

## The Holly Oak

The wind that blew my seed,  
the rain that nourished me  
were all you, one great God.

By Your will the desert  
did not swallow me. I grew  
tall and straight and true

to honour you:  
god of fire and water  
air and desert.

Then men with axes came  
to cut me down  
Was this your will?

And were these men also you?  
Were their axes you?

And who was he,  
nailed to my body  
on that bare hill of rock

Who in that hour  
when your light was lost to me  
cried in my voice:

'Oh God,  
my God -  
why have you forsaken me?'

by Mick Gowar

The holly oak or ilex is reputed (along with many others, including the cypress or cedar) to be the tree used for the cross, and this poem was inspired by the Anglo-Saxon allegorical poem *Dream of The Rood*. In that poem the cross speaks of its experiences, and in particular its witness to the sufferings of Christ.

Mick Gowar lives in Chard (where his wife Ann is the Rector) and has a long engagement with poetry – his own and other people’s. I asked him what place he thinks poetry has in a life of faith and he writes:

‘I would say that poetry is in many ways central to a life of faith, in that the holy texts of the Old and New Testaments are best understood as poetry - or at least through an appreciation of the techniques often associated with poetry: metaphor, allegory, even irony. Some theologians and poets have even gone so far as to suggest that the life of Jesus was in itself the most sublime and still living poem, and that Jesus was the greatest creative mind - or to put it another way, the most inspiring and profound poet - who has ever lived ...’

### **read more about Mick’s life and work**

Mick Gowar

*I became interested in poetry in my teens, first through an excellent anthology I was given at school, Rhyme and Reason edited by Raymond O’Malley and Denys Thompson. I was living in North London and was able to attend the Poetry International festivals, where as a fifth and sixth former I was lucky enough to hear readings by Stevie Smith, W.H.Auden and Brian Patten - which probably formed a quite eclectic taste. In my final year at college, I became involved in planning the Cambridge Poetry Festival, which was organised by the poet and teacher Richard Berengarten (then known as Richard Burns). In 1981 I was co-ordinator of the fourth festival.*

*1981 was also the year I published my first collection of poems for children. In all, I published five collections for young readers, all now out of print. However, I’m now planning to publish a series of digital chapbooks, containing both previously published and new poems. The first, a collection of Christmas poems, I’m hoping to publish later this year, with illustrations by the York-based artist Alice Bickerton.*

*I’ve been fortunate enough to have taken my poetry to schools, libraries, colleges and festivals in the UK and abroad, and I’ve also taken part in collaborative educational projects for, among others, the Philharmonia Orchestra, the Britten Sinfonia, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Sinfonia 21, and the Fitzwilliam Museum and Kettles Yard Gallery in Cambridge. I’ve also tutored on writing courses for the Arvon Foundation and Talliesin Trust.*

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*As Tom Wright has pointed out, many parts of Paul's letters are in essence poetry:*

*"Paul turned it all into words, words with wings, words that set people on fire and do so still ... Philippians 2:6-11 and Colossians 1:15-20 have a poetic density; you can go deep down into them, deep into the beating heart of God's revelation. I think they come from deep within Paul's own prayer and reflection. They are what we might call 'primary theology': as in music, you can say several things at once in a poem, whereas with prose you have to say one thing at a time. The greatest theology in the world seems to have started life as poetry."*

*If asked who my favourite poets are, I would choose several. To me, poetry is similar to music; different poets and poems suit different moods, different times of day. Like music, poetry can help us understand or enhance different events and occasions. Of the poets who are no longer alive, I would pick T.S. Eliot, W.H. Auden, Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney as particular favourites. These are all poets who engaged with the profundities of faith, doubt, the conflicting dimensions of the physical/secular world and the intangible spiritual/supernatural realm.*

*From the many excellent living poets, I would pick Alice Oswald and Malcolm Guite - both very influential among their own readerships, and also both are 'strong poets': their poems are rooted in traditions which profoundly nourish them.*