Review


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On reading Sally Read’s poetry in “The Day Hospital”, I was taken back to the start of my ministerial journey and to my placement at Whitechapel Mission. The mission was a day centre for many in the East End who were homeless, struggling with mental ill health and other issues. What I remember was the relationships that were formed with them. Adjacent to Whitechapel Mission was Tower Hamlets Mission. On the inside back wall of the mission hall was a mural of the Last Supper. But instead of the apostles surrounding Jesus there were many of the familiar faces that I had come to know, joyously partaking in the sacramental feast. In Sally Read’s poems, to my delight, I can hear some of their voices again.

I can also hear the voices of many of the patients that I have encountered as a Mental Health Chaplain.

This is not easy poetry, but what makes it remarkable for me is that it is born out of Sally’s deep compassionate relationship with the patients she has encountered. There is much pain and sadness, but it is held in a deeper love.

Ruth, an 80 year-old Jewish woman, who left her parents in Nazi Germany, recovering from depression speaks of her wrestling with holocaust and God, as in “Night” by Elie Wiesel there is hope even in depression.

What fills, wise girl, is another agent, apart from us, yet in us (in our tongues, minds, and hearts) incarnate from the impossibility of absence.

Sally speaks for Jack, an 80 year-old Londoner with Alzheimer’s disease who struggles with an inconsistent memory that flits between then and now. His knowing and unknowing relationship with his wife moves from the, “Was-sy-aname?” to the relieved and joyous recognition of:
Then a flash! Bob's your uncle:
Maureen, more tea!
Nailed it.

Sally Read’s poetry is drawn from her caring encounters with patients while working as a community psychiatric nurse in Central London. The poems give voice to Alzheimer’s disease, schizophrenia, dementia, depression and anxiety. The poems also give voice to the impact of immigration on the lives of those who were refugees from the holocaust, or economic immigrants of the 1950s, Irish, Polish German, Italian, West Indian.

Though as Cecil Day Lewis says, “Poets write to understand, not to be understood”, Sally Read has enabled me to understand the people I know and can see in the book so much better. I understand her writing, and now I understand myself even better.

I fully commend this book.