

Mrs Zebedee

Criostoir O'Flynn

Page by page my Gospel came asunder
Blown by the uncharitable puffing of priests
Who made the Good News of Christ a front for
A carry-on belying all that Christ preached.
The binding came unstuck when one professional
Shepherd left my lambs nibbling the hungry grass;
Their mother, shuffling bills, made recipes from
The lilies of the fields, while on the beaten track
Of exile to England the breadwinner
Vomited curses, poisoning Friar Tuck's dinner.

Each apocalyptic horseman then came,
Hardship, Recrimination, Illness, Debt,
To carry off his prize; soon nothing remained
Of the two thousand year told and tried Great
News but a phrase here and there; a mere puff
Would surely have sufficed to scatter those;
A whisper, had it been convincing enough,
Would have initiated me into the fold
Of those for whom this world is all: I listened
For one puff more, for that nihilistic whisper.

My natural and often-proven bias
Towards non-good (I must learn not to use
Archaic terms like *sin* or *evil*) should suffice
To melt the Mosaic stone. I gathered views
From atheist thinkers, and from free-living youth
Clear proof that this old blueprint chronicle,
Compiled by Jews who were no longer Jews,
Was no more relevant than some fossil
Dinosaur to the future of humanity.
Man makes his destiny: what can be, will be.

At the door of the Temple, as I groped
Towards dazzling freedom, I met this buxom
Homely woman. 'Excuse me, sir,' she spoke
In tones that seemed familiar. 'Would you
By any chance have seen the Teacher? I'm
Wanting to put a word in for my lads,
James and John. Anyone with half an eye
Can see they're the pick of his bunch. My man
Zebedee, he's decent, but a dreamer:
Made no fuss when they went with the Teacher.'

Her roving eye watched all, inside and out.
She gabbed on: 'Would you believe what they're
Saying now, that Himself is thinking about
Making Simon, Jonah's son, the boss? Now fair
Is fair, and God forbid that I should find
Fault with a prophet; but truth must be told,
And Jonah's son is a slob, a headstrong wild
Sort of a man. If only I – there he goes!
Jesus! Oh Master, didn't I tell you often
To take care of yourself? Look at you! What'd

Your mother say if she could see you now?
She gave me these for you, your favourite fish
Done in a pastry. She sends you all her love.
She'll come to see you when the neighbour's kids
Are better. God love you, Jesus, what's the
Point in preaching to mobs? The Sanhedrin'll
Get their claws in you. You shouldn't be at the
Beck and call of every dog and devil
That comes the road. Sit you down here, Master,
I'll bathe your feet. Simon, keep them back farther!'

My mother, that's who it was, gabbing there!
Mine, and yours, all our mothers, motherhood
As Mother Nature makes it everywhere.
The mother raven is convinced her brood
Outshines all other nestlings. So, with one
Foot going this way, and one that, I stumbled
And was glad to grab hold of the homespun
Shawl of Mrs. Zebedee. My slow-tongued
Remedial reading of this single scene
Came easier since I felt this must have been.

It wasn't long before around me gathered
The other chosen ten; even sly Judas
The double-dealer, grew hot and bothered
And querulous as a jackdaw. 'All of us,'
He growled, 'were with the Teacher from the start.
So, what do these bombastic thunder-boys
Of Zebedee think they're up to? We can
All play *that* game. Anyway, the Master knows
Them. Professionally, they're just fishermen.'
'Easy on!' said Simon. *I'm* a fisherman!'

Thus with the vital womb-thread that sound woman
And loving mother, Mrs. Zebedee,
Sewed page to tattered page. 'I'm only human,'
She admitted. 'My faults are plain to see.
But still, you'd think they'd have found better things
To write about. Matthew, that high-class tax-man,
And Mark – *he* wasn't there, got everything
From Jonah's crafty son: the *Rock* is what
They call him now. Oh, I could tell some tales!
But, fair dues, Peter never hid his shame.'

'You won't find me in Luke, a gentleman,
He wouldn't like to hurt my feelings. What!
My son, is it? Don't you know my John
Was not collecting gossip! The love of God,
That's what *my* boy preached. Of course, he told some
Things that happened too. I remember that day
Dumpy Zacheus climbed the tree – such fun
When Jesus called him down! And that very strange
Blind man (chapter nine) what's this his name was?
But you should read that other book of his--'

'All lovely visions that he had. Between
You and me, I couldn't make head nor tail
Of it. He's going to explain it all to me
Some day. D'you know, there were some complaints
From certain persons I won't name, scholars
Who said his Greek had not the proper style.
The devil mend them and their Greek! His mother
Know's what's biting *them* – jealousy and spite
Because my boy was always the most dear,
Sat next to Jesus, whispered in his ear.'

A travelled, storied woman, her great heart
Mothered the whole wide world. She knew them all,
Jews, Romans, Greeks, priests, whores, Samaritans
Good and bad. A sparrow could not fall
But she'd have seen. She knew what had become
Of every plank the Carpenter took in hand.
The catering in the wilderness was done
By her command, when the hungry thousands
Feasted on five loaves and two fishes. Twice
She stood with Mary in the tomb of Christ.

As for the intellectuals, those minds
Who fancy themselves as the guiding stars
Of the human race: 'It's all very fine
To talk,' she said, 'but what could any man
Do in the pickle Nicodemus found
Himself in? Family to think of, position,
And after all, the Teacher's native ground
Was Nazareth! Pilate? A politician
Chasing the truth and a dog his tail. Then
There was Gamaliel: 'twas he that said to John

(Peter was there too) how is this he put it?
Ask Luke, he has it all.' From Bethlehem
To Calvary's gibbet, that motherly
Unauthorized guide took me through her version
Of the Good News. So, back in the Temple
On Christmas Day, a father reunited
With his children, their mother selflessly
Resilient — we, too, somehow had survived
On loaves and fishes, such as came our way —
We knelt together at the starlit cave.

Along with the shepherds, the ass, the ox,
I noticed someone new this year, someone
I did not recognize until her voice
Battered my heart: 'Oh Lord, in a strange town!
No friends, no house! What matter, a stable
Or a palace, it makes no difference,
We're in God's hands. Joseph, you could have shaken
That straw out better. Wouldn't your carpenter's
Tools come handy now! Here, girl, sip this honey
I know it hurts, love—we all hurt in our coming.'

'What did you expect? But don't you worry now,
You're in good hands, my girl, and by the looks
Of things, it's going to be a bonny boy.
Here, Joseph, cheer up! Now, there's little use
In mooning around, you're only in my way.
Go down to that stingy town and root us out
Some bread and milk. Now, now, Mary, I'll stay
With you forever and a day!' Without
Licence from Pope or priest, as large as life,
There she was. Mrs. Zebedee, midwife.