

# Learning the Lesson of Love: The Poetry of Elizabeth Jennings (1926-2001)

Timothy Gardner OP

Elizabeth Jennings, who died in 2001 was 'the most unconditionally loved poet of (her) generation,' according to Michael Schmidt writing in the preface to her *New Collected Poems*.<sup>1</sup> This seems a slightly less generous accolade when Schmidt goes on to say that the other poets of her generation included Kingsley Amis and Philip Larkin, not themselves obviously loveable poets. One imagines that Larkin might have been rather disappointed to have discovered, posthumously, that he was unconditionally loved, whereas Elizabeth Jennings' poetry seems to invite just this response. Indeed, so different is the poetry of Elizabeth Jennings to that of Amis and Larkin it is hard to imagine how she can ever have been seriously associated with them in the minds of critics. Whether *The Movement* ever existed at all has been much debated, but the mature Elizabeth Jennings that we find in *New Collected Poems* shows what a different trajectory she had followed from that of her laconic and wry contemporaries.

*New Collected Poems* begins, like her *Collected Poems* and *Selected Poems* with a dozen poems from her first collected volume of poetry (entitled tentatively *Poems*). First and second are 'Delay' and 'Winter Love' which seem to set the tone of everything which comes after. They are short poems — the first consisting of two quatrains, the second of a sestet, almost two halves of a divided sonnet — which address two recurrent themes of Elizabeth Jennings' poetry: love and time, more particularly the way in which the test of love is the test of time. As Shakespeare wrote, 'Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks / Within his bending sickle's compass come;<sup>2</sup> for true love will outlast the buffeting of time and be borne out, 'even to the edge of doom.' So in 'Delay' Elizabeth Jennings compares the light thrown out by a distant star (which the eye may never see, so distant is the star) to a ray of love which 'may not reach me until / Its first desire is spent.'

In 'Winter Love' we might expect to read of love frozen or love grown cold, but instead Elizabeth Jennings presents winter as a time of slow growth that allows the heart 'to partake / Of the slow pleasure' of the tranquillity of love. Unhurried by the fecundity of spring and allowed to snooze in the too hot eye of heaven of summer, this love comes to rest in sleepy tenderness:

Let us fall apart, O gladly weary,  
The white skin shaken like a white snowflake.<sup>3</sup>

It is this tenderness and gentleness which marks off love from its caricature, lust. The most perfect image of love for Elizabeth Jennings is friendship:

Such love I cannot analyse;  
It does not rest in lips or eyes,  
Neither in kisses nor caress.  
Partly, I know, it's gentleness<sup>4</sup>

Lust, on the other hand, is characterised by egotism and is destructive of love. In the sequence 'The Seven Deadly Sins' (not in *New Collected Poems*) lust:

misses out all that love means —  
Giving, taking, accepting, perhaps abstaining,  
Always being gentle and full of thought.<sup>5</sup>

In 'Song for a Birth or a Death' written eleven years earlier, Elizabeth Jennings sees clearly that the opposite of love not as lust, nor as hate, but as fear. The poem, one of Elizabeth Jennings' most violent and troubling, paints a world in which 'love-making' is counterfeit, merely animal rutting, and has even become a malady such that men are 'in bed with love and fear.' The world she describes is very much the world we inhabit, where people, deprived of love, find it difficult to believe that they matter at all. To prove that we do matter we accumulate things, possessions, but behind this barrage of belongings is the anxiety that we are nothing. We find it hard to love ourselves and thus find it harder to love others, unable to take delight in those we 'love' unless we can possess them too. This is a precarious and nightmarish world where nothing is as it seems and even love-making is duplicitous:

Last night I watched how pleasure must  
Leap from disaster with its will:  
The fox's fear, the watch-dog's lust  
Know that all matings mean a kill:  
And human creatures kissed in trust  
Feel the blood throb to death until

The seed is struck, the pleasure's done . . .  
. . . and cries of love are cries of fear.<sup>6</sup>

Here Elizabeth Jennings presents human beings as living in fear. Not a sensible, rational fear of things that may do them harm, but an irrational fear of being without value. In this world, others are dangerous and barriers are erected, so that even 'love-making' leads paradoxically to death, not life.

What Elizabeth Jennings regards as love, true love, is shown clearly in her 'Love Poem' first included in that most tortured of her collections *The Mind has Mountains*. Love is marked fundamentally by kindness, gentleness and even a measure of shyness. She is convinced that:

Love which cries out,  
And wants the world to understand,  
Is love that holds itself in doubt.<sup>7</sup>

Genuine love is a love which is 'quiet' and 'kind' although never sealed off from suffering for, 'Pain must play some part / In all true feelings.'

