

## 1 The John Bradburne story

On 5 September 2019, a very special event took place at Mutemwa, a leprosy settlement in the north-east of Zimbabwe - it's about 80 miles from the capital Harare. The leader of the church in Zimbabwe, Archbishop Ndlovu, was there, as well as four other bishops from the country, and over 400 clergy. Oh, and about 15,000 people from all around. Why? To launch the cause for sainthood of an Englishman who had given his life while caring for the lepers at Mutemwa 40 years before.

This was John Bradburne, who is now well on the way for beatification - depending of course on how quickly the wheels at the Vatican turn. He's already been designated a servant of God, which is the first step along the canonization road. We might call him England's next saint - bearing in mind that he's Zimbabwe's saint too - indeed, that country's first. But what's especially interesting - and the point was made strongly in the homily during the Mass at Mutemwa - is that John was a layman - not a priest, or a monk, or a nun, which is the usual background for a saint. And this in itself is rather rare - but surely a role model for ordinary folk, yes?

What brought 15,000 people to Mutemwa that day? And by the way, not only on that day, for each year on the anniversary of his death, thousands make a pilgrimage to the village. I've been there, and it's by no means the easiest of places to get to - especially in a country where the economy is in such a perilous state and travelling long distances is a real challenge. But people make the effort and get there. And the reason? To remember a man who cared so much for the poor and infirm that he refused to leave them even though his life was in danger, during the Rhodesian Civil War. And they believe he is still with them. It certainly is a very special place, with an atmosphere of holiness and peace just like any other centre of pilgrimage in the world. Perhaps even greater than the famous locations, such as Lourdes, as it hasn't been commercialised.

So who was John Bradburne? He was born in the Lake District in England in 1921, September 5th. Note the date - it's the one the Zimbabwean bishops chose to launch the cause in 2019. And note the year. It's the centenary of his birth this year, which is the reason I'm recording this series of talks. Anyway, as I say, he was born in the tiny village of Skirwith - or Skirrith, as it's often locally called - in Cumbria. He was the son of an Anglican vicar, who eventually moved to look after a parish in Norfolk, and that's where John went to secondary school - Gresham School. Then at 18 - well it was 1939. He joined the army, and served in Malaya, seeing a lot of action, and by all accounts showing great bravery. As the Japanese advanced, he managed to escape capture, but fell seriously ill with malaria, and was evacuated to India. He returned to England after the war, and took a variety of jobs while restlessly searching for a vocation. He became a Catholic at Buckfast Abbey, explored several monastic orders, and travelled a great deal - he spent a lot of time wandering around Italy, and visiting the Holy Land. He wrote a poem about one of his visits, 'Of Bethlehem', and we can hear him reading it himself.

How far is it to Bethlehem?, I asked,  
Knowing it must be less than seven miles;  
The seven holy hills in starlight basked,  
And still Jerusalem my mind beguiles.

\*

The road led uphill all the way; I'd walked  
From Jaffa gate at dusk that Pentecost;  
I went alone; only to me I talked,  
Hoping that soon in wonder I'd be lost.

\*

Proceeding 'tween the fields and olive yards,  
I came at last to little Bethlehem;  
I took some food, talked to Ishmaeli guards  
Of law and order; it is thanks to them



That I achieved a room amidst an inn  
Whose prices they had halved for me; no sin!  
Brightly received mine host, like wafer thin,  
Upon Whit Monday morn, a stray in Shem.

## MUSIC 1

He has a lovely cultured voice, hasn't he, and he speaks with great care, and obvious sincerity. I'll play some more examples of John reading in later programmes in this series. There aren't actually very many recordings that have survived, but the ones we do have are like gold dust. After all, how often do we have the chance to hear the voice of a saint?

On one of his wanderings, he visited Assisi, and developed a deep relationship with the life of St Francis, and his love for the poorest of the poor. He became a Tertiary (lay) Franciscan, obeying its rule, and singing the daily office of Our Lady. He lived its hours, rising at dawn for Matins and ending the day with Vespers and Compline. In 1962, he confided to a Franciscan priest that he had three wishes: to serve leprosy patients, to die a martyr, and to be buried in the habit of St Francis.

Well, after several years of restless searching, he got his first wish. He wrote to a priest friend in Rhodesia with a simple request: was there a vacant cave in Africa where he could live and pray? His friend said yes. And so, he arrived, in 1968, and worked on the Jesuit missions as a lay helper before the crucial change - becoming warden of Mutemwa, transforming it into a community of peace, joy and love. His unstinting service to all at Mutemwa gave the lepers back their self-respect and self-worth, and changed their lives. He was greatly loved by them and many still remember him today with deep gratitude and affection.

He got his second wish in 1979. It was a time of civil war in Rhodesia, and he was advised to get out of the country, but he refused to leave his beloved lepers. He was abducted from his hut by one of the guerrilla factions, and shot dead. His second wish. Then, at his funeral in the cathedral, he got his third wish. During the Mass, drops of blood were seen beneath his coffin. Afterwards, the embarrassed undertaker opened the coffin, but there was no sign of any blood. Then it was noticed that John was wearing ordinary clothing, and a Franciscan habit was sent for.

That was the first of many special events that have since come to be associated with his name. Mutemwa, as I said, has become a place of pilgrimage. The miracle of the spinning sun has been seen there - and recorded on video. There have been many testimonials acknowledging his intervention. In the 1990s, the John Bradburne Memorial Society was established, to continue supporting Mutemwa - it's called the Mutemwa Care Centre now - and of course to foster John's cause for sainthood. If you go to their website, [johnbradburne.com](http://johnbradburne.com) - don't forget the e at the end of Bradburne - you can keep up to date with all the current developments.

