



Papers from the 2008 Modern Churchpeople's Conference

*Saving the Soul of Anglicanism: the nature and future of the Anglican Communion*

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## R. S. Thomas' Religious Poetry

### Questions not Answers: A way forward for the Anglican Communion?

Most Rev. Dr. Barry Morgan, Archbishop of Wales

The title of this lecture is "R. S. Thomas' Religious Poetry – Questions not Answers – A way Forward for the Anglican Communion?" Why this title? I have chosen the poetry of R. S. Thomas because he is one of Wales' most distinguished sons, a priest of the Church in Wales, who spent all his working life in the parochial ministry. He died in September 2000 at the age of 87. His poetry has been translated into many languages and he won many prizes and awards, narrowly missing the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1996.

During his lifetime he was not much enamoured of bishops, but I got to know him after his retirement when I was Bishop of Bangor, when I was no threat to him. I had always enjoyed his poetry from my days as a student and found him deeply engaging and found what he had to say full of profound insights. A great number of his poems are about God and the Christian Faith. The title of some of his poetry volumes reveal his attempt to grapple with existential questions – "Experimenting with an Amen", "Mass for Hard Times," "The Bread of Truth," and "H'M". In the poems in these volumes, and indeed in other volumes without religious titles, he grapples with the meaning of existence, belief in God, prayer, and God's revelation of Himself in the person of Jesus.

He returns to these themes again and again and by so doing raises fundamental questions about what it means to believe in God and to lead a Christian life.



He is to my mind first and foremost a religious poet. He does not profess, however, to give definitive answers but does raise profound questions about faith and belief. He is able to do that of course because he is a poet and not a systematic theologian and a poet "tells the truth but tells it slant" as Emily Dickenson, another poet, once put it. And because of that and because in his introduction to the Penguin Book of Religious Verse he defines religion as "the response of the whole person to reality, and poetry as the imaginative presentation of it", he may have much to teach Anglicans and the Anglican Communion at the present time, torn apart as it appears to be, partly because it wants definitive answers and is not prepared to live with questions and uncertainties. "Poetry" says Thomas

“is that which arrives at the intellect, by way of the heart”.<sup>2</sup>

In his autobiography he says that during his later life “he turned increasingly to the question of the soul, the nature and existence of God and the problem of time in the universe,”<sup>3</sup> and writing about himself in the third person, he says, “the religious vein in his poetry became more visible during his last years for after all there is nothing more important than the relationship between man and God.”<sup>4</sup>

How then might the poetry of this man help Anglicans and the Anglican Communion in its present crisis? And as I frame the question I am acutely aware of its paradox. R. S. Thomas would not have been much bothered about the Communion since he was not much concerned about either diocese or province. His concern was far bigger than that – it was with God and the universe and because that was so he has profound insights to offer. His poetry arose from and was shaped by his priesthood but he shirked none of the hard questions that believing in God entails and his poetry bears the marks of his inner wrestling with God as he strives to make sense of His purposes in the universe. Indeed he compares writing poetry with the attempt to encounter God. At times it seems to happen without great effort, at others it takes a lot of effort, for “the meaning is in the waiting” as he puts it in his poem entitled ‘Kneeling’. Neither God nor the poetic impulse comes to the poet at his own bidding. Thomas raises questions, gives hints of possible answers but there are no certainties for he sees the difficulties that believing in God entails. That to him is the nature of faith – it does not have definitive answers, nor does it resolve every doubt. I would like in the rest of this lecture to see how Thomas’ poetry can help us to think about God, prayer and His revelation in Jesus and how that in turn might have things to teach us as Anglicans.

## I. His insights about God.

He asks, “Who is it who ever saw God? Whoever heard Him Speak? We have to live virtually the whole of our lives in the presence of an invisible and mute God.”<sup>5</sup> Thomas confronts head on the elusiveness and the seeming absence of God at a time when many people seem to know only too clearly how God thinks, what God thinks and how we should conform to His will.

