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'I asked the songthrush about the soul …'[1]

Pat Bennett in conversation with Pádraig Ó Tuama

Pádraig Ó Tuama is a poet with interests in language, violence, power, and religion. He is the host of On Being's "Poetry Unbound" podcast[2] *and has published volumes of poetry, essays, a memoir and theology. He lives in Belfast and New York City.* https://www.padraigotuama.com/

Pat Bennett is a liturgist and writer with a dual background in science and theology, and has worked with Pádraig as part of the Spirituality of Conflict project.[3] *She is based in Glasgow.*

Pat Bennett: Pádraig, many people will know you primarily as a poet and the host of On Being's phenomenally successful "Poetry Unbound" podcast. But you're also an experienced conflict mediator, hold undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in theology – including, most recently, a PhD in Theology through Creative Practice from the University of Glasgow – and, as I know through working alongside you on the Spirituality of Conflict project, you are someone with a deep and extensive knowledge of both the Old and New Testament canons and of their literary, cultural, and psychological underpinnings.

With each episode of "Poetry unbound", you offer an immersive exploration of a single poem which moves between analysis and storytelling – not in order to answer a 'What does the poem mean?' question, but as a way of helping the listener to explore and discover the

[1] From "In the Name of the Bee", Pádraig Ó Tuama, *Kitchen Hymns* (Copper Canyon Press, 2024), 5. All quotations from *Kitchen Hymns* are used with permission.

[2] https://onbeing.org/series/poetry-unbound/.

[3] https://www.spiritualityofconflict.com/.

wisdom it might offer for their own journey, and the questions it might ask about that. There's an invitation in this for them to bring their own lives, experiences and questions into a conversation with the poem, and it's clear, from their responses, that people find this a really helpful approach. However it's not necessarily one which we're encouraged to take when reading the biblical texts – which have often been presented as having a clear message which is authoritative, and as such can wield great power and control in various ways. In a time when this type of usage is becoming increasingly prominent, and polemic, in public discourse, I thought it would be good to explore how the kind of approach you use with poetry might open up different sorts of conversations with these ancient texts, as we seek insight and wisdom for the times in which we live.

In a recent interview with Eliza Griswold for *The New Yorker*, you said that 'the more I think of the Bible as art, rather than obligation, the wilder it's become.'[4] 'Art' and 'wildness' are perhaps not words we would typically use in connection with biblical texts, so that seems a good place to start! Can you expand on what you mean by them?

Pádraig Ó Tuama: Well, much of that was informed by reading and looking at the kind of imaginative, anarchic freedom that midrashic writers throughout millennia gave themselves to essentially free associate with the text. It was like Freud before Freud! They would take a text and ask questions about it. So, for instance, the Babylonian tractate of the Midrash (written during the Babylonian exile) takes the story of Abraham and Isaac up on top of the mountain after poor Isaac's been bound and released and asks – 'What do they talk about coming down the mountain?' It's an amazing question! And, so often what I've found these imaginary questions to do, is to disrupt what we have been told is the moral of the story and say – No! You can just pause it right in the middle and ask the curious question and see where it takes you. This kind of midrashic reading, the ways in which Jewish rabbis have created inter-commentary argumentation across centuries, and then reading the contemporary Torah scholar Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg made me realise that I'd never really been taught to ask questions.

[4] Eliza Griswold, "Pádraig Ó Tuama's Poetic Spirituality", *The New Yorker*, December 5, 2022, https://www.newyorker.com/news/on-religion/padraig-o-tuamas-poetic-spirituality.

In a certain sense, I suppose, having an Ignatian interest throughout much of my adult life has helped as well. Ignatius urges his followers to read a text twice at the beginning of their prayer, and then to close the book and to enter into the text in their imagination and see if there is any part of the story that draws their curiosity and imagination. But the midrashic approach seemed to amplify two things, one of which was to read the text very, very carefully, down to the tiniest jot and tittle,[5] if there is one. And then, accompanying that, to read your questions very carefully, to allow yourself the imagination of looking at this text as if it is wildness. And this has allowed me, I think, to move away from the idea that biblical material is anything less than *Ulysses* or *Gilgamesh* or the *Odyssey*, or any of these historical or contemporary works of brilliance that invite all kinds of fascinating associations.