It's difficult to categorise John Bradburne. He was a pilgrim and a hermit, a poet and a musician, a joker and a mystic, and a down-to-earth spiritual thinker, expressing profound theological insights. For me, he's John Bradburne the poet, because since the 1990s I've been editing his extraordinary output of poems. And here's the fact. Nobody has ever written as much quality poetry in the English language as he did. Definitely the most prolific poet we have. But note the word 'quality'. It isn't enough for you or me to sit down and scribble thousands of lines of poetry. No, what we write has to be judged by someone other than us - an editor, a reviewer, a publisher. In John's case, every word he wrote has been given an editorial review. And, when his cause for sainthood goes through its later stages, it'll be read again by three theologians. All of it. I don't envy them their task!

But (I can hear you thinking) how do you measure poetry? Well the easiest way is just to count the lines. And that's easy to do these days, thanks to computers, as when a poet's writing is made digital, there are clever programs that can do just that. So, let's compare some famous poets of the past. Milton wrote about 20,000 lines. Wordsworth about 50,000. Shakespeare about 90,000 in his verse plays as well as his poems. But John Bradburne wrote



about 170,000 lines, in over 5000 poems. I must admit I was taken aback when I first did that calculation. But it's one that's been recognised by Guinness World Records.

In my next programme I'll introduce you to the poetry in more detail. But I'll end this week by giving you another taster. I'll read you one of his love poems. This one reverses the common expression 'God is love'. He wrote it in 1973, and called it 'Love is God'

Love is the Triune substance of the Lord,  
Begetting and Begotten He Proceeds  
Being Himself perfection of accord  
From all eternity, before time's deeds;  
Before all doing, Love is Thought Divine  
And Thought's divine fulfilling in the Word  
And Voice the Vehicle of being heard  
By Him Himself rejoicing and ashine;  
He has no need of visible creation  
Or of creation none on earth may see  
But, in His endless heavenly elation  
At Being Love, He amplifies His glee:  
As analogical as it is true,  
Love is like one who longs to share a view.

MUSIC 2



## 2 Meet the poet

In my last programme, I reported the record-breaking poetic achievement of John Bradburne, who wrote over 5000 poems - the vast majority in the decade between the time he arrived in Rhodesia in 1968 and 1979, when he was killed. His last poem was written just a few days before he was abducted from Mutemwa, the leprosy settlement where he worked, and was murdered.

I'm amazed that he managed to get so much writing done, while looking after the daily needs of 80 lepers, and managing the sometimes tense relations between them and the authorities. He would feed them, bathe them, tend to their sores, defend the settlement against thieves, pray with them, play and sing for them in the little chapel, stay with them as they lay dying, and bury them. As warden of Mutemwa, he lived in a small hut in the village, until he fell out with the proposals of the authorities to cut the rations of his beloved lepers. They sacked him, so he just went to live in another hut just outside the village boundary, and kept on caring for them at a distance. How on earth do you manage to write so many high-quality poems, in such circumstances? Apart from anything else, how do you find paper to write on? He was able to get hold of a typewriter, and people from the Jesuit community in Rhodesia were able to help with supplies, but it was still a difficult situation for any writer. He managed it, though - and that in itself was a bit of a miracle, I think.

Today I want to tell you what he wrote about, and say something about his style. And what did he write about? Well, it might sound like a cliché, but in a word: everything. He is, first and foremost, a spiritual writer, producing many poems about the Trinity, the Bible (both testaments), pastoral care, the sacraments, the liturgy, and the place of Mary in Christian thought. But he saw spirituality in everything - especially in the fauna and flora around him. There are hundreds of poems about the birds and beasts where he lived, both in England and Zimbabwe, and especially about eagles (often seen in Zimbabwe) and bees, with which he had a special relationship. And by the way, if you suddenly encounter a bee, while listening to this, then that's probably John giving you a wave. I'll tell you about that in my next programme.

Yes, he saw spirituality in everything - and in everyone. He had a real ecumenical spirit, fed partly by his travels in India and the Middle East. His thinking moves with facility between Catholic, Anglican, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions. Here is an Anglican who became a Catholic, who sprinkles his poetry with the Buddhist mantra, *Om mani padme hum*, which he glosses as 'to the sea the dewdrop goes'. And he signs his verse-letters home to his mother John Bradburne, Jew - identifying, of course, with Jesus the Jew. And his ecumenism extends to music and literature, where he had an enormous range of tastes - one might say catholic, with a small C. In music? especially plainchant, early English music, hymn-writers, and the great composers, Bach above all. And literature? Again, a huge range of reading, but Shakespeare above all. And everyone - every composer, every author - is seen as a sign of God's presence in the world. I'll illustrate his ecumenical spirit in my fourth programme.

That leaves two other big themes. First, John the caring poet. He wrote passionately about Mutemwa and its people, and about the effects of leprosy on their bodies and minds. Every leper gets at least one named poem. English literature has never provided such vivid character descriptions of individual lepers, as we read in the poems about his little community. And by a 'caring poet' I also mean his concern for the environment. Looking after plants and trees. Pointing out the dangers of plastics. You thought worries about plastic were a recent thing? John was worrying about them in the 1960s.

