

Treasuring the Questions
Reflections for Advent 2022
Part 1 - Questions

1 Corinthians 13: 12, The Passion Translation

For now we see but a faint reflection of riddles and mysteries as though reflected in a mirror, but one day we will see face-to-face. My understanding is incomplete now, but one day I will understand everything, just as everything about me has been fully understood.

The Key

At this point in Alasdair Gray's novel Lanark (Canongate, 1981), the protagonist, Duncan Thaw, is a shy teenager growing up in the West of Scotland just after the war.

The key was small and precise, yet in its use completely general and completely particular. Once found it would solve every problem: asthma, homework, shyness (in front of girls), fear of atomic war; the key would make everything painful, useless and wrong become pleasant, harmonious and good. Since he [Duncan Thaw] thought of it as something that could be contained in one or two sentences, he had looked for it in the public libraries but seldom on the science or philosophy shelves. The key had to be recognised at once and by heart, not led up to and proved by reasoning... Recently he had thought the key more likely to be found on a night walk through the streets, printed on a scrap of paper blown out of the rubble of a bombed factory, or whispered in a dark street by someone leaning suddenly out of a window...

They [Duncan Thaw and Coulter] were beside a fence of old railway sleepers planted upright at the towpath edge. From the other side a clear tuneless little voice was singing...

They looked through a gap in the sleepers onto a road with the canal embankment on one side and the black barred windows of a warehouse on the other. A small girl was skipping with a rope and singing to herself in a circle of light under a lamp. Coulter said, "That kid's too young to be up at this hour. What are ye grinning at?"

"I thought for a moment her words might be the key."

"What key?"

Thaw explained about the key, expecting it would send Coulter into a fit of annoyance, as most of his less practical concepts did. Coulter frowned and said, "Has this key to be words?"

"What else could it be?"

"When I was staying with auld MacTaggart in Kinlochrua during the war I remember two or three nights when I got a good view of the stars. Ye can always see more stars when you're in the country, especially if there's a nip of frost in the air, and these nights the sky was just hotching with stars. I felt this... this coming nearer and nearer me till I almost had it, but when I tried tae think what it was, it had gone. And this happened more than once."

"I don't know what you mean. What sort of thing was it? Did it tie up everything you believed? Could ye test things with it?"

"You could test nothing with it. It was a feeling, I suppose. It was gentle, and permanent, and more like a friend than anything else."

Fullness of Love

"The longer I live, the more I experience that God is Absolute Mystery, and as I grow in perception of this, I perceive also the sheer simplicity and unity of life. There is thus an increasing sense of 'unknowing' even though, as far as I can see, I do grow in wisdom and understanding..."

"God in God's essence is totally unknowable, yes. But I know that this same Mystery can be 'known' and that the answer to all our yearning, our questioning, the fulfilment of our transcendence, is utterly close, intimate, available, not to thought or to emotion but to love. The 'unattainable' is not a closed door but a welcome, a heart wide open to receive us."

"Through Jesus I know that the Holy Mystery is not something but someone, not merely fullness of being but also and primarily fullness of love, a holy communion opening itself outwards to embrace all persons, gathering all home to itself... As Christians we hold one certainty: God's unconditional love."

From Ruth Burrows, *Living in Mystery*, Sheed & Ward, London, 1996

The God of Surprises

In turning to God we must first acknowledge that whatever and however he is, he is mystery. We can never, with our finite minds, adequately grasp who he is. If you are searching for a clear and precise notion of who God is, you will not find him in reading this book, and if ever you do find a neat and clear definition, you may be sure that it is false. God is mystery: but that does not mean he is totally unintelligible. We can come to know a mystery and grow in knowledge of it, but the more we enter into the mystery of God, or more accurately, the more the mystery of God takes hold on us, the more we realise that he is mystery.

This truth about God, that he is mystery, is of fundamental importance. Being fundamental, any religion which ignores this truth will certainly lead us astray. We may construct a most elaborate and ingenious religious system, but if it is not grounded in this basic truth that God is mystery, then our elaborate system becomes an elaborate form of idolatry. We are constantly tempted to make God in our own image and likeness. We want to control and domesticate him, giving perhaps a position of high honour in our heart, home and country, but we remain in control. God is uncontrollable, beyond anything we can think of or imagine. 'God,' I once heard someone say, 'is a beckoning word.' He calls us out of ourselves and beyond ourselves, he is the God of surprises, always creating anew.

From Gerard W Hughes, *God of Surprises*, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985

Truth is to be found not so much in our responsive language as in that which causes us to ask questions, and our conscious ignorance...

E. Schillebeeckx

"I ran out of answers such a long time ago,
and I treasure the questions, wherever I go."

Martyn Joseph - *Treasure the Questions*

The Place Where We Are Right

From the place where we are right
Flowers will never grow
In the spring.

The place where we are right
Is hard and trampled
Like a yard.

But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.

Yehuda Amichai

A PAGE TO PONDER

“We are closer to God when we are asking questions
than when we think we have the answers.”

Abraham Joshua Heschel
Jewish philosopher and theologian



What is the question that feels most important
in your life, at the moment?