



ST PETER'S EASTERN HILL

Anglican Parish Church of the City since 1846

15 Gisborne Street Melbourne Victoria 3002 Australia

Poets and the Faith

The life, poetry and faith of significant poets within the
Anglican and Catholic traditions of Christianity

Second Tuesday evening of the month

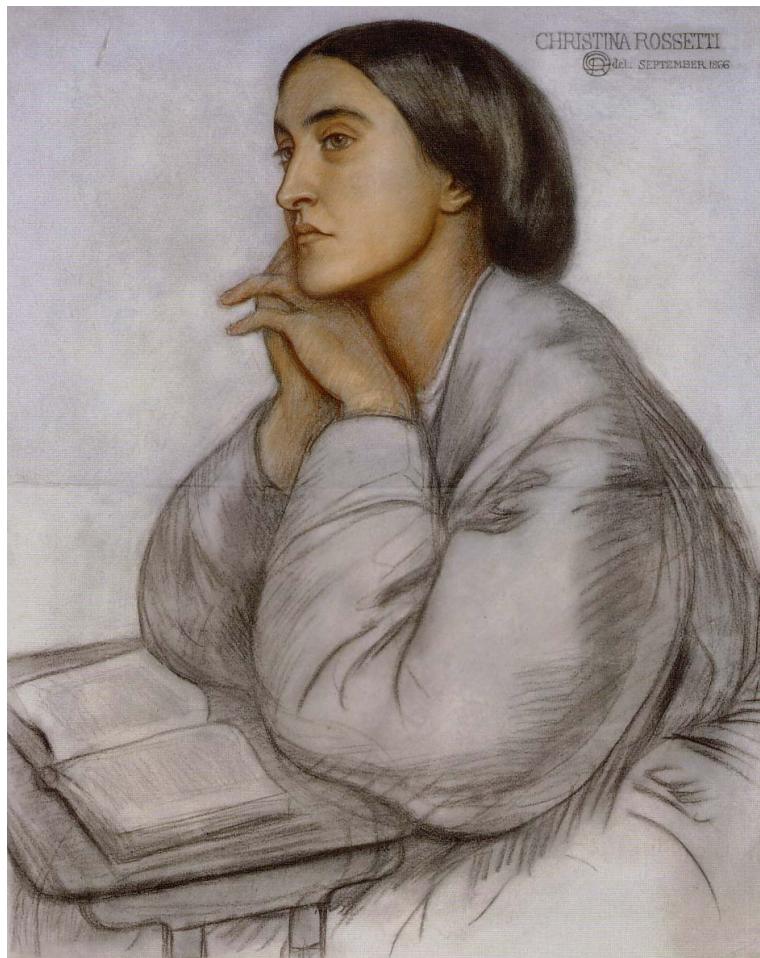
6.00-7.30pm

Wine and cheese on arrival

(Suggested \$10 donation)

Venue: The Hall of St Peter's Eastern Hill
Corner of Albert Street & Gisborne Street,
East Melbourne

(Entrance via the Albert Street driveway)



In the coming year at St Peter's Eastern Hill, we are hosting a series of talks about significant poets who have inhabited - or skirted the fringes of - the Anglican and Catholic traditions of Christianity.

From Gerard Manley Hopkins to R.S. Thomas, from Emily Brontë to W.H. Auden, how did their poetry enrich and challenge their understanding of the faith? How did the faith inform their poetic vision? What can they help us to see of God and of our lives in the world?

Such are the questions our speakers will address as we gather on the second Tuesday evening of each month, a glass of something and some nibbles in hand.

These are addresses with no prior knowledge necessary. Only an interest to learn something of the lives, craft and spirituality of the poets in question. There will be opportunities to respond and discuss, and to hear some verses recited in that context in which, we believe, they are meant to be heard - in the lived gathering...

All are welcome!

If you would like to attend, please sign up via:

<https://www.trybooking.com/COHCY>. This is to give us a sense of numbers for catering and preparation purposes. Walk-ins are also most welcome.

If you have any questions or queries, please send an email to our team at poets@stpeters.org.au.

Kathryn Bellhouse

& the 'Poets and the Faith' team

St Peter's Eastern Hill, Melbourne

“His mystery must be stressed. For I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I understand.”

March 12

Dorothy Lee on Gerard Manley Hopkins

The English poet and priest Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) has been a major influence on my own life and spirituality. I first encountered him at University and loved then the intensity of his language and faith. Still today, many years later, his poems can come to my mind in odd moments and I continue to be amazed at how they articulate the deep things with beauty and truthfulness.