That's my fifth programme. And finally, we have John the human poet. And by that I mean he writes about everyday matters - about tea and coffee - and brandy, about noisy telephones and televisions, about local politics, about feeling unwell, about constipation - yes, you heard that right, a real problem for many in such a climate, so he writes a poem about it - has any poet ever written about that before? He writes domestic letters home to his mum and to his friends and benefactors - asking after their health, catching up on local gossip - and all in verse. He says he's uncomfortable writing prose. And that's the reason, by the way, we



don't yet have a final figure for how much he wrote. He sent letters to all sorts of people in verse; and some of these are probably still tucked away in an attic drawer somewhere.

So that's one way to meet John the poet. To see what he wrote about. But there's another way. To talk about how he wrote. His style. To get a sense of this, listen to this poem: it's called simply 'Love', and it was written in 1971. And the bonus is that it's read by John himself. We have very few surviving recordings of his reading, actually, but they're invaluable. He had a tape recorder, and from time to time he recorded himself speaking, singing, or playing his recorder. The audio quality is often poor, but the spirit can be clearly heard.

Love is a short disease, a long desire,  
A strong and lasting healing; love is like  
An angler landing fish, a hand at lyre,  
A roadhog flogging home his motor-bike;  
Love is a deep unsleeping thing, leaps time  
And steeps amidst eternity for rest  
And love is like three candles lighting rhyme  
And metre I am making for the best;  
An Alleluiatic sequence shows  
A little of love's eloquence that lasts;  
Love has three lights, one to another glows,  
A third proceeds between: naught overcasts  
True love because it knows that it possesses,  
Being possessed, a zest above distresses.

## MUSIC 1

Did you feel the heartbeat of the poem? The lines have a regular 10 syllables with a tum-te-tum rhythm - the traditional iambic pentameter of English poetry. An angler landing fish, a hand at lyre, A roadhog flogging home his motor-bike, There's a nice regular rhyme scheme too. Shows and glows. Rest and best. And so on.

Now regular rhyme and metre isn't the fashion these days. Today, poets like to write in free verse, with varied rhythms and line lengths. But the old-fashioned way still has its appeal, especially when it's supplemented by other powerful literary features, such as repeated initial consonants (alliteration) or echoing vowels. Sometimes he just plays with sounds for the sake of it. Listen to the opening two lines of a poem called 'Brewing', written in 1978. It sums up the opening chapter of the book of Genesis:

First Eve fell fast for fallen fiend's false fable,  
Foul weather followed for us folk forlorn,

You try it: write a line of poetry with all the words beginning with F - or any other letter you choose. It's clever fun, but it's more than fun, because it catches your attention. The poem continues in a serious vein, taking us through scenes in the Old Testament before ending up, as so many of his poems do, with Mary, called 'Second Eve', and the Word becoming flesh. And we get another piece of wordplay, but followed by a profound thought for the day:

I AM put golden fleece of Miriam on  
And Second Eve, having believed those tidings,  
Brought forth the Word-made-flesh and God did don  
Man's body, banning him from odd backsliding:



Even as AVE Eva's name reverses  
So we are sown in blessings and not curses.

I'll be talking more about the Trinity and Mary in next week's programme.

Now I don't want to give you the impression that every poem is full of profound thought. Sometimes he writes very light-hearted pieces, or a simple description of an event or a bird, and sometimes a piece is little more than doggerel - a word he uses himself of his own writing. There's inevitably going to be some dross in such an enormous oeuvre. But it's all presented in a spirit of fun and joy in creation. God, he affirms, has a great sense of humour, and Mary, he insists, loves plays-on-words. So I end today with my favourite of all his 'fun' poems. It's called 'False Teeth', written in 1973. Those for whom English is a foreign language may be unfamiliar with two words in the first line. Victual - meaning a fragment of food. And plate - meaning the denture that holds false teeth in place.

There sat a man at dinner and a victual broke his plate,  
Sat next to him a thinner whispered "Not to scratch your pate,  
I've got one in my pocket which I feel you'll find will fit":  
He dived for it as he connived, in secret proffered it  
And, lo, it was the height of taste  
And right as well! fell to in haste  
The fellow, for a further course  
Was following - he had to force  
Until he broke replacement rare  
And thought "It really isn't fair...."  
But, saith the breath next door, "There there,  
I've got another nigh the same"....  
Passed it the hand, the hand did claim  
Another winner!.... "What's your name  
And what Profession, may I ask,  
That you carry supplies for such a task?  
You're not perchance a false-teeth maker?  
"No, no", said he, "I'm an Undertaker".

MUSIC 2



### 3 John the theological and nature poet

Of all the 5000 or so poems that John Bradburne wrote, there are just a handful that are purely secular - like the 'False Teeth' one I read in the last programme. Everything he writes about is seen through a pair of spiritual spectacles. And in hundreds of cases, that spirituality comes to the fore. He's especially enamoured of four huge themes: the Holy Trinity, the Virgin Mary, the Bible, and the Eucharist. They all relate to each other, and in this programme I'm going to look especially at the Trinity, and at Mary's role in relation to it.

It's the nature of the Trinity which fascinates him most, and his insight is profound. I imagine many of you have had my experience of listening to a priest giving a homily on Holy Trinity Sunday, and beginning 'Ah it's a mystery', and giving us the impression that it's impossible to understand. Well, read John Bradburne for the opposite view. He makes this ultimate mystery amazingly accessible. The key is love. Listen to what he says in a poem called 'Logos':

The Thought, The Word, The Voice are Persons Three  
Of Love in Love with Love for evermore.

