

Boats are a means to an end

It was hard to tell who was the wetter last Saturday at the Head of The River – the crews on the water or the Blue and White band of supporters drenched on the land. But the rain did little to inhibit either the rowing or the cheering.

It seems to me that rowing can be something of a metaphor for life – preparation and planning, head and heart, art and science, the individual and the team, successes and failures, solitude and fanfare, the human spirit and nature, the grit and the grace.

I would like to think that rowers have a special insight into ‘finding God in all things’. This phrase is a succinct summary of Ignatian spirituality which never sees God as compartmentalised. God was in class and the gym, on land and on water, in quiet twilight prayer on Lake Burley Griffin and in the adrenaline charge at SIRC, in the crew in the boat and the mates on the banks. God’s Spirit blows where it will. Ignatians can sense it.

Last year, the Society of Jesus held a General Congregation in Rome. The gathering took as its theme ‘Rowing into the Deep’ and adopted a logo. That phrase comes from Luke’s gospel (chapter 5), the account of those luckless fishermen who return after a night’s work on the lake with nothing. Then this stranger, this teacher, this Jesus, comes along and offers them advice. “Put out into the deeper water for a catch.” What would this man know about nets and currents and the movement of shoals of fish? But they do what they are told, and what a catch they made. That challenge to “row into the deep” was one given by fellow-Jesuit, Pope Francis, to the Society some years ago. He encouraged us to go where others do not go, to take the risks, to chart new waters, to tackle the improbable, even the seemingly impossible. Francis here is speaking *magis*-language. Anything less is the crime of living cautiously. This boldness is how to approach building God’s kingdom here on earth.

One of my favourite poets is an American woman, Mary Oliver. She frequently writes about God disclosed in nature. She also pens verses about virtue, about matters of the heart, about life, and a life well-lived. This particular one picks up that rowing metaphor.

West Wind #2

Mary Oliver

You are young. So you know everything.
You leap into the boat and begin rowing.
But listen to me.
Without fanfare, without embarrassment,
Without any doubt, I talk directly to your soul.
Listen to me.
Lift the oars from the water, let your arms rest,
And your heart, and heart’s little intelligence,
and listen to me.
There is life without love.
It is not worth a bent penny, or a scuffed shoe.
It is not worth the body of a dead dog nine days unburied.
When you hear, a mile away and still out of sight,
the churn of the water as it begins to swirl and roil,
fretting around the sharp rocks –
when you hear that unmistakable pounding –
when you feel the mist on your mouth

and sense ahead the embattlement,
the long falls plunging and steaming – then row,
row for your life toward it.

Oliver is talking about ‘rowing into the deep’, taking risks, looking (like those disciples) for a better catch (the *real* rewards), reflection, finding love, naming the desires that make the heart pound, knowing there are rocks and rapids and falls ahead – but just going for it.

Stirring and challenging, passions and risks – perhaps a poem for us all?