

Trinity College Cambridge

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Good Books

Gerard Manley Hopkins: *Selected Poems*

'Pied Beauty', 'God's Grandeur', 'Spring'

Bible Reading: Colossians 1: 9–23

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INTRODUCTION

Gerard Hopkins was born in London on 28th July 1844 and died in Dublin in 1889. For about half of his shortish life he was a devout, increasingly high church, Anglican. In 1866, while still a student in Oxford, he was received into the Roman Catholic Church by John Henry Newman and two years later became a Jesuit. Hopkins was highly gifted academically, with an extraordinary sensitivity to visual beauty and to the sound and nuance of words. He was also gifted at drawing. He inspired great affection in the people he knew. He took his vocation as a priest with great seriousness. He left a modest number of mature poems, many letters, a journal and detailed notebooks. Despite his talents and his kindness, the Jesuits never quite knew where to put him, and he was moved around from post to post, as a school teacher and a university teacher, as a parish priest and as a preacher. By the end of his life, he seemed both to himself and to his fellow-Jesuits to have succeeded little in any of these positions. He also suffered from periodic depression. During his lifetime, his poetry, which seemed very difficult and quite eccentric, was known to only a few close friends.

Even those friends found his poetry obscure. Yet when it was finally published in 1918, a whole thirty years after his death, he became quickly famous. This man, who was so steeped in his own Victorian age, seemed to be a 'modern' writer, with his daring experiments in the sound and rhythm of words, and his courageous articulation of powerful emotions. Yet perhaps it is only now that we can fully appreciate one way in which he was ahead of his times: in his sensitivity to the manner in which industrialism was damaging the natural world. 'Nature, even when we mend her, we end her,' he wrote in a poem which lamented the chopping down of some poplar trees near Oxford. But Hopkins does not only identify the problem, he also points to its cause: the loss of wonder. And in order to learn to wonder, he suggests, we need to take time. Time, however, is what we seem no longer to possess. Caught in a web of technology, most of it designed to speed things up, driven by targets and by deadlines, we are always anxious, always short of time. Hopkins can make us slow down.

First of all, he makes us slow down just because his poems are not easy. I first heard one when I was in my last year at school. We had to take a general studies exam, and go to classes in subjects we were not taking for A-level. The English teacher read to us a poem called 'The Windhover', in which Hopkins compares a bird of prey, a kestrel, which hovers in the sky and then suddenly swoops down, to Christ. It is not a straightforward poem – which is why I didn't choose it to be read today. At a single hearing you might not have made anything of it. Indeed, when our English teacher read it to us at the beginning of the half hour it sounded mysterious and intriguing, but incomprehensible. He then slowly took it apart and explained it to us - and by the end of the session, I was hooked for life. Reading Hopkins takes time – and it reminds us, in a world shaped by the fantasy of instant access, that doing anything worthwhile takes time.

'KINGFISHERS'

You have already heard three poems. Let me read you one more, another sonnet, which is undated, but may come from the same period as the three you have already heard, when Hopkins, in his early thirties, was living in lovely countryside in North Wales. As I read it, listen out for the music.

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves - goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *What I do is me, for that I came.*

I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is -
Christ. 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.

SEEING THE GRANDEUR OF GOD

The first thing that strikes you about Hopkins was that he used his eyes. He had the eyes of a painter, and he made looking itself into a form of art. He spent weeks, literally, observing the form of things, patiently trying to receive their shape, to understand their beauty. He never imposed himself on the thing, but waited to allow its individuality to emerge. As he put it himself 'I look at it until it looks at me.' His journals are packed with dozens and dozens of amazingly detailed descriptions, often quite technical, as he tries to capture the uniqueness of each thing that he studies – a bunch of oak leaves, a sunset, a flock of swallows, breaking waves.

I looked at the pigeons down in the kitchen yard ... They look like little gay jugs by shape when they walk, strutting and jod-jodding with their heads. The two young ones are all white and the pins of the folded wings, quill pleated over quill, are like crisp and shapely cuttleshells found on the shore. The others are dull thundercolour or black-grape-colour except in the white pieings, the quills and tail, and in the shot of the neck. I saw one up on the eaves of the roof: as it moved its head a crush of satin green came and went, a wet or soft flaming of the light.¹

So, when he says in a poem, ‘the glassy peartree leaves and blooms’ or talks of ‘skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow’, he is not offering a glib, superficial description. He has stared for hours on end at trees and at cloud formations to be able to say that. Here, for example, is one of his many descriptions of clouds:

The sundown yellow with light but ending at the top in a foam of delicate white pearly and spotted with big tufts of cloud in colour russet between brown and purple but edged with brassy light.