'Thought, Word and Voice' is his favourite analogy, explored in hundreds of poems. But he's always on the look-out for others. Here's one, 'Heat, Light and Sound', written on Whitsunday 1979, just a few months before his death,:

There is no light, other than that reflected,  
Except it is engendered by blithe heat,  
A fresh analogy is thus projected  
For Father, Son and Holy Paraclete;  
The Father, Love The Thought, I call His Heat,  
The Son His Light diffuses it abroad,  
Christ, who is Love Begotten and Our Lord,  
Speaks to us now through Love The Paraclete;

Love is the key, and he writes several poems on it, as we heard in the last programme.

John is convinced that his primary task, as a poet, is to explain the Trinity, and the same words turn up over and over:

The Thought, The Word, The Voice of One in Three  
Are Father, Son and Holy Ghost of God,  
They are The Persons of The Trinity

Indeed, as he explains in one of his ballads, he sees this task as a personal responsibility:

I personally am intent on telling  
To Rome, to Italy and to the World  
That, since true Faith is dwindling and not swelling,  
The One in Three should freely be unfurled  
As Dogma of predominance and hurled  
Hard (by some bard or other) at the throngs  
Of peoples too unsteeped for true songs.

And he adds, rather cheekily:

But I must find a Maiden first to go  
And see the Pope with Faith and Hope agog  
And tell him that the Trinity is so



Simple to know as falling off a log:

In another poem, he explains why he is so definite about this:

I am assured that it is up to me  
To write this down as clown and troubadour.

So who has given him this assurance? Who's told him that the Trinity is as simple as falling off a log?

Our Lady has. In several poems he affirms his total dependence on her inspiration. This is how he recounts his first encounter with her as a Muse, in a long early poem called 'Ut Unum Sint', 'that they all may be one', written in about 1955, when he was 34:

I did not have the least idea what I should say,  
Yet knew that all about wide living wonders were;  
I loved the breath of Summer and its pleasant day,  
As also Winter's sunset and the frosty air;  
I'd seen the beauties of an Oriental clime,  
The dwelling and the wisdom of a distant race;  
I'd listened rapt to music's harmonies sublime,  
And knew the fascination of a woman's grace:  
But still I waited sad and dumb with aching heart,  
Because it seemed that there was naught which I could do,  
Except to gaze on loveliness - I had no art!  
Then spake Our Blessed Lady, and my life was new:  
She said - 'My child, give me your hand, I'll guide your pen,  
And we will write about the love God has for men.'

And ever after he sees himself as her amanuensis, writing down what she inspires.

## MUSIC 1

His love for Our Lady knew no bounds, and many of his poems describe the intense nature of his relationship to her, fostered through visionary experience. Think of whoever or whatever you find most beautiful, he tells us in a poem called 'Oneing', and you will find all that beauty and much more in Mary:

Upon that throne Our Lady Fair  
May sit as Queen of grace,  
Ask her to take  
For heaven's sake  
Such earthly form and face  
As you consider is the height  
Of human beauty in your sight.

And why should we get as close as we can to Our Lady? Because that is the way we can get closest to the Trinity. Listen to what he says in a poem called 'Aubade' - the dawn.

He that is alone with The One  
Whose name is Love must be  
With Mary and her Son  
And the blessed Trinity:  
The son of Man and the Lord of light  
And the Father great and Our Lady bright!



And one more poem on this theme. This one was written in 1974, and it's important because he shows how the Trinity relates to everything around us:

The Word of God is valleys, woods and hills,  
Mountains and streams and rivers running broad  
Towards the seas ... at ease the book refills  
With bees in clover, swallows over sward;  
The Word of God expressing God The Thought  
Plays with the dolphins, crests the restless waves,  
Goes surf-riding in idle man for sport,  
Walks with the kings and saunters with the knaves;  
Talks with the swifts concerning their migrations  
And tells the storks which chimneys to select. ...  
In all of this He couples ministrations  
With God The Voice, The Paraclete elect:  
Myriad sights, myriad sounds, I AM,  
But best expressed as born of Miriam.

There's a playfulness, a joyfulness, in his images, isn't there - God the Word playing with dolphins, going surf-riding, all expressing God the Thought. Then the myriad sights, myriad sounds: God the Voice. And in the final line, the role of Mary (Miriam).

I AM  
But best expressed as born of Miriam.

Or maybe we should read it Mir-I-AM.

## MUSIC 2

John's theological vision is profound, but he makes it amazingly accessible by expressing it in images that we can easily grasp. And I don't know whether you've noticed, but many of these images are from nature - bees, swallows, dolphins, swifts, storks...

His poetic love affair with the animal kingdom was intense and lifelong. He was fascinated by birds, and especially eagles, because of their spiritual significance. The eagle is the crest of St John the Evangelist, symbolizing high flight towards the love of God; and the Shona people he lived among believe that the eagle is a messenger of God. At one point he paid daily visits to an eagle's nest to see if an eaglet had arrived, and entertained the parents on his recorder while he waited. His association with eagles continued after his death. It's a matter of record that eagles have a habit of unexpectedly turning up when Bradburne events are taking place in Zimbabwe.

As do bees, which regularly visited him in swarms during his stay at Silveira House in Harare. He kept a swarm of African bees in his room there. Why? To put off unwanted visitors, and to give him more time to be alone and pray. The arrival and departure of the bees is recorded in detail, and they too are entertained by his recorder. The analogy between the queen bee and Mary as Queen of Heaven drew him irresistibly. Here's one of his poems about bees, called 'Prime', written in 1971 - and read by himself:

A little after five o'clock this morning  
Came a loud volley from the honey-bees,  
Peaceful complete invasion without warning  
Taking possession of the bluegum trees;  
Scarcely a breath of any breeze, grey sky  
Trying for rainfall; liquid ringing note  
Of a red-throated twinspot sounded, nigh  
So far as might identify - my vote



Would hazard forty yards; the hum increased,  
Resoundingly surrounded where I dwell,  
Roseate flocks stole from the steely East  
And hung, and listened to that lightsome bell:  
Blest tintinabulation, restful hum,  
Holding the still creation spellbound, dumb!