PB: You seem to be saying that we are often simply too incurious, or too timid in our reading of the text, too ready to reach for the security of a 'given' meaning …

PÓT: And to assume that it is a *singular* meaning. But meaning is made and remade, and made and remade, across eras, centuries, circumstances, and across ways of reading. In Terrence Tilley's book *Story Theology* – which is a primer on reading the Bible through the lens of literary criticism – there's a line where he says that the author of a story cannot control the story's power to reveal.[6] And it's a radical assertion, because, if that's true, then the point is not, in the way that so many people were taught, to plough the texts to get at the singular original intention, or the piece of God it reveals, but rather to just look at it and ask – 'What's happening now?' This isn't simply saying read it casually and then see what happens. It's a phenomenological approach that asks for very close attention to the text: that we read it very carefully and, with that, allow the free association of the imagination – and therefore it does become very wild.

I think that this is what we also do in both poetry and visual art. Years ago a friend of mine said that he'd done a portrait of me. I was in my 20s and was – 'Oh my God, can I see it?' So I called around one evening and it was an entire canvas of my favourite colour – a deep, deep rust – and

[5] Matthew 5:18 (KJV).
[6] Terrence W. Tilley, *Story Theology* (Liturgical Press, 1990), 189.

then, in the top right corner, there was a small, verdant green window patch.

PB: I'm guessing this was not quite what your excited 20-something-year-old self was expecting?

PÓT: I said 'Wow, like this is a portrait?' And he said 'These are the colours I feel when I'm around you.' And I thought – 'Can you *do* that?' But I was so moved – he opened up Rothko to me, and how it is that he paid attention to the way the experience of a person translated to him into some kind of synaesthetic experience. So I am interested in how it is that art can therefore suggest itself in multiple ways – my friend wouldn't expect other people to have the same experience from that piece of art that he'd done. So if a piece of art is too attached to the controlling definition of the artist's temporary idea about its purpose, then I think the phenomenology of that art will be limited if people feel like they have to read it, or experience it, in a certain way. And it seems to me that when it comes to the literary art which we have – and that's ultimately what all of these texts which we call the Bible are – that the way that many people were taught to read is to have the answer before they know what it means to ask the question. And that will limit your imagination.

PB: It makes me think, too, of the way in which we can sometimes – especially with passages where the story is held as crucial to a larger theological narrative – completely collapse a text into its end point and miss what also happens along the way. When we hear the Annunciation story, for example, we so readily leap in our mind's ear from 'in the sixth month', to 'let it be to me …'; but such a lot else happens between those points, and the text offers insights and wisdom about all sorts of other things – about listening, about reflection, about internal debate and external questioning, about agency. It reminds me of Gabriel Marcel's description of the difference between the prospector and the explorer,[7] where for the former, everything which is not the object of the search is dismissed, but for the latter, everything encountered while searching is a seen as a gratuitous, enriching gift. What ways do you have for trying to

[7] Gabriel Marcel, *The Existential Background of Human Dignity* (Harvard University Press, 1963), 8.

approach biblical passages as an explorer, to help yourself really *read* these familiar words and stories and open yourself to their gifts?

PÓT: I like reading the Bible in different languages, reading it backwards and writing a passage out by hand – anything that arrests your attention, makes you go – 'Oh, look at that!' And what does it mean to read something carefully? It means to really, really see it. One time, at a Corrymeela[8] service, there was a young fella there, about 15, and the reading was the prodigal son. We'd read it once, carefully and slowly, and then the question for everybody was – 'Is there anything that in this text you'd want to change?' And he said, 'All I see is three men who don't know how to talk to each other.' And then he began to apologise for not knowing the text. But what a brilliant insight and what fresh eyes he came to it with! So often that text is used to illustrate a particular idea about God, but this lad came in with an entire critique from the perspective of a 15-year-old from Belfast: this is a story of failure between three men in a household!