Thomas reminds us that it is impossible to define God. So he writes of the hiddenness of God, the mystery of God, the silence of God and the darkness of God. In so doing he is being true to centuries of Christian tradition which has always maintained that God is ultimately unknowable as He is in Himself, a mystery to which our human words point only by analogy. Only something that can be fully defined can be proved, and so, since it is impossible to prove the existence of God in the abstract, God remains a concept about the way things are. One of his volumes of poetry is entitled H’M, devoted to probing both the existence and nature of God. Does the apostrophe in the title indicate the omission of the letter ‘i’, so that the volume is in fact about God reflecting the fact that God in the Old Testament was never called by his proper name, in order to respect his otherness and ultimately his unknowability, or is H’M just a kind of reflection on how things might be? – a kind of hm. Thomas is convinced of the fact of God’s existence but constantly reminds us that God is not an object to be explored, but a mystery in whose presence one can ultimately only rest in faith, hope and prayerful existence. For him God is beyond anything we can conceive or understand, and so it is only through using images, metaphors and analogies that one can begin to find a language for Him, and these elements are always provisional, inadequate and incomplete. One often has to resort to saying what God is not rather than what He is, for as the prophet Isaiah put it “To whom can

God be compared?" His thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways are not ours." (Isaiah 40v 18 : 55 v8.) "It is the attempt to define him – that is when the trouble begins"<sup>6</sup> writes the poet. "Perhaps we should not attempt to define him. If the creature can comprehend his creator, his creator is no longer a creator,"<sup>7</sup> he says in an interview. Neither modern mathematics nor the wonders of modern science can capture Him:

'My equations fail  
As my words do.'<sup>8</sup>

'Genes and molecules  
have no more power to call  
him up than the incense of the Hebrews.'<sup>9</sup>

Thomas compares trying to understand God to the way that waves run up the shore, always to fall back. The poet like the tidal wave runs:

'up the approaches of God  
and falls back.'<sup>10</sup>

God is awesome and beyond man's reach and beyond the capacity of our intellects to understand Him. The only possible response is to be silent before God's silent presence, "Whose silence so eloquent as this?" he asks in a poem called Nuclear.

He picks up this theme of the silence of God again and again:

'But the silence in the mind  
is when we live best within  
listening distance of the silence  
we call God. This is the deep  
calling to deep of the psalm  
writer, the bottomless ocean  
we launch the armada of  
our thoughts on, never arriving.'<sup>12</sup>

or

'I dwelt  
in a soundless darkness in the  
shadow  
of your regard.'<sup>13</sup>

It is through silence that God communicates and it is in the silence that humans encounter him – but a relationship is forged:

'The relation between us was  
silence; that and the feeling  
of each one being watched  
by the other .....'<sup>14</sup>

This is true faith – God is real, not an object among other objects but the ground of one's being. This reality surpasses the poet's understanding for he realises he can never understand God's inner nature and being. But this is an active not a passive watching and waiting – an alert attention to God's presence "for the poet makes his return on his knees."<sup>15</sup> To have this relationship involves:

'a turning aside,  
a bending over a still pool,  
where the bubbles arise  
from unseen depths, as from truth  
breathing.'<sup>16</sup>

"The darkness" he says,

'implies your presence ....  
It is not your light that  
Can blind us; it is the splendour of  
your darkness'.<sup>17</sup>

There's no guarantee, of course, that in that silence, in that darkness, that God will necessarily respond or indeed if He does what form that response will take. But the desire of the poet for God is a desire of the heart; it's not a desire of the intellect. Knowing God is about having a relationship with Him, and again,

that's in line with Christian mystical tradition. "The Cloud of Unknowing", a medieval mystical work, says "that God can't be reached by intellect and by reason but through love."<sup>18</sup> And so, R. S. Thomas speaks about the desire of the heart, the desire to enter into the darkness of God. It's obvious from his poetry that R. S. Thomas used to spend a great deal of time in church in order to find peace and quietness, waiting for God to reveal himself:

'Moments of great calm before an altar of wood  
in a stone church in summer,  
waiting for the God to speak,  
the air a staircase for silence.'<sup>19</sup>

Speech is not the language of prayer but waiting and desiring God are. We cannot force God to reveal himself. Only as we give time and attention to Him may we encounter God – but there are no guarantees:

'There was no admiring  
of my restraint, no suggestions even  
of a recompense for my patience.  
If he had allowed himself but one  
Word: his name, for instance, spoken  
Ever so obliquely; my own that  
For all his majesty, acknowledged  
My existence.'<sup>20</sup>

The poet reaches out for God hoping for a 'reciprocating touch?'<sup>21</sup> But he realises, as did the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart, that 'where understanding and desire end, there is darkness and there God's radiance beings.'<sup>22</sup> So too the seventeenth century divine Henry Vaughan speaks of God's dazzling darkness where God is to be found for:

'The darkness  
is the deepening shadow  
of our presence: the silence a  
process in the metabolism,  
of the being of love.'<sup>23</sup>

The miracle is that in persisting with and in the silence there come intimations of the presence of God. Thus:

'There are times even at the Pole  
when he, too, pauses in his withdrawal  
so that it is light there all night  
long.'<sup>24</sup>

'He's such a fast God, always before  
us and leaving us as we  
arrive.'<sup>26</sup>

'His are the echoes  
we follow, the footprints he has just  
left. We put our hands in  
His side hoping to find  
It warm.'<sup>27</sup>

There are two allusions there, to his habit of putting his own hand in the nest of birds, discovering that the birds have just gone, and also, too, of course the invitation of Thomas the disciple to put his hand in Jesus' side after the resurrection as proof of His having come through death to life. So he writes:

'We never catch  
Him at work but can only say  
coming suddenly upon an amendment  
that here he has been.'<sup>28</sup>

or again another poem:

'So in every day life  
It is the plain facts and natural happenings  
that conceal God and reveal him to us  
little by little under the mind's tooling.'<sup>29</sup>

God may speak very little, but he does speak sometimes but one has to listen hard to what He is saying. There is an economy about God's self-revelation:

'It is when one is not looking  
..... that God comes.'<sup>30</sup>

God is not predictable, you can't pin him down, you can't guarantee to find him in and through the natural world, but there are moments, if you are alert enough, when that does happen. But what the poet is also saying is that the God who created this world continues to reveal Himself in and through it, and that it is often through the events of every day life that we discover God and His will for us. In other words, God is not abstracted from His world, but is revealed in and through it. We have to be alert to the presence which is never an unambiguous presence since God wants our response to be voluntary not forced. Encountering God is never clear cut and straightforward.

Moreover this God seems to be absent a great deal of the time – the *deus absconditus* that many mystics write about:

'Never known as anything  
but an absence, I dare not name him  
as God.'<sup>31</sup>

Or in "Via Negativa"

'I never thought other than  
that God is that great absence  
In our lives, the empty silence  
Within, the place where we go  
Seeking, not in hope to  
Arrive or find.'<sup>32</sup>

Thomas, echoing Isaiah and later Luther, saw God as a God who hid Himself. Yet the hiddenness of God does not preclude our being able to find Him when he chooses to reveal Himself. This is totally different from not believing in God, for if

there is no God then there is no possibility of finding Him, whereas for R. S. Thomas a God who hides Himself provides a challenge for us humans to search Him out since the poet believed that nothing of any worth came easily. The hiddenness of God therefore draws people on like a magnet. Following Aquinas, Thomas believed God revealed Himself to people according to their ability to receive him.<sup>33</sup> So, the absent God is never totally absent in Thomas's life and poetry. Paradoxically, to search for God is to find Him. Again and again Thomas finds "a presence in absence" as he compares God's presence to that of his dead wife.

The absence of God, therefore, suggests the presence of someone who has been there but who has moved on. Frustrating as that may be, it corresponds to the spiritual experience of many Christians who reach out in faith to a God who eludes them, who can never be fully grasped but who has left tantalising hints of his existence behind.