Hopkins was brought up in a High Anglican and very literary environment. He was deeply influenced by the Tractarian movement when he was a student at Oxford, and was received into the Roman Catholic Church by John (later Cardinal) Henry Newman in 1866. His poems all date from his later years as a Jesuit priest.

My talk will consider how Hopkins’ poetry - influenced by another favourite of mine, Christina Rossetti - communicates a vivid sense of the beauty of nature and the creative work of Christ within it. His poems are characterised by unique rhythms and intricate language-play, a passionate depth of feeling, and a love of the Old English rather than Latin roots of English. Sadly his poetry was not appreciated until after his death, when it was published posthumously by Robert Bridges in 1918. We will explore why his poetry nevertheless had such a significant influence on subsequent generations and how it continues to speak to us today.

Dorothy Lee FAHA is a New Testament scholar at Trinity College in the University of Divinity, an Anglican priest and a published author and poet.

“... the life of steadfast attention.”

April 9

Carol O'Connor on Denise Levertov

Though born a Jew in Russia, whose grandfather was a distinguished Hasidic rabbi, Paul Levertov was ordained as an Anglican priest in London in 1922. His daughter, Denise Levertov (1923-1997), grew up greatly influenced by his strong intellectually inquiring mind and ethic for social reform. Moving to live in America as a young married woman in 1948, Levertov's poetry never lost this anchor in her Jewish Christian heritage despite her long period of 'regretful scepticism' until her slow Christian conversion in the 1980s.

Levertov was a poet who lived with doors open, attentive and steadfast in her path of both witness and in being engaged with the contemporary issues of her day. Thinkers such as Martin Buber helped her see the necessity of constant dialogue in relationship with others and with God. Poets such as William Carlos Williams clarified the need for language to be integral and concerned with the immediate. Spiritual friends like Murray Bodo OFM, helped her understand the bridge between her poetry and her faith. It was gradually in her own solitary journey that she came back to faith and spoke of poetry as work that 'enfaiths.'

How do we tread that very difficult and often fraught path of communicating what is essentially unknowable but experienced? The path of being a watcher, yet passionately engaged and alive in the world? An understanding of God as transcendent, Incarnational and Spirit of energy renewing creation? These are questions I ask in my own life, and when I revisit the poetry of Denise Levertov she opens the doors of my own imagination and her words drop down some helpful clues.

Carol O'Connor works at St Peter's Bookroom Anglican bookshop at St Peter's Eastern Hill Melbourne. She is a writer, retreat conductor, has a background in Classical Studies and a Masters in English Literature.

**“We have one day, only one,
But more than enough to refresh us.”**
Gwen Harwood, *At Mornington*

May 14

**Ken Parker on Gwen Harwood and
James McAuley**

Thank God for letters! I mean epistles and written by hand. Thank God for Gwen Harwood's letters, for their preservation and their publication. Through her letters I found James McAuley again. I had loved his poetry and those hymns he wrote in the 1960s, but I had lost him. In recent times he has been successfully hidden by the drama of the Ern Malley hoax and his association with Bob Santamaria and the Democratic Labour Party. Gwen Harwood's view of him, expressed in her letters, enabled me to find McAuley again – the poet of deep faith, who sees the potential of Australia and Australians, while ridiculing the littleness of our thinking.

As I rediscover the poet McAuley, so I am led to look again at his contemporary, Gwen Harwood, whose poetry has lasted so well. I am intrigued by her writing, so strong, so clear and reflecting her courage and her believing. Though Harwood and McAuley were good companions on a 1970's poetry tour, their lives and their work offer a most interesting contrast.

Ken Parker lives in Mornington and walks daily to Fishermen's Beach, which inspired Gwen Harwood's poem. Ken was once the priest at St. Peter's Mornington where the poet's brother Fr John McAuley had recently been the vicar.



**“You have given us the ability
to ask the unanswerable question.”**

June 11

Rowan Williams on R. S. Thomas

R.S. Thomas was a priest who struggled with the Church and a poet who struggled with communication. Out of these conflicts emerged a poetry that is always challenging, often haunting, profoundly contemporary. We shall be looking at his development from work that is often focused on the local and natural world towards writing that is more politically engaged and philosophically complex - and also at how he deals with prayer, art and love. He is widely acknowledged as perhaps the most significant Christian poet of his generation, yet his expression of faith can be tantalizing and often near-agnostic. His style is spare and laconic, but his metaphors are often astonishingly dramatic. His vision - both his religious and poetic vision - is undoubtedly difficult, but his phraseology has captivated countless other writers and thinkers, and he has the distinction of having shaped an entire imaginative landscape, especially but not exclusively for readers in his native Wales. He continues to attract critical attention and a diverse global readership.

