibition, having heard about it by word of mouth or seen posters.

The exhibition’s publicity had mooted the possibility of weekday visits by prior arrangement and this facility was utilised twice – once by a member of the congregation who is also a member of a local reading group and wanted other group members to have the chance to see the poems ; and another was Mohan Rana, a local poet (see reference to him below).

Visits varied greatly in their quality and duration, of course. Some involved just a quick tour of the material, lasting minutes and limited to just glancing round ; other visitors were simply interested in seeing the balcony for the first time, or the cathedral interior *from* the balcony ; but others again spent as long as half an hour, going over poem after poem, studying them very closely. Children came up and were simply interested in the different “foreign” scripts on show, and the implications of all that difference ; several adults were struck by particular poems and took out their phones to photograph and keep them.

After a brief but careful scrutiny of the posters in situ, their general tone and content, one visitor remarked that they constituted a sort of contemporary Book of Psalms ; she suggested that they were saying something urgent and very present in this place, of all places. Certainly, the words of a large number of the poems seemed to be given an added power by the setting in which they were displayed here, not just its size and grandeur, but its purpose and nature.

An Arabic student from a nearby school of languages had seen a poster advertising the exhibition and she visited during one Sunday. The next (and final) week-end, she brought some fellow students along and showed them round.

A retired C. of E. vicar who preaches at a church nearby, visited on the exhibition's last week-end and went round the exhibition carefully and appreciatively.

One of the cathedral deacons used the Sunday evening openings to peruse the poems on his own, before mass, on successive week-ends.

The Hindi poet Mohan Rana lives in Bath and had one of his poems represented among the collection. At my invitation, he came to see it and later brought a group of friends along from Bath, to look around.

Left-overs, Learning Points, Regrets.

A significant number of visitors said at the end of their time on the balcony that there was so much of real power in poem after poem, that it was impossible to take everything in at one go. Some came back for another visit, as a result. I myself am steeped in all these poems, having known them so well for so long, and, as curator, I was concentrating on showing just what and how much is available. But I have no doubt that, were I to have met this material all at once and for the first time, I would have responded in the same way – too much to take in fully at one go. But I am not sure whether it would have been better to have exhibited less material. I think it's debatable. On balance, I think the quantity was about right.

For obvious reasons, the exhibition stayed closed during actual masses. But I was less than perfect in coming back at the correct time to open up again. Especially on a Saturday morning, I kept on under-estimating how short that mass can be ! As a result, the exhibition did sometimes burst its banks a bit and impose on clergy and the cathedral's support team. I feel badly about that and grateful for their patience.

However, despite the odd glitch and poor synchronisation on my part, I actually enjoyed the fact that this exhibition was briefly taking its place in the life and routine of a magnificent working building, full of its different communities, and not in some more neutral and less meaningful specialist exhibition space. A perfect mesh at all times was perhaps too much to expect.

I moved house during the time the exhibition took place. I could not control those dates and of course would not have chosen them, and it made it that much harder for me as organiser/curator to stay as fully on top of all arrangements, as I would have liked.

Conclusion

The following has to be rather one-sided and perhaps subjective, since my experience and observations derive from an absorption in the exhibition which was inevitably more concentrated than anyone else's could be.

I found the exhibition a memorable and marvellous experience, and the cathedral balcony a profoundly appropriate setting for the poems. They meant even more in that place, somehow, than they could do in a setting more "neutral," less majestic, less given over to the spiritual. In fact, I cannot imagine anywhere better for them to speak from. I am profoundly grateful to Canon Bosco for allowing the exhibition to happen, for supporting it so meticulously and generously and – perhaps above all – for suggesting the balcony for it.

It was good to discover and experience the balcony as part of the cathedral's life for a while, in this rich way, (and also to see the Rumanian icons close to) and I kept wondering up there, what the architect might have been imagining for it, when he conceived of it above the font. Of course, it is a bit impractical for an exhibition, in obvious ways, but some of the disadvantages could be chiefly off-set and they were anyway greatly outweighed by the sheer beauty of the setting and view point it provides. It was a privilege and joy to spend time there.

I also enjoyed shaping and adapting the exhibition content to the character and style of its setting. In terms of the basic "mechanics" of mounting the posters, this meant : using simple wood and string, nothing fancy ; following the shape and opportunities of the area and making use of the walls where they were highest ; and making use, as well, of the measured holes in the walls for inserting simple wooden plugs, to which most of the poems were attached...

But not just the mechanics – the imagery as well : so St Augustine's words were placed next door to those of a Punjabi girl aged 12, each asking a question basically similar and similarly basic, on the same bare wall ; a Syrian Arabic poem was put next to, and on the same wall as, a Hebrew poem, written by a famous Israeli poet ; two very different poems of exile were displayed on the same blue display screen ; and four poems sharing the image of proffered hands were set out in a cross shape, opposite St Peter on his cross and Christ on his.

The exhibition relied heavily on the cathedral's admin team from beginning to end — from the initial planning and preparation and delivery and setting up of the material, to the exhibition's promoting and publicity, and then its temporary absorption into the cathedral's routine at a busy time of year.

The team's backing was given unstintingly and added to the pleasure of the whole business.

I believe the cathedral provided an apt setting for the poems to speak fully to people. The combination was powerful and beautiful. The words were especially eloquent in there, and many of their readers were especially open to them.

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