

The Lily Crucifixion

Robyn Fitzgerald



And about clothing — why are you anxious? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither labour nor spin. But I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory was clothed like one of these.

Matt 6:28-29

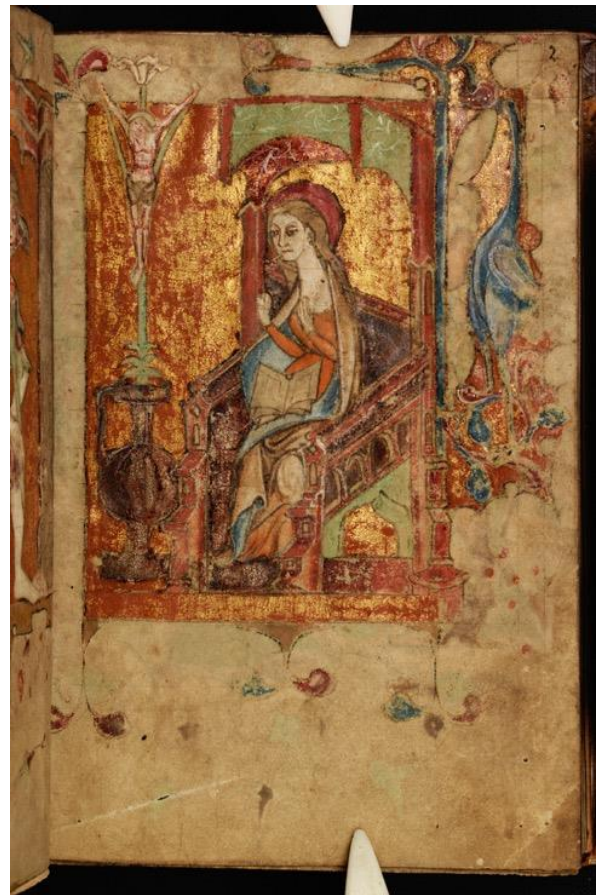
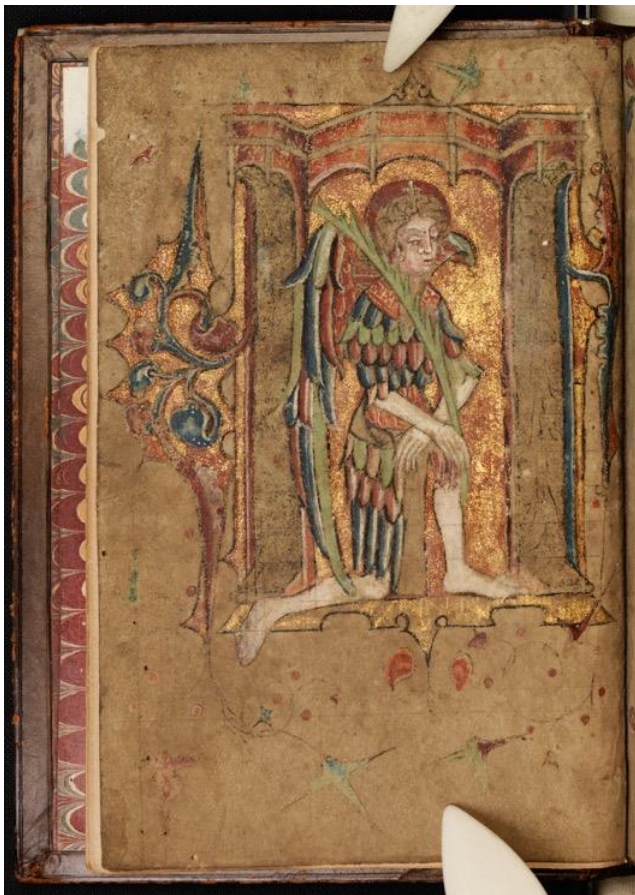
In her brilliant book, *The Easter Mysteries*, Beatrice Bruteau asks, “Can we strip ourselves naked of adjectives?” to which she replies, “if we do, what will we have left? Nothing it seems. And that *nothing* is just the point”.ⁱ Two thousand years earlier, on a hill near Capernaum, overlooking the Sea of Galilee, Jesus asked a similar question. He asks, “And about clothing – why are you anxious?”, before offering insight into unclothed, bare, *nothing* awareness by pointing to the lilies of the field.