### MUSIC 3

I'll end this week with a handful of his most striking descriptions of animal colours, sounds, and behaviour.

Beetle flying like an autogyro

The oriole remains, a flautist-chief  
With throbbing breast as golden as a sheaf

The coppersmith, that tintinabulating bird

And, my favourite:

Elephant is a walking Royal Plural

This is John Bradburne the nature poet. But a layer of spiritual interpretation is never far away. As he says in another poem...

Animals, reptiles, insects, birds and bees  
Are each and all as aspects of God's love...

John Bradburne illustrates a genre which - unusual in contemporary English literature - brings together theology and natural history. I call it devotional nature poetry.

### MUSIC 4



#### 4 John the ecumenical and musical poet

When John Bradburne's cause is successful, what could he be a patron saint of? Lepers, perhaps. Or the environment, given his huge concern to protect the fauna and flora of Zimbabwe and elsewhere. But maybe ecumenism. His longest work, a manuscript poem of over 10,000 lines, is called 'Ut Unum Sint' - 'that they may be one'. It reflects the diversity of his own spiritual background. Raised as an Anglican, he became a Catholic, frequently signed off his poems and letters as 'Jew', and in his travels had close encounters with Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Here's a small extract from 'Ut Unum Sint':

'That they all may be one' in God's glorious Son -  
All the Christians so sadly divided, and come  
To the King who is Shepherd: all flocks He will bring  
To one fold, and they safely shall graze in the Spring  
And the Heavenly Summer - all peoples He calls  
From His turret, high up o'er Jerusalem's walls.

Judaism, I imagine he would say these days, is part of our spiritual DNA. Here are some more lines that hammer the point home.

Now come we to a deeper truth:  
True Catholics are Hebrews all  
As much as David and Saint Paul,  
And this has Eucharistic proof -

The Body and the Blood of Christ  
Which are the Holy Eucharist  
Were of the Virgin Mary born  
At Bethlehem on Christmas Morn.

And therefore Christ's Humanity  
Is wholly Hebrew; and when we  
Receive in grace we truly be  
United with The Trinity.

For Jesus Christ's Divinity  
Is hypostatically one  
With all that makes Him Mary's Son  
And Hebrew fruit of Hebrew tree.

#### MUSIC 1

So John Bradburne thinks of himself as a Catholic Jew - but one who also reads the Koran, is happy to pray in a mosque, and who ends one of his poems with the Islamic affirmation 'Allah ek akbar' ('God is great'). Here he is in the port of Beira, in Mozambique:

I went into the Beira Mosque and sat  
Awhile upon the floor-fulfilling mat  
And then I prayed to Power, more divine  
Than love of wine, Agape give for that.

Agape - unconditional love. And this is a Christian who repeatedly praises Buddhist mysticism and sprinkles his manuscript writing with the Hindu sacred syllable 'Om'. Listen to these lines:



Where kindles Love's eternal light on everlasting hills  
Hymn Father, Son and Holy Ghost around that flame which thrills  
Whilst each to each in simple speech begins it with 'Shalom'  
Whence it proceeds as Love it feeds, one syllable, in 'Om'.

And here's John himself, reading a short poem called 'Grail Ageless', which brings together three religious traditions in a single line, and crowns them with a fourth. Oh, and the sannyasees he mentions are Hindu religious mendicants.

Shalom, Salaam, Om mani padme hum.....  
We have it, East, increased is in the West  
And sealed by Medieval Christendom  
All that sannyasees ever thought the best;  
Cloud of Unknowing, Grail that bore the King,  
Bid me adore, bray more not anything.

That reference to braying is typical John, who describes himself as an ass. He's saying there's nothing more he can say after the powerful statement: 'Grail that bore the King, Bid me adore...' Except this was written in 1971, and there are eight more years of poetry to follow!

## MUSIC 2

I've never read anyone who taps so deeply into so many religious traditions. His conclusion (in 'Ut Unum Sint') is therefore unsurprising:

Hindoos and Buddhists, Anglicans,  
And many quaint Americans  
And legion others, if they seek  
Sincerely, are the Saviour's sheep.

'Tis men of Faith whom God doth choose -  
And pray remember that the Jews  
Of old were His own faithful race:  
We are adopted by His grace.

The world needs a signpost pointing clearly towards the possibility of religious unity. John Bradburne provides it in a unique way. There are many examples of people from different spiritual traditions displaying a willingness to come together. What John does in his poems is show how it's possible to integrate these traditions into a single personality, a single vision. In a world full of suspicions and tensions between Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus, to name just four, he is a much-needed symbol of hope.

So, that's the religious side of John's ecumenical spirit. But we can see it again in the way he approaches the arts, especially in music. His enthusiasm for music goes back a long way. When he was a child, he recalls repeatedly listening to classical music on gramophone records. And he was a musician himself, both as singer and player - first the recorder, later the harmonium - abilities which he put to good use in the tiny Mutemwa church. Music for him has a greater function than providing auditory pleasure. Listen to what he says in the introduction to 'Ut Unum Sint':

there is on Earth a music that expresses at the same time both Heavenward longing and profound peace of soul; such music seems to say - 'we are mortals, yes, but promised Immortality: we are pilgrims, but our Native Land's in sight, so our hearts can rejoice as we journey.'

