

‘Christ plays in ten thousand places’ – An address for Evensong

Each of our Scriptures this evening has something to do with beauty and transcendence. In our first reading we are given a vision of the future by the prophet Daniel. Out of violence and anguish new age shall be born, a time of resurrection and joy in which even those who have died shall arise, to ‘shine like the brightness of the sky,’ and ‘the stars for ever and ever.’ Our psalm today speaks of the beautiful order of the earth and the heavens and the deep mystery of humanity whose earthly reality somehow seems to outshine even that of the angels. And in our second reading, the apostle Paul writes about the spiritual beauty of Christ, ‘the image of the invisible God,’ in whom all the glory and splendour of creation inheres.

Hans Boersma speaks of this as ‘the weaving of a sacramental tapestry’ in which the whole of creation participates in the reality of God, singing out his beauty and his truth. In this way God can be seen as utterly infusing the material realities of our world, but also infinitely transcending them, or as Rowan Williams puts it, ‘every finite phenomenon is at some level a carrier of divine significance.’ If this is truly the case, then we will need to move beyond the merely technological and utilitarian if we are finally to understand ourselves or our world.

I think that the writings and poetry of Gerard Manly Hopkins, ‘the most original poet of the Victorian age,’ give us one of the best insights into this ‘sacramental tapestry’ and the interweaving of the earthly and the heavenly, the temporal and the eternal, the particular and the universal. Hopkins spent his life playfully rejoicing in the rhythms and seasons of the world and its language, delighting in the connections between words: their sounds and syntax. Poems like ‘Pied Beauty,’ ‘As Kingfishers Catch Fire,’ and ‘God’s Grandeur,’ playfully and powerfully portray a world full of colour and beauty, giving thanks for strange and spare things, for the things of our world and in our hearts that don’t quite fit, that we can’t get a handle on, but that playfully leap away from us, laughing at our attempts to flatten and control.

When Hopkins looked at the world, he didn’t see a neutral context for human economic exchange or for its cynical use and misuse, but rather that ‘all things are charged with love, are charged with God and if we know how to touch them give off sparks and

take fire, yield drops and flow, ring and tell of him.’ Hopkins is a world full of mystery, but more than this, it is a world that communicates. The world isn’t simply something to be analysed or dissected, but a sign of the transcendent, a word of God itself.

‘Pied Beauty’ takes us into the heart of Hopkins’ understanding of what he calls ‘inscape.’ ‘Glory be to God for dappled things... / All things counter, original, spare, strange... / With swift, slow, sweet, sour; addable, dim; / He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change: / Praise him.’ In his poetry, Hopkins focusses on the distinctive and the ‘spare’ in the world around him, seeing it like a particular note in a symphony of music or a particular colour in a landscape, an inner distinction or particularity that somehow carries the weight of the eternal. Teilhard de Chardin articulates something similar when he speaks of ‘the universe fulfilling itself in a synthesis of centres. With God as the centre of centres.’ Our world, full of movement, ephemeral and spare, somehow speaks of the eternal unchanging beauty of God.

His poem, ‘God’s Grandeur,’ begins in a similar manner, singing out that ‘the world is charged with the grandeur of God.’ Again the world is no static thing, but rather dynamically radiates out with the beauty and joy of God. But the poem takes a dark turn as it speaks of the trudging toil of human endeavour, flattening out this depth and greying out its colour: ‘All is seared with trade; / bleared, smeared with toil; / And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell.’ This feels akin to Tolkien’s mythology of middle-earth in which the magic of the eternal is dwindling as the age of man approaches. But despite this, ‘nature is never spent... / Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.’ The fragile beauty of creation cannot finally be dimmed even by the worst of humanity’s destructive acts, because it bears the imprint and potentiality of the creative Spirit of God itself.

At this time of environmental crisis, in which our human endeavours reduce people and things to what Heidegger called ‘standing reserve,’ a mere resource to utilise and discard, it is imperative that we recapture something of this sacramental vision of the cosmos, in which all things however small, however spare, shine out with the beauty of God, and that everything in its utter particularity speaks of its eternal worth. For as Hopkins writes, ‘For Christ plays in ten thousand places, / Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features of men’s faces.’