Faith reaches out to the darkness and is occasionally rewarded by glimpses of where God has been. These intimations of the divine are enough to spur the poet on in his quest for God. The "luminosity of his shadow"<sup>34</sup> is enough to sustain him in his quest.

In his poetry and in his discussions about God, Thomas echoes the experience of both mystics and theologians. Simone Weil said, that "God can only be present in creation under the form of absence", that is that God cannot be identified with any aspect of the universe because He is the origin of all of it. So Thomas believed that when one is conscious of God's absence then paradoxically one becomes aware of His presence. Darkness and absence do not imply nothingness but rather the mysterious presence of the living God as men and women try to reach out to him. It is a presence in absence. Faith is continuing to believe

that one can catch tantalising, glimpses of this God who is "too fast for us".

This approach to God is worlds away from those who are totally certain about God's actions and activities and who believe that others should simply fall into line and accept their interpretation of God's activity in the world.

## II. R. S. Thomas' kind of theology alters one's perspective on prayer.

It is more of a listening than a talking. It is waiting for God, opening oneself out to Him and spending time in His presence. Prayer is about submitting one's will to God's will, not attempting to enforce one's own will on God. There is more to prayer than reciting verbal formulae in God's presence. The poet in a radio broadcast once said that he had yet to come across a satisfactory book on prayer.

Thomas has no patience with the kind of person who would talk to God as if God were eavesdropping in the doorway<sup>35</sup> nor with bombarding Him with personal requests and petitions, a kind of shopping list of wants:

'I would have knelt  
long, wrestling with you, wearing  
you down. Hear my prayer, Lord, hear  
my prayer. As though you were deaf,  
myriads  
of mortals have kept up their shrill  
cry, explaining your silence by  
their unfitness.  
It beings to appear  
This is not what prayer is about.'<sup>36</sup>

Again in another poem he explains how in the past:

'It had begun  
by my talking all of the time  
repeating the worn formulae  
of the churches in the belief

that was prayer. Why does silence suggest disapproval? The prattling ceased .....

I contented  
Myself I was answering his deafness  
with dumbness. My tongue  
Lolled, clapper of a disused  
Bell that would never again  
Pound of him.'<sup>37</sup>

He writes scornfully of:

'Prayers like gravel  
flung at the sky's  
window, hoping to attract  
the loved one's  
attention.'<sup>38</sup>

For the most part, God does not answer prayer in either a mechanical or arbitrary way, but rather reveals Himself in personal relationships or nature. Thus in the poem 'Folk Tale' the poet almost persuades himself to abandon prayer and its endless petitions. But something deters him:

'peering once  
through my locked fingers  
I thought that I detected  
the movement of a curtain.'<sup>39</sup>

So the poet perseveres with his prayer life, but it is about nurturing a relationship, not seeking answers to a list of demands. Saints and mystics have also argued that prayer is not about bombarding God with petitions but waiting in silence for his revelation of Himself. As he says in his poem, Ivan Karamazov he cannot believe in a God who returns prayers like tickets:

'with the words  
"Not granted" written upon them.  
I repudiate such a God.'<sup>40</sup>

Some people think that in writing such poetry R. S. Thomas did not believe very much. John Barnie, the editor of the Welsh Cultural Magazine Planet, writing in a book entitled "Echoes to the Amen ..... a series of essays after R. S. Thomas" says that "he was a man struggling to retain a faith in God in the face of the evidence available to him from the material world."<sup>41</sup> He goes on to say that Thomas failed to accept the logical conclusion of his position which would have led him to cease believing in God. He thinks Thomas should have adopted the position of his contemporary, the Swedish poet Harry Martins "who lived without the baggage of theology"<sup>42</sup> without having the need for a God or any ultimate answers and for whom the universe was an enigma. Thomas should have given up the "consolation of religion."<sup>43</sup> Barnie chastises Thomas for his constant harping on God's absence. He writes "In a world where God is present only as an observer, it may be that he is absent in the more thorough going sense of being non-existent."<sup>44</sup> Yet is not Thomas addressing the question most believers, if they are honest face – does God exist or are we just talking to ourselves when we pray? Kierkegaard, the Danish theologian whose writings influenced Thomas, asked the same questions and was the "articulator of uneasy faith and experienced living over dark fathoms."<sup>45</sup>