PB: You talk a lot about this more expansive attentiveness in connection with poetry – of the need to pay attention not just to the words of the text, but also to notice what it's calling out in you; and then to listen to that as well, and to ask about the desire, the emotion behind that, and about how you can then be attentive to *those* things. The poet Paul Celan, whom I know you reference a lot, closes one of his late poems with the exhortation to 'hör dich ein / mit dem Mund' – 'listen your way in / with your mouth'.[9] That too seems to convey something about this way of really feeling our way into a text – exploring its textures and patterns, its sounds and silences, its corners and gaps – and letting these help us to hear what it is we are questioning, and what's behind those questions.

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[8] Founded by Ray Davey in 1965, the Corrymeela Community is Northern Ireland's oldest peace and reconciliation organisation. Working through community members, staff, volunteers, and partners, it seeks to 'engage with difference, heal division and support peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland and beyond.' For more information see https://www.corrymeela.org/. Pádraig was the Leader of this Community from 2014 to 2019.

[9] Paul Celan, "Die Posaunenstelle", in *Selected Poems*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Penguin, 1990), 351.

PÓT: And to be less certain that there's only one meaning-making pattern in it. There are multiple meaning-making patterns – one of which might be that there isn't meaning in it! The author might be retelling a vivid event they recall, but not be putting this forward as a kind of a moral template or a theological pointer. They might be just saying, well, this thing happened – the young man at the arrest of Jesus who ran away naked rather than be apprehended, for example – simply reported as part of the madness of that event. But the organising mechanism of everything trying to be a homiletic, for the purpose of explaining salvation, or even worse, a sectarian demonstration of religious superiority between the Christian approach, or a particular brand of Christianity, means that those things suddenly don't even become about the text. They become about tendencies in humanity to try to prove that one group has a better interpretation than the other, and so therefore everybody should belong to the superior group. And then suddenly you're talking neither about God, nor heaven, nor divine revelation – you're just being sectarian, and hiding all of that under the illusion of thinking that your interpretation of the text is singular and superior.

PB: When we worked on the Spirituality of Conflict project, one thing that really came home to me was that there are so many different sight lines into a story. Even a story which may, on the surface, have nothing to do with conflict can, when you read it through that lens, contain all kinds of things which then can educate and inform you about it. A parable badged as being about the end times isn't simply about 'what will happen when Jesus returns – period'. Those stories are often also about power structures, about how the dynamics of interaction can be played out in good and bad ways, about hospitality, about generosity, etc. As such they are rich repositories of wisdom for interrogating the *present* times and determining how we are to live in them.

PÓT: I agree. And again there's something here about abandoning the idea of singular meaning in a text, and maybe even abandoning the idea of comprehensive meaning about it; to think – 'Well, what if this was just written out of desperation and art and something like the unconscious?' And to think too of all of these vying, arguing, competing agendas happening in the communities in which these texts arose. I was once set an undergraduate essay question asking us to write a comparative analysis

between the political imaginations of the re-establishment of the city of Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile, comparing Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Nehemiah and second and third Isaiah. I felt like I was writing a drama for a political – a presidential – debate, and thinking these people would have *hated* each other! 'Build the walls up high, nobody can come in!' 'Nonsense! Knock the walls down! Swing the gates open wide and everyone can come in!' 'Let's be a city on the hill, a welcome for all'; 'Let's be exacting: Who are you? Is your husband or wife a Gentile? What are the circumstances under which they could be let in? Do you have half-foreign children? Maybe you should get proper ones!' etc.

