

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY – WEDNESDAY, 3RD JANUARY 2024

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The shipping forecast is a hundred years old this week. Growing up in Lusaka, Zambia, I would listen expectantly to my father's wireless wheezing through the stations, as he tuned in to the evening news on the BBC. There it would be – the shipping forecast – its lyrical cadences conjuring up an imagined world of distant islands and stormy seas, small ships tossed on billowing waves. Even though I now live in Britain and know that those are real places – I've stayed on Lundy many times – they've never lost that mythical allure.

The same is true of the game of Monopoly. I've lived in London for many years, but the map I carry in my head is the Monopoly board of my African childhood, not the A to Z.

But with Monopoly as with the shipping forecast, there's a connection between reality and imagination. Houses in Mayfair and Park Lane really do cost a lot more than houses in Whitechapel and Old Kent Road. Fenchurch Street, Marylebone, Kings Cross and Liverpool Street are real London stations.

Faith for me is a bit like that. It's a poetic and sometimes playful vision of a world, linked to but transformative of reality as we know it - what Ludwig Wittgenstein might call "language games". It connects communities across time and space by shared rituals and stories that transport us into realms of imagination and hope.

Martin Heidegger described language as “the house of being ... In its home, humans dwell.” Pope Francis repeatedly calls upon humankind to communicate in poetic language that might enable us to imagine and work towards a different, more sustainable and peaceful way of being. He speaks of “poets, contemplatives and prophets” who “help free us from the technocratic and consumerist paradigm that destroys nature and robs us of a truly dignified existence.”

In her poem “Prayer”, Carol Anne Duffy plays on the rhythms of the shipping forecast to describe it as the radio's prayer in darkness.

Prayer, like poetry, is no less real for being the language of the imagination, enfolded within and emerging out of the hopes and fears, the joys and sorrows, of the realities of our lives. As we enter a new year with all its gloomy forecasts of stormy seas ahead, maybe we need both poetry and prayer to navigate our way through the dangers, and to guide us towards better times.