And he goes on:



This mood may be found among works of certain great composers, especially Bach; but its most complete expression is in the Plainsong of the Church, in the chant called 'Gregorian'. Of this chant the Holy Spirit is the Composer, for all the Liturgy is work of His direct inspiration. And the singer is Christ's Church - the Mystical Body of the Son.

Over thirty composers are mentioned in his poems - but Bach receives the greatest accolades. Here's what he has to say about one of Bach's compositions :

His Little Fugue in Minor G.  
My Lady wafted to my soul,  
Before my being all was hers  
Who chooses Chords which Christ prefers:  
But now that she has made me whole,  
In One Alone she loveth best,  
I bid Bach's magic manifest  
The words, which instruments have guessed  
As happily as ever I  
Could dream, Great PAN to glorify.

Now here's the fascinating thing. Not only does he write a poem about the Little Fugue. He actually writes one in which the rhythm of the lines follows exactly the rhythm of the music. Let's listen to the opening of the Fugue first.

### MUSIC 3

And here's his poem, 'Holy harp', written in 1949:

Holy harp,  
With me all Christ's creation sang  
In the words of David, whose psalming  
Lifted this earth in the power of praising:  
'Twas his heart disclosed God's orchestra to man.'

\*

This sad world,  
Reflects in music lasting peace;  
All you lonely, all who are sighing!  
Look to the lord, on His goodness relying,  
For in music He assures us care shall cease.

\*

Do you hear the music in the lines? Let me read those last few lines again, in a semi-chant.

This sad world,  
Reflects in music lasting peace;  
All you lonely, all who are sighing!  
Look to the lord, on His goodness relying,  
For in music He assures us care shall cease.

### MUSIC 4

And that was written in 1949, when he was 28.

I'll end this week with another few words from the introduction he wrote to 'Ut Unum Sint'. A better statement of the spirituality of music it would be hard to find.



Thus the Good Shepherd sings in our midst, for the glory and honour and praise of His Father, and for the eternal peace and blessing of His flock. And His song is heard in its sublime beauty, in the monastic choirs of the great Contemplative Orders, whose work above all works is the singing of Divine Office, the 'Opus Dei'. And the chanting of these monks, whose life is Christ, is infinitely more than an art: it is the voice of Love Incarnate, the music of the Lord, and the folding of many in One.

## MUSIC 5



## 5 John the caring poet

John Bradburne's vision is one in which Catholic Christianity is seen as special because of the unique role of the Blessed Sacrament, which adds an extra dimension to everything else we do. This is what he says in his long ecumenical poem, 'Ut Unum Sint', that they all may be one:

A thankful heart, a contrite heart,  
A heart aflame for love of Christ  
Is far above all human art  
Without the Holy Eucharist.

But in the furnace of His Love  
The Host can lift our hearts above  
And make them melt for love of Him  
Who sits above the Cherubim.

It's also a vision in which the Bible holds a central place. He'd love to learn the Bible off by heart, he says in one of his poems, but thinks this would be a tad difficult! In any case, as a poet he finds it better to nibble away at its truths, bit by bit, until eventually one arrives at the whole. This is how he puts it.

Sirs, I should read the Bible through  
And then decide what's best to do  
And if you cannot quite be sure  
Read it again: a golden cure  
For lassitude and idleness  
Is getting it by heart I guess  
But I would find that far too hard,  
Not near enough to art of bard  
Who'd rather take a little bit  
And whittle it away with wit  
Until each little bit he took  
Become One Word who'll claim the Book.

His vision, moreover, is one in which prayer plays a critical role. Indeed, many of his poems *are* prayers. Listen to this one. It's called 'Sumer is i cumen in':

Among the fading blooms on pleasure's lawn;  
No more to slumber, heedless of Thy chime  
That keeps unfailing watch from dawn till dawn;  
No more the quest for this world's fairest views  
Which can but fill the eye with fresh desire;  
No more the crowding vanities and news  
Which keep from souls the Holy Spirit's fire;  
No more the wanderer way, the wide unrest,  
And weary search for joys that pass and cease;  
No more, Good Lord, to turn from Thy behest,  
For now we know Thy Will to be our peace:  
To Thee we tread the path which Jesus trod,  
So rest our hearts in His - Thy Heart, dear God.

MUSIC 1



And of course, all of this - the Eucharist, the Bible, Prayer, is a vision that becomes a reality only through a life of service to others. 'Why is John Bradburne important?' someone might ask. The lepers of Mutemwa would have had no difficulty at all answering the question: because he provided them, as much as he could, with their daily needs in the form of food, medicine, and loving care. Listen to these words:

I'll stay to watch and pray and try  
To bring about undoubted ill's decrease  
By standing sentinel in Christ and by  
Issuing rations where the rations cease.

He saw an intimate connection between the two worlds of daily survival and eternal life. Listen to these lines:

Mootamewa is God's darling; those who come  
And go or stay may thus work out salvation.

One hour with burnt-out lepers when the wind  
Of mood and mode is blowing quite contrary  
May change from mellow fast a fellow's mind  
And make him think naught good but God and Mary!

And it is this continual relating of the realities of this world to those of the next which is the unwavering focus of his writing. Listen to John telling us himself, in the opening of a poem he called simply 'Mutemwa':

This people, this exotic clan  
Of lepers in array  
Of being less yet more than man  
As man is worn today:  
This is a people born to be  
Burnt upward to eternity!

\*

This strange ecstatic moody folk  
Of joy with sorrow merged  
Destined to shuffle off the yoke  
Of all the world has urged:  
This oddity, this Godward school  
Sublimely wise, whence, I'm its fool!