Jesus would have been intimately familiar with the lily, one of the many beautiful wildflowers that sprung up through the fields of ancient Palestine, especially in Spring. Often white or radiant in colour, its soft, sweetly scented, bell-shaped white flowers blossom in delicate sprays that arrest the eye and delight the senses. Furthermore, Jesus would have embodied the lily often as one of the many fragrant symbols of mystical marriage in the Song of Songs, a symbol of the passionate, mutual, endless love shared between the divine-human lovers. And he would know by heart the song of the lovers: “I am the rose of Sharon and the wild lily of the valleys. Like a lily in a field of thistles, such is my love among the young women. [Sg 2:1-2].”ⁱⁱ

However, in Jesus’ hands, the lily also becomes a potent locus of transformation. In what Karl Rahner calls “a primordial Word”, the lily becomes a word that “brings the reality it signifies to us, makes it present, realises it and places it before us”.ⁱⁱⁱ As primordial Word, Jesus calls forth a new reality through the lily, a reality which itself “does not divide as it mediates but unites immediately”.^{iv} St Matthew helps us to see the power of the lily as primordial Word not just because of its natural beauty, nor even its expression of the mystical marriage, so much as the way in which it is placed as a mirror to the question “why be anxious about clothing?” Connecting the sense of being de-clothed, naked, nothing with the sensuality and fragrance of the lily as a symbol of the intimacy of being beloved of Love, Jesus calls us to go beyond both and to perceive his heart awareness connecting and uniting them. This is so important for us today as we are clothed in words, languages, philosophies, theologies and scientific thinking that so easily and so subtly fall back into dualism, numbing our senses and our experience of the undefined and endless wholeness of reality.

Jesus' use of the word "consider" is also important. For example, in Greek, the word "consider" καταμανθάνω means to observe deeply, to contemplate attentively, while in Hebrew, "consider" לָדַבַּר (*sim lev*) means "set (your) heart" (*sim* "set" or "place" and *lev* "heart"). Jesus longs for us to set our heart in his heart as a seal, and to remain there as we awaken the wisdom of the lily as primordial Word made flesh in our world today.

In this reflection, we will consider the lily through contemplating a beautiful medieval illumination of the Annunciation in the *Llanbeblig Book of Hours*.^v Paradoxically named *The Lily Crucifixion*, the image was popular between the 14th-16th centuries throughout England and Wales, and could be found carved on tombs and prayer bench ends, crafted in stained glass and painted on the ceilings of churches.^{vi} Miraculously, some survived the widespread destruction of religious art during the Reformation, suggesting the image was well loved.^{vii} The *Llanbeblig* Annunciation invites us to consider the lily, as a "true symbol united with the thing it symbolises"^{viii}, thus allowing us to see, to feel and to be ever more intimately one in the One who clothes us, nourishes us and grows us, in every part of us and every part of our beautiful world.^{ix} So, we will begin by spending time with the illumination, which is below.



I invite you to find a comfortable place to sit and rest, taking time to feel Love 'closing you all about' as Mechthild of Hackeborn prays, 'like a robe of sunlight'^x. Feel all that you carry in your heart, the quiet joy of love, all aches and suffering, emotions that feel strong, responsibilities weighing, memories lingering, hopes shattered, all being gathered into the robe of light

