Interrupted By Hope

ADVENT AS POETIC IMAGINATION

(Malcolm Guite “A Womb for a Wounded World” video)

How might we reimagine our lives, however difficult that might be? Poet and scholar, Malcolm Guite, helps us draw a line around our lives so that we can make sense of the most tragic of events. God is waiting to be born in us, even if our lives appear to be a dark and dirty manger.

Questions for Reflection

1. Guite starts by talking about why he wrote “O Emmanuel.” He wrote the sonnet in remembrance of a friend who died of a brain tumor. Toward the end of his life, his friend said, “I think my life itself is a poem. I know I am being written by God. But my big problem is I always thought I was an epic, but now it turns out that I am a sonnet. I am short; I see the end right here.”

   How might we look at our lives as compared to a literary genre? Are our lives epics, or sonnets, or tragedies, or comedies, or short stories? Many, if not most of us, presume that our lives will be long, that there will always be another day—but what if our end comes sooner than later? How does that change what we invest in each day?

2. Guite says that towards the end of his friend’s life he had “to know how to concentrate the forces, like I have the bounding line now.” The image of the “bounding line” is one where two surfaces converge onto each other. Guite saw that his poetic technique and his friend’s were converging on this line. On a grander scale, the “bounding line” takes place when our life meets the “life” of God. Guite talks about this bounding line later in his poem “O Sapientia.”

   How has God brought us together with others to form a “bounding line”? How do we often have negative connotations about being bound? How might it be an actual benefit to be bounded together, with others and with God?
3. Below is the text to Guite’s sonnet, “O Sapientia.” The word, sapientia is Latin, for wisdom.¹ This poem invokes wisdom for the start of Advent.

O Sapientia

I cannot think unless I have been thought,
Nor can I speak unless I have been spoken.
I cannot teach except as I am taught,
Or break the bread except as I am broken.
O Mind behind the mind through which I seek,
O Light within the light by which I see,
O Word beneath the words with which I speak,
O founding, unfound Wisdom, finding me,
O sounding Song whose depth is sounding me,
O Memory of time, reminding me,
My Ground of Being, always grounding me,
My Maker’s Bounding Line, defining me,
Come, hidden Wisdom, come with all you bring,
Come to me now, disguised as everything.²

What does it mean to welcome wisdom into our lives?
What does wisdom have to do with being bound to God?
How can we fill our lives with this wisdom?

4. The second poem that Guite recites is “O Emmanuel.” Emmanuel means “God with us” in Hebrew and, in the book of Isaiah, it is the sign of God’s presence in the midst of the conquering Assyrian Empire.

O Emmanuel

O come, O come, and be our God-with-us
O long-sought With-ness for a world without,
O secret seed, O hidden spring of light.
Come to us Wisdom, come unspoken Name
Come Root, and Key, and King, and holy Flame,
O quickened little wick so tightly curled,
Be folded with us into time and place,

¹ See Richard Rohr’s video on wisdom and Advent where he discusses the Gregorian chant, “O Sapientia.”

² This poem is from Malcolm Guite’s book, Sounding the Seasons: 70 Sonnets for the Christian Year (Canterbury Press, UK, 2013).
Unfold for us the mystery of grace
And make a womb of all this wounded world.
O heart of heaven beating in the earth,
O tiny hope within our hopelessness
Come to be born, to bear us to our birth,
To touch a dying world with new-made hands
And make these rags of time our swaddling bands.

What might it mean to have “God with us”?
Guite ends the poem saying, “make these rags of time our swaddling bands”?
What might he mean by saying “rags of time”?
How can God transform our lives into something that can receive the Christ child into this world?

3 This poem is from the same collection of sonnets.