## MUSIC 2

Mutemwa is God's darling, he says. Well, Mutemwa was John's darling too. In addition to looking after his lepers, he would immortalize them in a poem. In September 1969, not long after he arrived in the village, he wrote a series of poems in a foolscap book, which he called 'A Jumbly Alphabet'. There's one for each of the lepers, all 80 them. He begins with Aaron, Abraham, Agnes, and Andrew, and ends with Wilson, Wisborne, Zvauya, and Zvirachi. Here are two sonnets from the middle of the alphabet. First, blind Muchero, and then Marshareera.

Muchero merits an Augustan Ode,  
He is the ripeness of Mashonaland,  
His very name means Fruit, his lifetime's load  
He's borne as if he'd shared its being planned;  
Such dignity where earthly eyes are blind,



Such royal bearing with that loyal stick,  
Such mellowness of presence so combined  
With brightness, to politeness ever quick;  
So deeply human on a steep ascent  
Of fathomless dependence up to God,  
So confident in love as won't repent  
Of being blind for every step he's trod:  
Substance of hoped-for things and evidence  
Of things unseen I glean's his recompense.

### MUSIC 3

What a wonderful character portrait! And then, with Marshareera we get a glimpse of the horrendous treatment the lepers were receiving before John arrived - in her case, being left to eat from a plate on the floor, and scared that her food would be stolen by animals. Marshareera - he wonders how to pronounce it!

This really is the nearest I can get  
To right pronunciation of the name  
They give her and she gives herself, once met  
Never forgotten is this ancient dame;  
I do not know for just how long she fed  
Herself from plate unsighted being blind,  
The hens and dogs became her constant dread  
Before her, snatching food, - was she resigned?  
Under a blanket she would hide her face  
And platter, and she'd natter all the day  
As does this bookish bard who looks for grace  
To aid her better and the raid defray:  
Spells MARSHAREERA nearest to the sound,  
Feed her we must else eats she off the ground.

### MUSIC 4

And lastly, in this presentation of John the caring poet: he is also uncannily prophetic. What is the issue that today most cuts across all religions and non-religions, and attracts huge international attention in the media? In a word, the environment. Saving the planet. John was one of the first to realise this. When he was writing, the word *ecology*, in the sense of concern for the environment, was a novelty: the *Oxford English Dictionary* has first recorded usages of it only from the 1970s. And the harm being inflicted on the environment is one of the two things that ever made him really angry - the other, of course, was anyone or anything that dared to harm his lepers. In a poem written in 1970 he inveighs against what he calls 'Such savage wantonness, such random felling', and he goes on:

The most destructive thing on earth is man  
Disparaging his destiny in God,  
He roots up forests and his bootless plan  
Is concrete roads to speed him under sod.  
He ravages the fruitful fields with fast  
Measures for getting plenitude at once  
Until an ashen countenance is cast  
By cleverness that makes of him a dunce;  
He flogs the wheatflour free of all its pith  
And, making cancer-mixture, calls it bread,



Counting the Resurrection as a myth  
He rises not to what befalls the dead:  
But rising to the fact of Adam's fall  
Too late will not improve estate at all.

And he may well have been the first to write lines highlighting the 'curse' of plastic, in 1973.  
It's a verse in a long poem called 'Pastorale':

Time and again I feel inclined  
To curse the present mode that wraps  
All articles to buy you'll find  
In plastic - toothbrushes and taps  
And foodstuffs (chocolate and cheese  
In silver-paper too will tease).

And he speaks for all birds in the first stanza of 'A Ballade of a Breakfast-Flock', as he  
imagines the chief bird telling his flock:

Take it all back then, blast your plastic bags!  
Top-mast the Elder Gull gives sharp command  
To saddened flock and adds, if any lags  
At signal shrill I'll fill his bill with sand!

And his stricture seems to work, according to the second stanza:

The whole balladey lot takes wings, none lags  
Behind and from the mind of all is banned  
Least possibility of snatching bags  
Of plastic in the future...

In so many ways, John Bradburne was ahead of his time.

MUSIC 5



## 6 John the human poet

John Bradburne wrote poetry about everyday life and living in a way that no other has done. We learn about his likes - for tea, coffee, brandy, meringues, apple-tart... He tells us about his dislikes, such as telephones, television, and bureaucracy. And we learn about his health and his moods, and the mundane daily tasks he has to cope with in a difficult environment. It's possible to identify with someone like that.

Here are two examples: a like and a dislike. First, his love-affair with coffee, in a poem he called 'Salvé coffee' - Hail, coffee. You'll notice one of his favourite phrases in the middle: *Honi soit qui mal y pense* - Shame be to anyone who thinks evil of it.

Salute I thee, thou coffee free, thou elixir elect,  
Best guest of my astronomy, stimulant of the wrecked!  
Most gleeful partner to my cup, contentment from a tin,  
No friend to fat and flatulence, no windbag, flag to win!

\*

A spoon or two of honey (*honi soi qui mal y pense*)  
Or sugar's equal measure at my leisure in a trance,  
A decent deal of coffee and a meal is at my door  
Steaming away until 'Au lait!' I cry and sigh for more.

And note the pun in the last line. 'Au lait' is not just Olé as in Spanish, but in French as well: 'With milk'.

And now, one of his dislikes. The telephone. Why? Because the sudden ring disrupts his silence, destroys his prayerlife. Here's John reading 'Of telephones'.