As I was writing, it occurred to me that these people would have probably denied that they were co-religionists with each other because they were speaking to utterly contemporary, utterly secular concerns: about what to do with the destroyed city after the latest in a round of foreign dictators has come and annihilated you; about how you can preserve culture or preserve the future, or have a vision for the future, or attend to the bedraggled mess that you're left with. And the text therefore did not become about how you find the consistent answers to what they should have done. Because there *is* no 'should'! I just wanted to be in the political debate, watching them and thinking 'What do we do now?' 'I don't know what we do now. What can we do now?' And the text is permissive then, because suddenly, when you read it like that, you begin to ask, how do we look at the current political crisis? And is the text perhaps presenting something to say that in all of these there should be some guiding principles, and each of those can take a different manifestation: a guiding principle about the widow and the orphan and the foreigner, for instance. And that, ultimately, these are arguments about those things, and even when you do look at that kind of through-line, there are still going to be different ways within which that can be emphasised. So it just made every political debate of today seem alive and interesting, and to look through it, not for who's the singular right one, but to ask, what are the crises and the response? What are the moral and principled responses to crises, in and out of our control, that are guiding the voices that are trying to say 'I think this is the voice of reason and right' – which is another way of saying, 'Thus saith the Lord.'

PB: So you're arguing that we're doing ourselves a disservice when we constrain texts to specific themes, or take the Old Testament texts merely

as prequels to a story of salvation that's unfolded in the New Testament; that all the texts potentially have this kind of vivid immediacy if we approach them in a different way, and look at what's going on there much more closely without those constraining narratives to force our thoughts into a particular direction; and that this – could we call it 're-wilding'? – of the text can open up new wisdom for us in these troubled times. Which I guess is a parallel with letting a poem come into conversation with our life rather than asking 'What does it mean?'

PÓT: I've been shaped in this by theologians and nuns and priests and writers inside and outside the halls of religion – so I'm not saying anything new here. The Bible is sometimes referred to as 'God's love letter to humanity'. But if you say that, then what are you supposed to do with Abraham and Isaac, for instance, and almost every single biblical family – few of which would be legal today? What are you supposed to do about poor Judas, or Ananias and Sapphira, and those strange apocalyptic texts that seem like somebody's nightmare? 'God's love letter to humanity' is absolutely taming all that down. It's like saying Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* is only about a love story, when actually it's about so much else: empire; grief; shock; poverty; privilege; middle class people with aspirations; saris; flowers; songs; religion; sectarian conflict; partition. To say that the Bible is one thing is limiting it, I think. I'd just say it's an attempt over and over and over again by people to try to tell something true, as it seems to them at the moment. And it asks you to pay attention to your life, as well as to pay honour to these sophisticated, articulate people who were trying and failing, and trying and failing, and whose imagination of God needed to constantly be shattered and broken open.

PB: Paying this kind of attention to life takes us inexorably, it seems to me, back to the body and to incarnated experience – something which I know is a strong theme in your own writing and poetry. One poem in your recent collection *Kitchen Hymns* ends with the line 'busy with a body / not a question';[10] another says 'Your body is an event, / and you'll spend decades unpacking what's happened'.[11] Can you say a bit more about that,

[10] Ó Tuama, *Kitchen Hymns*, 21.
[11] Ó Tuama, 82.

about how you see the role of the body in given attention to a text and its questions?

PÓT: I have been fairly clear, through a series of recent poems, in being critical about the word 'belief' as it presents itself to me (I'm not saying that other people should think of it like this) – that it seems to be about trying to contain within our own psyche that which is simply beyond thought. And I found myself thinking, well, there must be more interesting things to do than be constantly saying – 'I don't know'.

