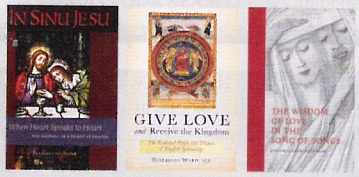
SPEED READING



LUKE BELL
follows scriptural signposts

In Sinu Jesu: When Heart Speaks to Heart – The Journal of a Priest at Prayer **(Angelico Press, £16.50; *Tablet* price £14.85) records words from the Lord and His Mother received in his heart by an anonymous Benedictine monk and priest. These meditations, in a rhythm similar to that of St John's gospel, resonate closely with Scripture. The book is a sort of latter-day *Imitation of Christ* – prioritising, for example, adoration over time spent at the computer. Every priest should read it, perhaps every year, but it is a call to everyone to appreciate the love the Lord shows us in the Blessed Sacrament.**

In *Give Love and Receive the Kingdom* (Paraclete Press, £18.99; *Tablet* price £17.09), Benedicta Ward SLG explores "essential people and themes of English spirituality". She brings alive people like St Bede and St Cuthbert, showing how the Scripture citations in the records of their lives bring us to the heart of who they were. And their hearts still speak to us, whether through "bright sorrow" or, as with St Anselm and Julian of Norwich, "the mind at the service of the heart".

In the beautifully illustrated *The Wisdom of Love in the Song of Songs* (Hikari Press, £25; *Tablet* price £22.50), Stefan Gillow Reynolds reads this literally central book of the Bible as a narrative of King Solomon's love for a woman in his harem who wants a personal relationship that transcends convention. Bringing fine scholarship to the detail of the Song, and the mystical interpretation of many traditions and (superlatively) a Bible-wide context to its meaning, he argues that "only human love can speak of divine love".

Life after death

HILARY DAVIES

Pascal's Tears
(or How Not to Murder One's Wife)
ROBERT FRASER
(CRANTHORPE MILLNER, 300 PP, £7.99)

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Everyday Madness:
On Grief, Anger, Loss and Love
LISA APPIGNANESI
(FOURTH ESTATE, 272 PP, £14.99)

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"**ALL GRIEF** is both particular and general ... as variously tinged as the vividly hued leaves [of] the lone acacia tree." The two books here starkly illustrate the truth of that statement. The lines come from *Pascal's Tears*; the tree stood in the hospital where the writer Robert Fraser embarked on the odyssey of his wife's death.

In September 2013, Catherine went into cardiac arrest after one of the asthmatic attacks to which she had become prone. After 10 frantic minutes, the medics restored a heartbeat, but an interval of oxygen starvation had left her with "severe global hypoxic brain damage". Catherine is now here and not here, her limpid blue eyes open but showing no functional awareness, let alone a flicker of recognition: even the threatened stab of a biro into her eyes does not elicit the protective blink reaction. Robert and his son respond by reading her Jane Austen and playing her favourite 1960s pop songs and Welsh chapel hymns. The enormity of the ethical situation they face rapidly becomes apparent. Catherine, a cheerful but determined apostate from Welsh Nonconformism, had left no indication of her wishes for treatment. When her tracheostomy tube becomes blocked, the family agrees to have it removed; Robert prepares to watch her die. But Catherine refuses to die. During the next four months, he wrestles with life or death questions: should his wife be fed and hydrated artificially? (yes: this is part of a duty of care, intuitively and medically); should she be given antibiotics and blood tests? (no: unnecessarily invasive).

THROUGHOUT, he maintains an inner and tender dialogue with his wife, revisiting the Welsh background that both unites and separates them; his delicate Anglican faith that she constantly calls into question; their shared love of Italy; their friendly sparrings. He gratefully records the common decency of those who care for Catherine; the concern of friends; and the unswerving, lucid support of his son. Yet he also charts his own feelings of guilt and fear of loneliness, the questionable nature of his judgements, the doubts over what Catherine may be experiencing, trapped in her uncommunicative body. The story reaches its inevitable conclusion, but that is not its climax; this comes with the scattering of her ashes by the sea, and the cathartic weeping brought on by a particular song.

HOW DIFFERENT Lisa Appignanesi's *Everyday Madness* is. Her account begins where Fraser's ends, with the death of a spouse. The last, angry words between them act like a curse over her grief, and so she rages, at virtually everything: her fraught relationship with her mother, her father's unpredictable outbursts of rage, the dreadfulness of their wartime experiences as Polish Jews and then exiles. She is angry at her husband's infidelity, and at the increasing number of her friends who are dead.

These trains of thought lead her to speculate about rage more generally: road rage; Trump rage; xenophobia; rage in the Bible; sibling rivalry; rage in social media; misogyny; racial hatred; casual rage on the street. It's the world seen through a bloodshot eye. Finally, she finds a kind of peace in the love of family: specifically, her little grandson, Manny. But there is a hecticness in her account, an uneasy feeling of striving for effect, of making a heap of all the rage she could access. Most disturbing is the almost total absence of her husband as an individual: the reader feels he has become a cipher for her rage, which is only partially to do with his death.

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