'Is prayer  
not a glass that, beginning  
in obscurity as his books  
do, the longer we stare  
into, the clearer becomes  
the reflection of a countenance  
in it other than our own.'<sup>46</sup>

It is not the case that for Thomas, God had no reality beyond his language about Him. He attempts to engage with the mystery of God's transcendence but realises that God is a reality greater than him and that he will never be able to compre-

hend God's inner nature and being. This is a totally orthodox position that does not offer cast iron certainties but explores difficulties and paradoxes. Thus he writes of the natural world as a place of great beauty and a place where God is revealed:

'Many creatures reflect you,  
The flowers, your colour, your tide,  
The precision of your calculations.'<sup>47</sup>

On the other hand he writes of the cruelty of nature and the way creatures prey on one another and the great waste inherent in the evolutionary process – "the impersonal, pitiless, beauty of nature."<sup>48</sup> Either God has no part in this cruelty, so that there is another power as great or greater than Him or else God is in some way responsible for the cruelty. It is summed up in his autobiography when he sees the sea as a mirror full of beauty and glory bearing the reflection of clouds and birds and yet "under the deceptively innocent surface, thousand of horrors, as if they were the creator's failed experiments."<sup>49</sup>

Darwin in his 'Origin of Species' raised the same question, where the weakest creatures seemed to go to the wall. Yet Thomas is not saying that there is no purpose or design behind the world – it has evolved over billions of years by the process of natural selection where admittedly only the fittest survive. In so doing he faces the dilemma we all face when we believe in a God who has created the world where there is so much beauty and order that it seems axiomatic that there is a purpose to it all, and yet is also full of much disorder, disharmony, cruelty and waste. One can appreciate the beauty of a sunset and yet be thrown by the randomness and destruction of a tsunami. We too, like Thomas, can feel:

'And in the book I read  
"God is Love". But lifting  
my head, I do not find it so.'<sup>50</sup>

It is the heart of the dilemma of anyone who is a religious believer. How do you reconcile a world where beauty, violence and cruelty seem to exist side by side? It is an unresolved theological problem for all Christians but Thomas is willing to face it. Belief in God is not always straightforward.

That is why on the day of judgement Thomas says he would have a great number of things to say to God:

'Storming at him,  
as Job stormed with the eloquence  
of the abused heart.'<sup>51</sup>

He said that what he tilted against was not God, but people's idea of God, stereotyped notions of God:

'I am really being derisive about men's ideas of God ..... I believe in God, I'm trying to show how people sometimes attempt to pin down this Being who's not a Being. A lot of my work is ironic, which possibly some people wouldn't always get.'<sup>52</sup>

He chastises the church for trying to pin God down too neatly:

'We have over furnished  
our faith.'<sup>53</sup>

and

'They laid this stone trap  
for him, enticing him with candles,  
as though he would come like some  
huge moth  
out of the darkness to beat there.'<sup>54</sup>

but

'Why then, do I kneel still  
striking my prayers on a stone  
heart? Is it in hope one  
of them will ignite yet and throw  
on its illumined walls the shadow  
of someone greater than I can under-  
stand?'<sup>55</sup>

and

'History showed us  
He was too big to be nailed to the wall  
of a stone chapel, yet still we  
crammed him  
Between the boards of a black book.'<sup>56</sup>

The living God cannot be restricted by either Church or Bible – that would, be to fetter his sovereign freedom. Ben Astley commenting on a poem entitled Possession says of it that "it leaves us pondering the nature of man and the universe. He gives us a diction of despair ('emptiness,' 'nobody there,' nothing) starkly juxtaposed with moments of hope ('illuminated city,' 'points of light'). His final image 'infinite darkness between points of light' allows us some understanding of the problem of being a man of faith ..... how to possess (or be possessed by) a faith beyond sensible experience.'<sup>57</sup> In other words doubt is part of faith because faith is not absolute certainty about God.