enclosing, enfolding, shining. Allow your body to soften. Allow your face to soften. Feel your mind sinking into repose, releasing, gentling, dissolving, enjoying the intimacy of being enclosed and enfolded by the light of love. Awakening the eye of your heart, feel your desire, as Gertrude of Helfta encourages, to “blossom forth in new vision like lilies of the valley by the flowing waters”^{xi}. Feel Love’s desire for oneness and wholeness alighting in the womb of your heart, blessing you with gentleness, satiating you in silence. When you are ready, open your eyes and take time to gaze at and to behold the illumination. Feel the whole image drawing your awareness. Allow the colours, scenes and images to illumine, to fill your heart and mind, drawing you into contemplation. Feel Love clothing you, intensifying as a sense of fullness, bringing awareness that you are conceiving and birthing the primordial Word within the ground of your heart. Open your heart even more fully to its transformative movements. Then, abide in the soft intimacy of the oneness of love clothing you in the silent stillness and wisdom of this illumination for as long as you choose.



As we are drawn into the Lily Crucifixion above, we sense an overwhelming sense of plenitude – the sheer beauty of the illumination, its rich colours, its serenity, all the parts flowing together, yet so profoundly differentiated, bathing our hearts in peace. On the left panel, we attend to a naked lily yet to flower, draped over Gabriel’s right shoulder, almost an aside to the sublime and timeless courtesy and gentleness of the exchanging beatitude being shared between the angel and the young Mary. With every cell of Gabriel’s body aroused by love, his supreme attention to Mary and vivid dedication to his task as messenger and speaker of the Word are completed by the naturalness of his pose. Love is effortless, his foot discloses, as it seems to fall out of the image altogether, unhindered by time, space, doubt, anxiety or fear.

The words of Jan van Ruusbroec come to mind, that “these persons have turned to the nakedness of their essence, so that it seems to them that life eternal shall be nothing other than a blessed isness without distinction of rank, of saints or of reward”.^{xii} Drawing us into the nakedness of his being, all that is “distinguished” in us, all those unhelpful adjectives, comparisons, self-focused evaluations and sad measures of perfection and expectation dissolve in Gabriel’s gaze. His timeless words resound silently in our being, “Rejoice, you who enjoy God’s favour! The Beloved is with you.” This is us to whom Gabriel speaks, singing in the deep depths of our hearts. Affirming the Beloved divine lover cannot be removed, divided or separated off from our life, not by agony, not by trauma, not by mental illness, violence or despair, Gabriel invites us to yield into the beautiful abyss-like naked is-ness dwelling in the ground of our vulnerable hearts. “Behold the naked lily”, he seems to say to Mary.

In the right panel above, the receptivity and openness of Mary’s heart is revealed in her open arms, the open book and the open blue mantle billowing out in the shape of a pregnant belly, as if she had uttered her words of consent many eons ago. Naked as the lily in Gabriel’s arms, Mary conveys to us what it is she has discovered herself, in the words of Jean-Luc Marion, to be “a given (gifted) phenomenon”.^{xiii} She “receives herself from what she receives and gives what she does not have”^{xiv} because she knows “to ‘be’ is to be be-loved”. Beyond, even being, she is,

simply, given. Thus, from the silence of the nothingness of givenness throbbing in her heart, she consents to love first, without any desire even to be loved in return. Like Gabriel she sees the unborn child in the "blessed isness", in the naked nothing of her given heart, whom in her "yes", becomes enfleshed and is given life. The words of Kerrie Hide come to mind, that: "We are called to see the unborn, to cherish and foster what is deeply within the ecstasy of the universe and midwife future abundance. As the enstatic within creation releases ecstatically, the cycle of encircling perichoresis manifests. We bear God. This ... is the trinitarian lifecycle that flows from Transcendent to Incarnate to Realized. Realizing this incarnating creativity is crucial for our future."^{xv}