These are the shallowest of insults,  
These are horrid interruptions amidst time,  
They make all else anachronism,  
Seize courtesy by the forelock for a dime.  
Their bells unbeautiful so fast insist  
Upon immediate attention that  
If ring they in my hearing, they'll be missed  
Quickly as I'll escape the place they're at.  
Straightway they make demand for a reply,  
Ousting all decency that well reflects,  
Then they ring off; softly comes silence nigh,  
Bidding me sigh for what no guile corrects.  
Speedier far than telephones can be  
Is heart answering heart, from sea to sea  
It reaches, and attains what it expects.

### MUSIC 1

John knew that his poems weren't known. He had only a handful published locally in Rhodesia during his lifetime, where he was quite well known as a poet - to the extent that he actually went on television there once, though he didn't enjoy the experience at all. He did try to get a collection published in Britain, but the publisher he approached wasn't interested. More fool him, in the light of subsequent events! And this lack of recognition depressed him a bit. Well, it would anyone! There's one poem in which we can hear him thinking: what's the point, especially as Shakespeare has said it all anyway!

When Shakespeare died, at only fifty-two,  
Behold, he'd told the thoughts of all mankind!  
There is no shade of mood in me or you



Which, in Will's way, may not expression find;  
 But, since himself that Bard has done this thing  
 In such a princely manner for the throng,  
 Shall I endeavour to go echoing?  
 Or shall I tintinabulate his song?  
 Say nay, it were a nightmare travesty  
 To try to gild the lily of his art  
 Which is as if The Holy Ghost made free  
 Both on our mortal and immortal part:  
 My age is fifty-three, my lines are many  
 And almost all of them not read by any!

## MUSIC 2

And almost all of them not read by any? Well, fortunately, that's no longer the case. And he'd be delighted with the kind of publicity his poetry is getting these days, because he was always hopeful that his writing would be helpful to others. Listen to this one:

God, I care not what clod forgot my face  
 Nor who remembered ever my address,  
 So long a song is poured upon the race  
 In strains like rains upon a wilderness  
 That those who say not No will say me Yes!  
 What use to be abstruse to a degree  
 Beyond both critics and the common press  
 If, reading me but once, saith dunce: "I see".

That reminds me of what the American poet Archibald MacLeish said: 'Anything can make us look; only art can make us see.' And if you were listening to my programme on the Trinity, that's a perfect example. People do see more clearly after reading John's poetic explanations.

A genuine humility pervades John's writing, which is full of jocular and self-deprecating description. In a poem written a year before he was killed, he hopes someone will sort out all his poems one day, and throw away anything that doesn't work well.

If they should pick me off tonight  
 And leave me on the floor  
 I'd pray before my soul took flight  
 That all this heretofore  
 Of reams and reams of nursery-rhymes  
 Might be well sorted out betimes  
 And not be published where it chimes  
 Not in with sinless lore.

Nursery-rhymes, indeed! It's this down-to-earth sense of humour, in the context of a spiritual exposition normally treated only with high-minded seriousness, that is so hugely appealing. Everything he wrote is driven by a delight in wordplay and a joyful exploitation of poetic technique that I find breathtaking in its sophisticated ingenuity.

It's perhaps foolish to try to sum up so much writing in a single word, but a description that comes repeatedly to my mind is to say John was a quintessentially 'human' poet - in the fullest sense, shown in an unceasing concern to integrate the natural and supernatural dimensions of the human condition. We see it in his account of the ways body and soul interact in everyday interests and activities. We see it in his celebration of the environment, in its fauna, flora, and landscape, as a reflection of the divine. And we see it, most of all, in the way he shows how it's possible to work unceasingly to battle disease and



poverty while maintaining a transcendent vision that allows us to see Mutemwa as a symbol of hope for the poor and marginalized everywhere.

In 2003, Cardinal Martins was Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, and he had this to say: 'The saints are like beacons; they show men and women the possibilities open to human beings'. He goes on to quote Simon Weil: 'It is not enough to be holy, it must be the holiness demanded by the present day: a new holiness, unprecedented.' In his poetry, John Bradburne is just such a light for the present day. In their 5000 different ways, his poems are beacons illuminating the nature of truth.

Well, in these six programmes, I've tried to introduce you to John Bradburne the poet, so that you can see how his poetry ties in with John Bradburne the saint - or, more accurately saint-in-waiting. If you want to read more of his poems, there are now several places to go. There are collections in book form available from the John Bradburne Memorial Society. And all the poems are available online at [johnbradburnepoems.com](http://johnbradburnepoems.com) - and don't forget the e when you're typing bradburne. All the audio recordings are there too, including the ones you've heard in this series. And I've written quite a large book about his poetry. It's called *A Life Made of Words: the Poetry and Thought of John Bradburne*, and that too is available from the Memorial Society.

So let me end now with one more poem - an unusual one, in which he describes a magical moment. Half awake, half asleep, he hears a guitar and joyful singing. He called the poem, recalling Shakespeare, 'In such a night as this', and here he is reading it:

Softly the twangling of a clear guitar  
Crossed between sleep and waking, which it caught,  
Neither it seemed a near, nor yet a far  
But sweetly passed and simply went to naught.  
Above its sound there soared a lieder voice  
Which serenaded all the starry sky,  
In which each point stood brightly, to rejoice  
With lowly minstrel, slowly passing by.  
When it is day anew, I'll ask the folk  
Dwelling adjacent to the cell I keep  
Whether they heard, and who might thus invoke  
Argus-eyed heaven, with a joy so deep.  
He cleaved the silence gently, in a chord  
With ghostly passing, wholly like the Lord.

MUSIC 3