### III. What then of Thomas' insights about God's revelation in Jesus?

Jesus certainly plays a less prominent part in his poetry than God but he is a Christian poet nevertheless and a quarter of his poems in 'Laboratories of the Spirit' are meditations on the Cross and both his volumes 'Counterpoint' and 'Mass for Hard Times' deal with Christian themes. He writes of God's love revealed supremely in Jesus but does not explain how that is so:

'He kneeled long,  
and saw love in a dark crown  
of thorns blazing, and a winter tree  
golden with fruit of a man's body.'<sup>58</sup>

In and through the crucifixion of Jesus, the love of God shines through. Through the crucified body of Jesus, one can see

something of God's love. That is depicted here by golden fruit, gold being the traditional colour of divinity. So a tree, which might look very dead in winter, is in fact full both of golden fruit and blazing thorns. So the poet writes that, on the tree of the Cross, God's love blazes out in Jesus despite his agony.

Another poem has the same theme of this new life coming through the Cross of Jesus:

'Not the empty tomb  
but the uninhabited  
cross. Look long enough  
and you will see the arms  
put on leaves. Not a crown  
of thorns but a crown of flowers  
haloing it, with a bird singing  
as though perched on paradise's  
threshold.'<sup>59</sup>

So, to Thomas in and through Jesus, God is revealed as a suffering God because of His love for humanity, and there are many poems which stress this theme of God's love being revealed through Jesus, 'a mystery terrifying enough to be called love'. God's love is made manifest supremely in and through the cross and suffering of Jesus. Listening to the violinist Kreisler and watching him play he writes:

'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  
It was himself that he played.'<sup>60</sup>

In other words, just as the violinist gives totally of himself in playing his instrument, the poet sees on Calvary the total self giving of God in Jesus and a total identification with humanity.

'Jesus is "Love's risen body".'<sup>61</sup>

For Thomas, if people want to know what God is really like then they have to look at Jesus, because he believed that it was in and through Jesus that God's love was disclosed as fully as it could be disclosed in a human being. That, of course, is in line with Christian Orthodoxy. So, it's interesting that, although it's impossible, as he says in other poems, to fully understand and comprehend God, yet this God is not some kind of remote, inaccessible, passionless God, unaffected by what happens to His world. In Jesus, God draws near to His world, suffers with His world, and His nature is that of out-flowing love towards that world. That is how God responds to the evil and tragedy of His world – by being involved in it through Jesus. At one and the same time, God is absolutely different from and beyond his world, and yet in and through Jesus relates to that world in self-giving compassion and love. The action of Jesus is the action of God and the two things cannot be separated. The life, ministry and death of Jesus, for R. S. Thomas, lie at the heart of all of that, because this God suffers in and with his world, and aches with it in its brokenness and its tragic happenings. The poet does not explain how or why that is so, simply states that to be the case. For Thomas, God is not some self contained the absolute monad of the Greek philosophers, unaffected by the tribulations of creation but a suffering, passionate God who aches for the world, and embraces it through Jesus with his love. God is revealed in Jesus, and especially in the cross of Jesus:

'This Christmas before  
an altar of gold  
the holly will remind  
us how love bleeds.'<sup>62</sup>

It is very difficult for any of us to explain how this God of love answers the suffering of His world, and in the end, there is

no explanation. Thomas simply states that that is God's nature. Love is His chief attribute. R. S. Thomas is not a theologian in the sense that he works out some kind of systematic theory of atonement or resurrection. He nevertheless, links the cross of Jesus to the love of God so that you can't understand God without that link:

The Cross is:

'a mystery  
terrifying enough to be named love.'<sup>63</sup>

God is:

'Impassible  
yet darkening your countenance  
once for a long moment  
as you looked at yourself  
on a hill top in Judea.'<sup>64</sup>

Here again Thomas' poetry is akin to the thoughts of many theologians. "God looks" in the words of Rowan Williams into the crucified human face to see who he is, to see himself in the centre of the world's suffering.'<sup>65</sup> Another Archbishop of Canterbury described God as Christlike and that in him there was no unchristlikeness at all. Again, no explanation is given of how and why that is so – for them, as for Thomas, it simply is the case that it is so.