This tension looms large in much of Elizabeth Jennings' work. Love and its opposite, hate, are dangerously close and the former can degenerate into the latter remarkably easily:

This is my love and now it must be spoken.  
I love you, I have loved you for many years.  
Now all my love is lapped around with tears.  
There are so many things that have been broken.<sup>8</sup>

It is typical of Elizabeth Jennings that she cannot remain content with the surface, but needs to dig deeper, to approach a mystery like love from many angles in order to begin to make sense of and understand it. But, finally, love resists explanation and defies description leading the poet to conclude:

It is not in the heart alone.  
I cannot find it in the mind;  
I know it reaches to the bone,  
I know also that you can find  
  
In sign, in touch, all this in look  
We give vague words to.<sup>9</sup>

It should come as no surprise, then, that such a mysterious thing should be such a cause of misunderstanding, pain and hurt. The very dependence and vulnerability which make love possible also make pain and hurt a constant fear. Elizabeth Jennings, for whom love is so tender and gentle a thing, returns often to the theme of how people are hurt by the people they love. In 'Hurt'<sup>10</sup> she describes the rejection of a small gift 'pretty and picked out with care. / I put it in her hands with love.' The tears that the spurned giver of the gift feels brimming in her eyes were foreshadowed in the crucified Christ: 'On his face / Among the sweat, there must have been / Within the greater pain, the one / A hurt child shows.'

This situation has arisen because pride and misunderstanding have been allowed to stifle charity, and so Elizabeth Jennings concludes that understanding and mutual confidence are presuppositions of all types of relationships; in love they are essential:

Two people, yes, two lasting friends.  
The giving comes, the taking ends.  
There is no measure for such things.  
For this all Nature slows and sings.<sup>11</sup>

Again, this is a love which is transformed and perfected through time, where lust and sexual passion give way to a friendship characterised by modesty and humility. In her poem 'One Flesh' Elizabeth Jennings writes movingly about her parents who in their twilight years sleep in separate beds and 'hardly ever touch.' Superficially, the poem addresses the same situation as Larkin's 'Talking in Bed'; a couple who have nothing (civil) to say to each other any more. But whereas between Larkin's cooled lovers communication has broken down, between Elizabeth Jennings' couple communication still exists but in a different mode. At first glance the poem seems to be an elegy for lost love, for love grown cold, for separate lives lived in separate beds and the loss of intimacy. But in the final stanza we find a meaning much more profound and subtle. Their silence is something that they share, a mute sign of their togetherness. All the excitements of their lives, though behind them, are experiences that unite them, a shared familiarity. Now they are:

Strangely apart, yet strangely close together,  
Silence between them like a thread to hold  
And not wind in. And time itself's a feather  
Touching them gently.<sup>12</sup>

Again, it is time which has done this. Their lives are not really separated, because they need each other still. The only thing that has happened to them is that they have grown old.

The same theme recurs in 'Time and Love' written many years later, another warning that time can not only perfect love but see it wane and disappear, and that often it is only when we note its passing that we recognise it as love. The love which endures is the love we find when we achieve peace with the world and with ourselves, beautifully described in her quite early poem, 'Beyond Possession.'<sup>13</sup> We need first to separate ourselves from the false images we have of the world, for we can only achieve real understanding of things through looking at their real nature, not by possessing them, 'we have no need to beat / the petals down to get the scent of rose.' True peace and love arise when we are content to leave things be, and not to force them into our predetermined patterns or seek to possess and control them. We need to achieve the state of heart and mind 'Where thought is free to let the water ride / is liberal to the rose giving it life.'

Elizabeth Jennings returns to the theme of loving mutual dependence and sharing again and again. In 'A Nurse Gone Sick' (in *Collected Poems*), the nurse understands because 'she has suffered too.' In

'Tenderness' the poet marvels at the kindness shown to her by a nurse, protesting that she is independent and able to take care of herself, but the relationship between them is one of love and tenderness for, in spite of the radical dependence of the former upon the latter, 'Washing was a kind of joke to share.' The nurse's acceptance of her patient and her tenderness transforms a routine transaction between a sick woman and a health professional into a truly human encounter. (Indeed, one of the most notable features of the poetry that Elizabeth Jennings wrote after her frequent spells of psychological crisis and breakdown is that it tends to be more concerned with the other patients and staff, which is perhaps why she always resisted the term 'confessional' to refer to her poetry and rejected comparison with Anne Sexton.)

It is when human relationships become relationships of power and possession, that we sense real fear in Elizabeth Jennings' poetry. In contrast to the kindly 'Night Sister' is the cruel psychiatrist described in 'The Interrogator' who always 'knows best,' always has the answer and is always eloquent, as if to taunt his confused and tongue-tied patient. This fear lies behind the rather touching series of poems which were collected in 'After the Ark' and sadly left out of this latest volume. In each poem an animal makes a plea to be valued by human beings. The mouse, which makes the human scream, nonetheless feels 'a kind of bond / with you in your huge fear,' and asks, 'was I the only friend near?' Similarly, the foolish looking sheep, though she looks like 'a tent / Whose guy ropes broke' reminds the reader that she has one thing to 'charm and delight' — her lamb:

He can move  
And prance. I am proud of a son so beautiful  
And so worthy of love.

