

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *In the Poorer Quarters* by Aidan Matthews

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## New Books

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**In the Poorer Quarters.** Aidan Matthews. Dublin: Veritas Pp. 224. Price €14.95

I remember listening to RTE Radio one Sunday morning sometime last year and hearing a reflection on that day's gospel reading from the lectionary and wishing that I had the text to mull over it again at my leisure. Now that wish has been fulfilled because Aidan Matthews has recently published the scripts of the complete series of talks that he gave on Sunday mornings on RTE Radio. The radio series, which ran in 2005–2006, was also entitled *In the Poorer Quarters*.

This wonderful collection of Sunday reflections is based for the most part on the Gospel of Mark across an entire liturgical year. There are thirty-six chapters in all, each running to about six pages of text. In his introduction the author acknowledges his debt to René Girard, with whom he studied in California. This apprenticeship, he claims, attuned him to the abiding newness and freshness of the scripture narratives. This may be the case, but it is also obvious from reading this collection that Matthews himself has a native instinct and skill to make the scriptures come alive and allow them to illuminate the hidden and public dimensions of our lives, something that will come as no surprise to those familiar with his other works of fiction, drama and poetry.

There is a strong autobiographical dimension to this collection, because Matthews sketches his own passage through a half century of Irish Catholicism, one which has seen seismic changes, and which has profoundly shaped and formed his own spirituality, his imagination and engagement with the 'quotidian domain'. He retrieves sensitively some of the core sacramentality of the Catholic understanding and imagination as it has impacted on him without slipping into any sentimentality or grievance about what has been lost. His own family members, their friends and his Jesuit mentors appear en route by way of illustrating the kind of influences that were at work on him and his contemporaries especially during the third quarter of the last century. He acknowledges, too, in a characteristically gentle and self-effacing way, how his own occasional struggles with depression have shown him that 'a desolate state can be a modest apostolate' (p.8).

There is an earthiness about his thought and style that shows the Christian faith to be genuinely incarnational, and so he challenges some of our characteristic reticence about sexuality and related matters. The

following passage, describing the activity of 'couples in the dim dormitory streets of the estates' preparing for bed, illustrates something of his ability to lead us to see afresh the wonder of each embodied person, formed in the image and likeness of God for a life of worship:

Women would be reaching behind them to open the clasp of their bras in that backward, bird's-wing motion of the elbows men are so moved by. Husbands and housemates would be lying naked on their duvets and their eiderdowns, with the stigmata of digital watches on their washed wrists and the stencils of socks on their poor, pale ankles, on their kissable Achilles' heels. The night prayer of the body was about to utter itself all over Ireland ... the compline of the love-act, the eucharist of flesh, was starting in stillness, saying, in the language of touch and tenderness, 'Lord open our lips, and we shall proclaim your praise.' And the Holy Ghost came down in the form of a pigeon among the vestments on the washing lines (p.110).

These reflections challenge the individual reader and Irish society as a whole, not in any accusatory way, to think again about God; about the Church and its liturgy, its wisdom and its sensitivities; about society, its assumptions and conventions, especially the victims that are its casualties. He notes our hypocrisy, for example, when 'a Hindu wearing a pottu on the forehead will be greeted with all the obsequious solemnity of the post-religious, left liberal house of fashion, while a sooty stain between the eyebrows at the start of the season of Lent would be the murderous mark of Cain ...' (p.58). As he says elsewhere, 'the high-handedness of the prince bishops has been replaced in our day by the hauteur of the puritan divines' (p.35).

All of the chapters are written in a most exquisite prose, replete with allusions to the classics, contemporary literature, the scriptures and the great liturgical repertoire of the Church. It is the kind of book that one can take up any time and one chapter will provide enough food for thought to sustain one through any day. You can hardly give a more welcome gift to any reflective friend this Christmas.

EUGENE DUFFY

*Limerick*

**Life Beyond Death, Threads of Hope in Faith, Life and Theology.**

Vernon White, London. Darton, Longman and Todd, Pp 94. npg.

The particular matter at hand – life after death – in this very readable and worthy short book by Vernon White (currently Principal of the Southern Theological Education and Training Scheme, and Canon Theologian of Winchester), is an adaptation of the Sarum College public theological lectures. It has a clear readership in view, typified by the mix of those in attendance. The intended audience comprises thoughtful people familiar