Rowan Williams was born and brought up in Wales, where he now lives. He was Archbishop of Canterbury from 2002 to 2012, and has published widely in theology and other fields. His 'Collected Poems' appeared in 2021, and his anthology, 'A Century of Poetry', in 2022.

“each breath a gift, each glance a blessing”

July 9

Andrew Bullen on Peter Steele

An early poem, *Matins*, places us in Parkville, where Peter Steele (1939-2012) spent much of his life and introduces us to his style: a particular event, whose details are presented in wide-ranging references, some of them suggesting a Christian sub-text; all given with a humane range of tones.

His predilection was for poems and poets capable of a dazzling range of forms and references and resonances: Auden, Merwin, Ashbery, Porter. He had a special closeness to Vincent Buckley, and so we might see him as an academic poet, even a Melbourne University poet.

Some overtly Christian indeed Christ poems: *A.D. 33* and a late suite presenting Christ as Elemental Man: *Breathing Days* (air), *Star Man* (fire); *Green Man* (earth); *Water Man* (water). Finally *Rehearsal*, his *Hymn to God my God in my sickness*, a poem I had the privilege of reading at Peter's burial in the Melbourne General Cemetery.

Peter Steele was born in Perth. He joined the Jesuits in Melbourne in 1957. Most of his life was spent teaching and writing at Melbourne University, where he held a Personal Chair in English. He also was a visiting scholar in Jesuit universities in America. After six years as Provincial of the Jesuits in Australia, he was Scholar-in-Residence at Newman College from 1991 until his death in 2012. He wrote poetry, texts for hymns, books of critical essays, studies of Peter Porter and of Jonathan Swift.

Andrew Bullen is a Jesuit priest, whose ministry has involved him in secondary education (including teaching literature), in Jesuit training, and in parish work. He has published one book of poetry, 'Etiquette with Angels'. He was born in 1947 in old South Wales and lost a leg to cancer when he was 13. His family migrated to Australia in 1964, and he joined the Jesuits in 1967.

“I see Heaven's glories shine and Faith shines equal, arming me from Fear.”

August 13

**Philip Harvey on Emily Brontë,
Elizabeth Barrett Browning
& Christina Rossetti**

The fabled crisis of faith in 19th century English life has always to be placed beside the extraordinary manifestations of faith in the same period, whether in the progress of church and society, or at the most personal level of individual life and experience. Three poets, each of whom belonged to highly creative families, developed special ways of speaking into the whole central matter of faith, and it is their distinctive thoughts and voices we will hear in this seminar.

Emily Brontë (1818-1848) grew up in the parsonage, where free enquiry was encouraged. “I see heaven's glories shine and faith shines equal, arming me from fear,” she writes late in her short life. Restlessly and firmly, Brontë words her experience, prioritising imagination, nature, and God.

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861), social activist and feminist before feminism, published her first poem before she was nine. The spiritual life informs her life's work, one of her essays stating “poetry is where God is.” When she asserts “if you desire faith, then you have faith enough,” Barrett Browning is opening a common existential reality.

Also very well-read in Scripture and theology, Christina Rossetti (1830-1894) is a poet whose star has been much in the ascendent in recent times. A hard-won line goes “Obedience is the fruit of faith; patience is the early blossom on the tree of faith.” Faith, both in the sense of the virtue and of the Christian religion itself, preoccupies Rossetti throughout her writing life, and could be called its driving force even where the word ‘faith’ is not overtly used.

Philip Harvey is a widely published poet and writer. New work is regularly added to his Words blog and other sites. He recently finished 20 years as Poetry Editor of Eureka Street and his latest poetry chapbook from Honeyeater Press is entitled ‘Complete Letters’.



“I salt my breakfast eggs. All day long I feel created.”

September 10

Wen-Juenn Lee on Annie Dillard

Of ‘Pilgrim at Tinker Creek’, Annie Dillard said, “I tried to be a transparent eyeball.” Reading Annie Dillard (born 1945) always reminds me of two verbs: to watch, and to create. Dillard is as obsessed with the spectrum of creation—muskrats, parasitic worms, deserts, eclipses, the North Pole—as she is with the spectrum of creating; the writer’s life, people, God. In both, Dillard embeds a deep sense of awe and reality—this is not creation abstracted but lived through, with ‘all its deformities’. Similarly, how one writes, how one attends and throws themselves against the ‘sublimity of our ideas’ conjures up a wrestling between faith and doubt. Dillard is not known for her poetry, nor for belonging to one faith—after leaving the Catholic church, Dillard said, “I stay near Christianity”—but in her attempts to understand nature and God, her non-fiction follows more closely the logics of poetry, devotion and Christian thought.