Though Elizabeth Jennings' poem 'St Thomas Aquinas' is omitted from this latest collection, her work, like his, is run through with a continual insistence upon the mutuality of human friendship and the reality of divine friendship. There is an unambiguous recognition that we cannot be friends, cannot be in love, unless there is true equality between us. We wish our friends well when we want their good, for their sake and not our own. But moreover, this love needs to be *communicated* in words and actions, whether the through the silent coexistence of her elderly parents, the gentle bath given by a nurse or the questions of 'A' level students reading her poetry. We may feel love for one another, but unless we find a voice for our love and express it in actions, we are only mutual well-wishers, not friends.<sup>14</sup> And, like Thomas, Elizabeth Jennings saw that true, lasting friendships were *habitual*, as her poems about the silent, comfortable love of an elderly couple or between friends around a dinner table show.

This theme of unselfish, virtuous friendship and love continues

throughout the poems written since 1989, collected for the first time in this volume. In her later work, Elizabeth Jennings muses more about old age and death, as she has always done, but also in equal measure about childhood. Her final years were far from peaceful, although to the end her poems sought peace, resolution and the friendship she prized so highly and understood so clearly. The theme of healing of a broken relationship is treated beautifully in 'The Prodigal Son', an example of her increasing preoccupation with religious and biblical subjects. The return of the son is welcomed not only by his father, but seemingly by creation itself when, 'grapes it seems have been burst across the sky. / Wine is running along the slopes of night / As a household starts to heal.'<sup>15</sup> The son is still a boy to his father, but their love is not that unequal love between parents and children because, in his haste to meet his son, the father himself has become 'fleet as a boy again' whilst it is the son who at first seems aged by his experiences, only later 'crying babyishly' when his father embraces him.

One of the last poems which Elizabeth Jennings wrote, 'Girl at Prayer', concludes that in the final analysis, love is a mystery for which we can never find adequate words of description. There is great humility here in the poet's voice, a poet who has written most perceptively about love and human relationships, when she recognises that love is only ever a lesson we can begin to learn and never master:

... she need not search for words  
Or make many movements either.  
All she need do is copy the sun's behaviour  
Or the moon's silent entry at night.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps it was this recognition that we can only ever be learners, not experts, that made Elizabeth Jennings so unwilling to revisit her early poetry. She wrote quickly, always exploring and questioning, giving her poems a somewhat tentative quality, and when the poem was finished she revised little and would already be thinking about her next. This new collection is a fitting memorial to a fine twentieth century poet who otherwise has not received the attention she deserves. If we search for a fitting epitaph in which to sum up her poetry, then we could do little better than a line from her poem 'Rembrandt's Late Self-Portraits': 'Here is a humility at one with craft.'

- 1 Elizabeth Jennings *New Collected Poems* (Manchester, Carcanet Press Ltd, 2002) *xix*
- 2 Shakespeare, *Sonnet CXVI*
- 3 *New Collected Poems* p.1
- 4 'Friendship' *New Collected Poems* 89
- 5 *Relationships*, London 1972, 30
- 6 *New Collected Poems* 34
- 7 *ibid.* 80

- 8 'Decision' *Lucidities*, 13
- 9 'Of Love' *Relationships* 35
- 10 *New Collected Poems* 91
- 11 'Friendship' *New Collected Poems* 89
- 12 'One Flesh' *New Collected Poems* 81
- 13 *New Collected Poems* 10
- 14 Commentary on *The Ethics* 8:2
- 15 *New Collected Poems* 205
- 16 *New Collected Poems* 354

## **Zizioulas: The Trinity and Ecumenism**

Thomas Weinandy OFM Cap

'Being as communion' is a phrase that evokes the name of only one person, that of Bishop John D. Zizioulas. It is first and foremost within the context of the Trinity that Zizioulas elaborates his understanding of this concept. Moreover, from his trinitarian understanding of 'being as communion' Zizioulas has also elucidated a distinctive understanding of creation, Christology, Christian anthropology, ecclesiology, the Eucharist and eschatology. In so doing Zizioulas has made significant and insightful contributions to Christian theology. I cannot comment on the whole of Zizioulas' thought in so short an essay, but I would like to examine briefly the topic that interests me the most — the Trinity. I want to highlight the strengths of Zizioulas' conception of the Trinity as well as to note those aspects that I believe demand greater clarity. In attempting to clarify the ambiguities I will also offer a few suggestions as to how Zizioulas' trinitarian thought might be further enriched. In the light of all of the above I will conclude by offering some thoughts on advancing ecumenical relations among Eastern and Western theologians.

### **The Trinity: Being as Communion**

In contrast to Greek philosophy, which gave ontological priority to 'nature' or 'substance', Zizioulas consistently argues that Christian theology, specifically through the work of the Cappadocian Fathers, obtained the insight that 'person' has true ontological priority. The catalyst for such an insight was the working out of a theological understanding of the Trinity, especially, Zizioulas argues, in the light of western Sabellianism, which denied the ontological distinctiveness of the persons.<sup>1</sup> 'The concept of the person with its absolute and ontological content was born historically from the endeavour of the Church to give ontological