We bear God. What feels startling to me in this illumination is that Mary, having cherished and fostered the ecstasy of the universe in her womb, now releases ecstatically the unborn child as the fleshy, crucified One. His head slumps. His whole body is being stretched, stretched and stretched even more with every new growth and new energy of the lily radiating out, filling his agony with the organic force and energy of nature, recalling us to those times we have felt we cannot bear any more pain, any more suffering and yet it will not stop. It keeps unfolding - an illness or chronic pain that will never heal, an incurable suffering, for which it feels "there is no medicine for your wound, no healing for you" (Jer 30:13). "Behold the lily", we hear Gabriel say. As we sink more deeply into Jesus' final journey into

nothingness, stripped of all that has covered our hearts, the life force, energy and truth of our givenness, of who we truly are, begins to flow. It is momentous, organic, unstoppable and full of creative new life. As Kerrie foretells, "the incarnating creativity' is released into the agony of the moment. What seems so profound, is that the lily is held in a beautiful golden vessel, mirroring Mary's womb, holding our beloved Suffering One holding and clothing us in our suffering as we learn to bear "the burden of a greater consciousness".^{xvi}

And all the while, in the foreground the Annunciation is taking place. Living our suffering does not take from us our joy as contemplatives or the deep peace of our 4pm daily contemplation together. Living in this evolutionary incarnational moment as the self-expression of the incarnation, like the lily, born of nothing and full of nothing, we enflesh the primordial Word. "Now this Soul", writes Marguerite Porete, "has her right name from the nothingness in which she rests ...she has nothing of herself. She has given all freely without a why, for she is the lady of the Bridegroom of her youth. He is the Sun who shines and warms and nourishes the life of being separate from His Being. This Soul has retained neither doubt nor anxiety any longer."^{xvii}

The great scholar of biblical prophets Walter Brueggemann says that the issues of the Old Testament prophets are the same as those we face today: "the world we have trusted in is vanishing before our eyes and the world that is coming at us feels like a threat to us and we

can't quite see the shape of it."^{xviii}As we consider the lily, may its wisdom as primordial Word, shine, warm and nourish the world through us. And may we, as "ladies of the Bridegroom giving freely without a why", enjoy and rest in the primordial lily Word, clothing us, loving and bringing us into deep peace. Blessings, Robyn Fitzgerald



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- i Beatrice Bruteau, *The Easter Mysteries*, (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1995), 12
- ii Ariel Bloch and Chana Bloch, *The Song of Songs: A New Translation* (London: University of California Press, 1995)
- iii Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*. 23 vols. (London, Baltimore, and New York, 1961-1992), 3,299.
- iv *ibid* 4.252.
- v *Annunciation*. Add. MS 17520A, ff.iv-2r, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. Used with permission of Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru, National Library of Wales.
- vi Christina Maria Cervone, *Poetics of the Incarnation: Middle English Writing and the Leap of Love* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 197.
- vii *Ibid*.
- viii Rahner, *Theological Investigations*,4,252.
- ix Cervone, *Poetics of the Incarnation*,163.
- x Mechthild of Hackeborn, *The Book of Special Grace* (New York: Paulist Press, 2017), 2.16
- xi Gertrude the Great of Helfta, *The Spiritual Exercises* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1989)
- xii Jan van Ruusbroec, "Little Book of Explanation", trans P. Crowley and H. Rolfson, in *The Complete Ruusbroec, Volume 1* (Brepols: University of Antwerp,2006), 627.
- xiii Jean-Luc Marion. *The Erotic Phenomenon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003),34.
- xiv Marion, *The Erotic Phenomenon*, 170.
- xv Kerrie Hide "The Ecstasy of Agape" in Ilia Delio, (ed) *Personal Transformation and a New Creation: The Spiritual Revolution of Beatrice Bruteau* (New York: Orbis Books, 2017) 100.
- xvi Teilhard de Chardin, "The Eternal Feminine" in *Writings in a Time of War* (Vihar: Facsimile Publisher, 2015), 193.
- xvii Marguerite Porete, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1993), 157.
- xviii *In the Room with Walter Brueggemann*, Conversation with Krista Tippet, May 18, 2011, The On-Being Project (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qAMnq4vdDvE&t=35s>)