

## Reflections on A Poem

Frank Hardy

The summer of 2022 my wife and I were visiting Finland and were invited to attend a performance of an oratorio by an American composer, and performed exquisitely well in the small city of Hyvinkää. The part of this work that I found most moving was the *Lacrimosa*, with words by Conrad Aiken,<sup>1</sup> but sung in Finnish. His poem follows, in its English original:

Music I heard with you was more than music,  
And bread I broke with you was more than bread.  
Now that I am without you, all is desolate,  
All that was once so beautiful is dead.

Your hands once touched this table and this silver.  
And I have seen your fingers hold this glass.  
These things do not remember you, beloved.  
And yet your touch upon them will not pass.

For it was in my heart you moved among them,  
And blessed them with your hands and with your eyes;  
And in my heart they will remember always.  
They knew you once, O beautiful and wise.

There is no theology here; only a human memory. The poet has lost a loved one. And this particular poet knew what it was like to lose loved ones. He was acquainted with deep personal loss. I would not want to make theology of a poem, but in my mind it provokes theological reflections.

In the upper room before His crucifixion, Jesus used the analogy of bread and wine to describe His body and His blood – figures that would only be understood in retrospect. We can be sure these were figures because Jesus speaks of His body and blood as being separated from each other, but on Thursday evening they had not been. That would not happen until the following day. When Jesus handed His disciples the bread, and said this is My body, no one confused the fingers for the bread, the bread for the fingers. And the same was true of the wine. There was no stain on the cup as He handed it to them. He was teaching, then as always. And on a spiritual level He was nourishing them.

But they were also nourishing Him. Their presence with Him answered a need. In the garden they would desert Him, and He would be deprived of all human

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://songofamerica.net/song/music-i-heard-with-you/>. When Aiken was still a child, his father took first his wife's life, then his own. He was there when this happened.

companionship. But on this occasion all were present. "And bread I broke with you was more than bread." This statement could be applied to them, and to Him.

We remember the story from a resolutely one-sided point of view. We reflect on what Jesus' presence meant to His disciples, and to us. And it means everything. But what did their presence mean to Him? Surely there is more than one level of meaning in the words, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 15). Not alone; with them. He would be alone soon enough.

The events of that evening surely meant more to Him than to them, knowing, as He did, things they did not. He would also have carried memories of it afterward, as they did. But different memories. Memories from a different point of view. Were His feelings comparable to those of the poet who wrote so touchingly of, I assume, his mother? We could ask this a different way: Were the poet's feelings comparable to His?

The words quoted could accurately reflect the disciples' thoughts on the Sabbath when Jesus was still in the tomb, as they felt the full extremity of His absence. Could they also reflect Jesus' thoughts now as He anticipates what it will be like to be reunited with them, and with us all, at the second coming?

Paul says in one place, "Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Tim 4:8). Are we the only ones who experience this longing? My sense is we do not realize how much we are loved.