

## In the Cathedral

*(i)*

In the cathedral, looking east,  
people bow their heads before the altar  
as if to some invisible force on a throne  
made manifest by this gesture,  
centuries old, of fealty.

Or you find yourself  
walking across that place of power  
with a destination in mind  
other than the power itself  
and that's a bit awkward

and requires you to stop and turn  
and again dip your head  
as if to apologise and make amends,  
before hastening back  
to your own small errand.

There is an element of dance in all this,  
or pageantry. We are the chorus  
and through the same movement,  
time after time, of head and hand,  
we contrive a kind of incarnation,

shaping that small space in the cathedral  
into the One, the All.

(ii)

In the cathedral,  
I was about to partake  
of the flesh and blood  
of the godhead

when, 'Lord, I am not worthy  
that you should enter under my roof,  
but only say the word  
and my soul shall be healed'

emerged from my mouth, in chorus  
with a multitude of strangers, kneeling alongside,  
sharing the lament,  
or confession, or devotion, or wild hope  
in those old words webbed world-wide

and I found myself sobbing, chest convulsing,  
and I was amazed.

Not grief. Then what ? Grief. Relief. Yearn.

I am left to wonder -

Heal

Forgive

Lord

Only

Say the Word

*(iii)*

In the cathedral  
we hung poems on the walls  
like psalms on old parchment.

The walls were slabs of cement  
pressed, while setting,  
against planks of Russian redwood.

The subtle print of the wood-grain  
was like poetry whispered in a cave.  
There were poems in many tongues displayed there

speaking true words together -  
like a new book of psalms, you said,  
psalms whispered in a cave.

*(iv)*

Hearing words that sought to wrest the truth  
from its torturers, I entered the chamber

where the torturers worked. Where else  
was I to go ? For here the truth was, also.

But even here the truth evaded me,  
refusing rescue.

The poet searches for truth ;  
the torturers ravage it, even though

their own children's only hope is truth.  
The truth evades us all.

(v)

From across the city  
we assemble here week after week  
for renewal and solace.

Each continent, perhaps,  
is represented  
under this one roof

as we hear and chant together  
in this one language  
the fierce, majestic poetry

of guilt and redemption, the shaming of greed,  
the enshrining of truth and trust – this language  
ever more foreign to the world outside.

Do my neighbours here in this space  
share my yearning, fears, bewilderment ?  
Yes, we share those great words of witness

crying out from dark centuries past,  
blood-stained and ruinous,  
but do we share their meaning ?

‘Give up all you have  
and, broken, come, follow...’

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## Footnote

This poem was not written with any intention of describing a particular cathedral, or to distinguish it from other places of worship, or – for that matter – other *modes* of worship.

I mainly had in mind the building's simple largeness and in a sense I regret the title 'Cathedral,' which might tend to narrow its application to something Christian. I am more interested in our universal human impulse to worship, whatever the faith, and in these vast buildings we have erected all over the world, in order to worship together in large numbers.

But in this poem, I am also remembering a fairly recent experience of my own, in which I did attend a particular cathedral for a while. Its name is Clifton Cathedral, it is Roman Catholic and it is situated in Bristol. It is a 'modernist' structure, built just a few decades ago.

Thus, while most of the parts of this poem are describing and reflecting on worship that could in principle be taking place in any large building anywhere, some parts could only be describing *this* place. I am thinking in particular of Part Three. A few years ago, I mounted an exhibition of mainly bilingual poems there. You can find some pictures here :

<https://poemsforthewall.org/exhibition-of-bilingual-poems-in-clifton-cathedral/>