I don't think time cares if I believe in it or not – what's left to me is to think about all the strangenesses, about what time is, and all the ways that time is many things that I can comprehend, as well as many things that I simply have no imagination for. I think belief is the same. Hence that line, 'busy with a body / not a question'. The question there is, 'Do you believe in God?' And certainly, as a gay man who was given all kinds of instructions about what you should or shouldn't do as a gay man, I wanted to write a poem that was amplifying and extolling and praising, really, the erotic experience, as a response to that question rather than as a slippage or a failure. And that isn't just relevant for those of us whose sexuality has been persecuted – many people who have been part of the halls of religion have been taught that sexuality is inherently shameful, and this shame has become deeply ingrained in them. So I suppose I was curious about what would it mean to trust that the body's experience in a trustable, erotic moment, might have something to say about that which we call God. And to extol that as an adequate response to the question of whether you believe in God; to not feel the need to finish the story off with a little moral, but to just let the two be in conversation. There are hares throughout *Kitchen Hymns* as well – and I think it's an entirely adequate response to the question 'Do you believe in God?' to go – 'Look, there's a hare', and to just pay attention to it and honour it, and honour the strangeness of the hare in all of that.

I've been influenced here, I suppose, by Hélène Cixous, the French essayist/philosopher/playwright/political writer who was so esteemed by Derrida. On one occasion, after brilliantly summarising the thinking of Heidegger, Hegel, Nietzsche and Freud, she then asked 'and did their hands hurt while they wrote?' While some of that is a joke about masturbation, I think, it's also part of her consistent attempt to say – what was happening to their bodies while they were writing? Who were they in

their personhood? And I think that's an intellectual commitment that she has. So, for example, after observing that much of the writing about fear of otherness has come from men, she thinks about the physical experience, both of sex and of childbirth, from the point of view of women – and then she says that if you've taken a body into yours, or if you've pushed a body out, then it's entirely likely that you might have a very different experience of what 'other' might mean, rather than the idea that the other always needs to be dominated, or that you should have a primal, automatic fear of otherness. She talks about the intelligence of recognising different experiences of body embodiments, and of how that will shape your political and philosophical imagination. And I loved the aliveness of that, of how she speaks about childbirth and labour, breastfeeding and messiness, etc., and says that all of this might be something called love, and this could be the beginning point rather than the assumption of primal fear towards the other. She does all that through attention to the body.

PB: And that has such a strong resonance, doesn't it, for a faith with incarnation at its heart: one where we talk about Christ taking flesh and becoming human. So if our own lives and bodies are loci of our own understanding or exploration of faith, then they are also one of the places we can consider the question – 'Do you believe in God?' In *Kitchen Hymns*, there's a whole sequence of poems with that title, poems which address daily life, and the things – large and small – of the quotidian round, the ordinariness of being alive and being in our flesh. And these become things through which the question of our sense/experience of the divine might be answered. I loved the sense of bricolage which goes hand in hand with that in the poems – of little bits and pieces coming together to make up that answer, in the same way that the long-tailed tits go about making their nest.[12]

Which brings us back to the question of paying attention to what things are calling to us in the biblical text, of opening ourselves up to the strangeness and wildness which might help us to come into a fruitful conversation with our own lives and faith journeys. You mentioned earlier some of the ways you approach the text – reading it in different versions or languages, or writing it out. What other things can we do – for ourselves, or with groups – to engage with a text in ways which might then help us

[12] Ó Tuama, *Kitchen Hymns*, 7.

find a way into its 'wildness', to see it as something different from the way it might have been usually presented to us?

PÓT: Jeanette Winterson – somebody who isn't formally part of religion but who has great theological intelligence and imagination – in her great book, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*, describes the value of Bible study in mining communities in the north of England, where she was brought up. She speaks of how, for people who were working brutal jobs and managing brutal family circumstances, the midweek Bible study was an opportunity to dignify their lives with a worldwide ancient text, and to then argue over what they thought about the characters and their actions.[13] She talks about how close attention to these was a way where people could feel like their lives were in conversation with an eternal text – which, for many people, is what the Bible is, or was. And therefore it becomes something in those communities, something like a language, a narrative language that transcends borders and even transcends languages. And she praises that – the kind of soap opera way where you might have an opinion about Rizpah, or an affection for the Witch of Endor;[14] or where you might want to say 'But here's the thing that I think about Judas'. And that within the context of a good study, the likes of which have been happening for centuries, there is space for all kinds of ways in which people can argue about matters that are vital to everyday living – like change, repentance, like coming into your own, like your prime passing, like needing to recognise that you are in need of help from other people, etc. We turn to our favourite soaps because they're compelling and we see little echoes of our lives in the people portrayed there. But that's also what the Bible is

[13] Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (Jonathan Cape, 2011), 68.