Wen-Juenn Lee, in her writing, is interested in gaps, leaks and spillage, which often take the form of place, memory and divinity. Her work has been published in *Meanjin*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Going Down Swinging*, among others. She was a Wheeler Centre Hot Desk Fellow for 2022, and has been awarded the Tina Kane Emergent Writer Award for 2023.



**“In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.”**

W. H. Auden

October 8

Nelson Rufatt on T. S. Eliot & W. H. Auden

T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) and W. H. Auden (1907-1973) became Christian poets, but with very different results. Eliot, the born-again Anglo-Catholic mystic, wrote poems that filled with quiddities. Auden, appalled by his ability to write beautiful, persuasive rhetoric in a world driven to murder by tyrants, eschewed metaphor, and cultivated a sceptical prosiness that said only what it meant. What do these different styles say about the poets' faith? Is spiritual life better reached through enchantment, or disenchantment? Questions like these will be raised by Nelson Rufatt in his seminar on Eliot and Auden.

Nelson Rufatt is a pianist, composer, and poet. He is the host of *Counterturn*, a podcast about humanism and the arts. He is also a choral scholar and parishioner of St. Peter's Eastern Hill.

“Like Gold to Airy Thinness Beat”

November 12

Kathryn Bellhouse on John Donne

The poet John Donne (1572-1631) lived four hundred years ago, in Elizabethan England, and yet his voice reaches us with the immediacy of a contemporary. Born into a family of Catholic recusants, he found his way, really rather slowly, into the priesthood in the Church of England (via a youthful elopement, brief stint in Harrogate Prison, and a failed diplomatic career). In his satire, love poetry and religious verse, he speaks to *you*. Be ‘you’ his wife and lover Anne More, his friend George Herbert, or Christ his God, he often leaves you with the impression you are as present to the poet as he is to himself. (A proposition you are welcome to debate with me in the session!) His love poems are full of religion and his religious works charged, challenged and deepened by human loves.

Stylistically, his work anticipates many developments of twentieth-century English verse: abrupt opening lines, a conversational tone fostered by irregular rhythms, and using his wit and love of linguistic play to lead him to metaphysical insight and also to question what he has found. Donne has left us with a body of verse startling in its originality, honesty, wit, and passion, as if encouraging us to confront, in each moment of our lives, the very last – and the Other who is at its heart.

Kathryn Bellhouse is assistant priest at St Peter's Eastern Hill Anglican Church, Melbourne. She grew up in Queenscliff on the Bellarine Peninsula of Victoria. Before undertaking a Masters of Divinity, she studied English & Theatre Studies and Philosophy for a Bachelor of Arts, and a Masters degree in Creative Writing, Editing & Publishing.

Committee:

Kathryn Bellhouse (Chair)

Philip Harvey

Stuart Hibberd

Dorothy Lee

Wen-Juenn Lee

Nelson Rufatt

Peter Yewers

Images:

Christina Rossetti, drawn by her brother Dante Gabriel Rossetti

R. S. Thomas: R. S. Thomas with his wife Elsi Eldridge, drawing by Elsi Eldridge (National Portrait Gallery, London)

Annie Dillard: Annie Dillard at the window looking in (Getty Image)

T. S. Eliot & W. H. Auden: Auden, drawn by David Hockney

John Donne in his shroud, engraving by Martin Droeshout (National Portrait Gallery, London)



*Corporis haec Animae sit Syndon Syndon Jesu.
Amen.*

Martin B. scup. And are to be sould by R.R. and Ben. ffisher

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THE CHURCH IS OPEN DAILY

WORSHIP AT ST PETER'S

SUNDAY

8.00am Low Mass (Traditional Language)

9.30am FAMILY MASS

11.00am HIGH MASS

6.00pm Evensong & Benediction (2nd & 4th Sundays)

6.00pm Low Mass (1st, 3rd & 5th Sundays)

WEEKDAYS

Daily Low Mass – 8.00am Monday to Friday
(Live streamed on Facebook and YouTube)

Wednesday – 1.15pm & Saturday 12noon Low Mass