This is totally in line with what the New Testament tells us about God reconciling the world to Himself in Jesus, without offering an explanation of how that is achieved. One needs to contrast that with a recent debate in Britain about the penal substitutionary theory of the atonement. That doctrine tries to explain Christ's death on the Cross on behalf of sinners. It asserts that Christ died as a substitute for sinful humanity and by so doing received the fullness of God's wrath as the penalty for our sins, thus making it possible for God to forgive the human race. Now quite apart from rais-

ing moral questions as to how a sinless victim can be substituted for a sinful one in eradicating the latter's sin, the depiction of God is one of wrathfulness and vengeance. That seems to be at variance with the God embodied in Jesus and depicted in the New Testament whose defining characteristic is love, not anger. On that view of things, when God's love is met by human rejection and hate and ends in the crucifixion of Jesus, God's response through Jesus is to persist in his actions of love and forgiveness. R. S. Thomas depicts God as loving not wrathful, suffering with His world and being vulnerable to it, echoing St Paul's theology about God being revealed in weakness not power.

The penal substitution theory tells us exactly how the cross works in securing our redemption. The concept of God as loving does not do that – it simply affirms that the defining characteristic of God is love. If that is so, that has profound implications for all Christians and how they handle differences and treat people whose views differ from theirs.

Anglicanism, at its very best has always asserted that it is impossible to pin down the living God, and that all our ideas and doctrines about God are provisional since God is bigger and more mysterious than we can ever imagine. Talk about God (Theology) is an attempt to put into words that which cannot really be described which is why Christian theology has tended to describe what God is not rather than what He is. Anglicanism has also historically been prepared to live with theological untidiness and diversity seeking to balance the insights of scripture, tradition and reason. It has been prepared to live with a spectrum of views without seeking to define things too narrowly or precisely. It is what the poet Louis McNeice in another context called "the drunkenness of things being various". R. S. Thomas' work is in this tradition, of being prepared to live a life of faith with doubts, uncertainties, and

paradoxes and also being prepared to admit that:

'I have faltered  
like Peter, unable  
to believe you had arms  
to sustain me.'<sup>66</sup>

And God is prepared to accept that, because He is not a God, who bludgeons us into belief, (and so here is another lesson for us Anglicans) but gives us sovereign freedom to come to Him in our own way. God is elusive because He does not want to force His being upon us. His approach is unobtrusive and even ambiguous.

'remarkable merely for the absence of clamour.'<sup>67</sup>

If we are to form a relationship with Him, God wishes it to be a voluntary one,

'To yield to an unfelt pressure that, irresistible in itself, had the character of everything but coercion.'<sup>68</sup>

If that is how God acts and we are made in His image, then His characteristics ought to be ours in our dealing with one another.

### Notes

1. R. S. Thomas (ed.) The Penguin Book of Religious Verse (Penguin Classics, Harmondsworth, 1963), p.9.
2. Residues ("Don't ask me .....") (Bloodaxe Books, Northumberland, 2002.)
3. R. S. Thomas, Autobiographies (Phoenix, London 1977) translated from Welsh by Jason Walford Davies) p.104.
4. Ibid. p.104.
5. Ibid. p.104.
6. Ibid. p.104.
7. Anglo - Welsh Review 74 (1983), p.39. 'R. S. Thomas talks to J. B. Lethbridge.'
8. Frequencies (The Absence), (Macmillan, London, 1978).
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