[14] Rizpah is one of the women in the Old Testament whose stories are often overlooked. A concubine of Saul, her two sons, Armoni and Mephibosheth, were among seven of his descendants ritually slaughtered by King David to appease the Gibeonites. As part of this, the bodies are left unburied, and for six months Rizpah sits out in the fields, stopping the carrion birds and the wild animals from despoiling them. David is eventually shamed by her actions into giving the bodies, and those of Saul and Jonathan, proper burial. See 2 Samuel 21:1–14. The Witch of Endor was a medium consulted by Saul who raises the spirit of Samuel for him to consult. Afterwards, when Saul is paralysed by fear, she offers him practical advice and sustenance. See 1 Samuel 28: 1–25.

doing by presenting all of these characters with their crises – and inviting our responses to those.

So I think what can be done well is for people to find a way of gathering round a text – having a cup of tea, reading together, and then talking and seeing what happens. And all you have to do is to say, 'Here's how I see it', or 'Where do you read that?' (and perhaps commit to not shouting anyone else down!) and then to allow the conversation to speak to your life. There's a fantastic example of this in *The Gospel in Solentiname*[15] – an amazing text from the Nicaraguan archipelago of Solentiname. During the 1970s its community was of subsistence farmers and artists who were under persecution from the Somoza government. Each Sunday the priest, Ernesto Cardinale, would read the text for mass on a Sunday morning and then ask the congregation – 'What do you think?' Afterwards at home, as far as he could recollect, he'd record what everybody had said. And that's what we have in this brilliant book: here's what Maria Sophia said; here's what Pedro said, etc. And what they're saying is how bits from the text – when the soldiers came for example – remind them of things that have happened to them, and what they noticed from that: they were reading the text, and the text was reading their lives, and you felt like you were part of a greater narrative. Every culture has got stories in it, and stories somehow are always where we work out some intelligence.

PB: This is the life we have, and it's in the life we have that we answer the question, 'Do you believe in God?' and discover what that means for how we live that life …

PÓT: Conflict resolution is filled with a primary question, which is 'Do you believe that change is possible?' If you think about the wars that are going on, behind most people's opinion as to who/what they think is right or wrong, is the relationship to change and whether they think certain actors – individuals, countries, or alliances – within war-making are capable of or interested in change. And that is the question of God as it occurs in conflict resolution. And so much of the literature that we have shows changes that are chosen, and then changes that are forced, and then everything in between. And it is so worthwhile looking at that in literature, because it's going to happen in life. And also looking at this in sacred

[15] Ernesto Cardinale, *The Gospel in Solentiname* (Orbis Books, 2010).

literature, where people are trying to evolve an idea of something eternal, and the text is constantly recognising that its imagination of the eternal name of God was flimsy and flawed and limited. So therefore the shape of God keeps changing, the name of God keeps changing, the whole way through these texts – and that is an invitation …

PB: to curiosity, imagination, listening, questions …

PÓT: … pleasant arguing with each other, and developing the capacity to say, 'Really? Where do you get that?' And to go, 'Do you mind if I ask you a question?' And then to say, 'Answer this with a story from your life' – and to just see what happens all around the text as you read it closely.

I love the stations of the cross that you find in many of the liturgical traditions around the world, and that's a helpful methodology too. When you look at the fourteen stations you find they're not all narrated directly from the text – Jesus falling three times, or Veronica wiping Jesus' face, for instance. In fact, the stations started as a meditation on the seven fallings of Christ and it was a walking prayer. But one of the things it shows is that within the context of a story, there are ways of chaptering, or stationing something. With groups of people, when we've been looking at a story, whether it's a biblical text, a narrative poem, I get them to close it and then ask – 'If you were to make fourteen stations from this, what would they be?' and – 'Allow yourself the freedom to repeat a few of them, or to hypothesise about something that you think would have happened along the way.' And it's very moving what people do with this, and then to say, 'Tell me why? How is it that your life has drawn you to give devotion to this, to this experience, or this little edge?' Again, those are exercises and points of view. And usually what happens in this way is that people move away from the idea that the text has a singular purpose or message, or proves why Christianity is superior; and suddenly what you're talking about is the ways in which a devout life is in conversation with something that we *can* prove – which is that literature is everywhere, and every culture has had stories and been guided by stories.

PB: When we were working on the Spirituality of Conflict project, I found this way of 'stationing' the Gospel stories so helpful: to stop at a point in the story and think, not about what happens next, or what the 'end point' is, but instead to ask myself 'What can I see happening in *this* moment –

and in this moment, what is the name I would give to God or the divine intention?' And then to consider what that name might tell me about how I'm responding to that story, what or who I'm aligning myself with, what conversation is opening up with the text, with God, here and now. And those conversations could be very different at different stopping points through the story, or when you read the story at different moments in your life.

PÓT: Exactly. There's a text – the last chapter of John's gospel – that I've read every year on my birthday since I was 20 – and I'm 50 this year. I read it mostly in Irish and I've come to it through such different lenses as years go by, and as I've moved from being younger than all the characters in that text, to older than them.

These moments in the text are like freeze frames in films which arrest you because they hold a whole wealth of emotion and experience that goes far beyond the confines of the film – and we'd probably all choose different ones in any particular film. There's one in *Love Actually* where Emma Thompson realises, as her husband gives her his Christmas gift, that he's having an affair. I find it breathtaking how, in that moment (and in a film which is mostly rather silly!), she holds in her person all of those experiences of shock, pain, love and concern for her children – it's just beautifully captured. And what I think we're trying to do when it comes to these texts is to say, 'Where were you stopped?', 'What happened to you?', 'Where would your sympathy go?' Once, during a meditation around the text where a woman enters the house of Simon the Pharisee, and wipes Jesus's feet with her hair, one woman said she found herself in the body of the Pharisee totally caught up in absolute jealousy of that woman, filled with envy out of a certain kind of yearning and wish. But she didn't mean that pejoratively – she just said 'I'm somebody who has responsibility. I have to hold it all together. And I've never been able to allow myself to just let everything be out there.' And I love that. Ignatius of Loyola said that if you're doing a meditation and something like this happens where your mind is totally captivated, stop. You don't have to finish the rest of your prayer. Something is happening – so let your prayer happen right there.

And that, I think, is what we're trying to do in stations of the cross, to ask ourselves or each other – where, today, are you being drawn? And that's where I think a Collect or any written form of prayer can be beautiful. The

Collect form is very simple: You name God; you unfold something about that name; you name your desire; you unfold something about that desire; you finish with an amen. And if you were to choose five stopping points in a text that you love, or that you're currently reading, and write a very simple Collect for each of them, it might only take ten minutes, but you'd have five very simple, short, prayers based on how it is that the text is in conversation with your life in the moment – and you've given God a name for each of those stopping points. Some of them might be a crisis stopping point, some of them might be a beautiful stopping point, some, a courageous stopping point. How gorgeous is that? And how many multiple meanings could come out?

And if somebody were to say 'Oh no, you shouldn't stop it there because you're missing the salvific point' – well, I think that is missing the artistic point, which is always what's driven the imagination of that which we call God.

PB: Thank you Pádraig. And in the spirit of this conversation, let's end on an act of wild imagination, taken from the closing poem in *Kitchen Hymns*:

[untitled/missæ]

I bless myself in the name
of the deer and ox,
the heron and the hare,
evangelists of land and wood
and air.
[…]
I go in the name of all of them,
their chaos and their industry,
their replacements, their population,
their forgettable ways, their untame natures,
their ignorance of why,
or how, or who.[16]

[16] Ó Tuama. 84.