Most of us would have quickly glanced at it and said, ‘That’s a nice sunset!’ We normally see so little. Hopkins has looked at the clouds until they looked at him.

What Gerard Hopkins found when he slowed down and looked was that the beauty of each thing lay in its individuality – its ‘thisness’, as he called it, using an idea from medieval philosophy. The kingfisher catches fire, the dragonfly draws flame – as we hear the words we can imagine the azure and russet flash of a kingfisher speeding past, or the sparkle of the sun on the metallic green body of a dragonfly. Some of you will be saying to yourselves, ‘I can’t imagine that.’ If so, that may be because you have never seen it for yourself. And as I say that, I can already feel some of you reaching in your imagination for your ipods (I’m sure you are too polite to do so in reality!), to search for a video of a kingfisher. Isn’t that what everybody does? Been there, done that, pressed the button? But have you been there and done it? Have you walked quietly and slowly by the side of a stream, attentive to whatever may appear – whatever is there quite independently of a virtual world that you can control? Have you seen and heard all the other things you see and hear when you are looking for kingfishers – a tiny wren singing its heart out, maybe, or the morning dew sparkling on the willow trees? Have you allowed yourself to be surprised – or to be disappointed? Or is all that you have seen a little picture on a screen? Because that is no more seeing a kingfisher than looking at a photo of your boyfriend or your Mum is the same as giving them a hug. When the kingfisher does appear, if it does, it will be unexpectedly, not regularly or to order. I have seen one when having a drink in a Cambridge pub, when waiting for a train on a suburban station. I have often failed to see one when I have been looking for one.

¹ *Journal*, 19 July 1872.

These things have their lives and their being independently of us and of our own projects. This patient, receptive, looking has a moral dimension – we are learning to forget ourselves. That is true of any real learning - of coming to understand a bird or a tree, a book or even a person. As I heard it put in another sermon recently, ‘When people do not tell us their personal story it is probably because we are so very busy telling them our own.’ We have to set ourselves aside, in order to see and hear what is really there.

When Hopkins did that, he not only found the thing itself, he also found that there was more to the thing than the thing itself. The kingfisher and the dragonfly, each mortal thing which ‘speaks and spells’ itself, is also saying some thing else: ‘for that I came’. Behind it is a purpose, a meaning, a power. In seeing it, we glimpse the one who made it. I’d like to quote for you from an email I received recently from a student who is still at school:

The whole point of creation is for God to be known. The unknown, unknowable, unmanifested God is finally known because the world points towards it. The only way we can get to know the unmanifested God is through the world. By having the world and then seeing beyond the world. It is a bit like when you look at something for a long time. You see it is amazing but then you also see that what is even more amazing is what can’t be seen.

That is exactly Hopkins’ experience. The metaphor he uses for it is fire: the kingfisher catches fire, the dragonfly draws flame, the grandeur of God flames out. But to see this flame, and to understand what it means, is something we need to *learn* how to do. This is how Hopkins himself put it:

All things therefore 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.²

If we know how to touch them. God does not force himself on us: it is up to us to learn how to find him.

‘GOD’S BETTER BEAUTY’

So far I have hardly mentioned Christ. But for Hopkins it was in Christ that the beauty of God was supremely revealed. The reading from Colossians told us that ‘all things were created through him and for him.’ Hopkins took this idea very seriously. For example, in the middle of a detailed description of bluebells he wrote, ‘I do not think I have ever seen anything more beautiful than the bluebell I have been looking at. I know the beauty of our Lord by it.’³

² *Notebooks and Papers of GMH* (ed. H. House, OUP 1937), p. 342.

³ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose*, ed. W.H. Gardner, Penguin 1985, p. 120 from the *Journal*, 18 May 1870.

With human beings, however, Christ's beauty is revealed in a completely new dimension. As Hopkins puts it so simply: 'I say MORE.' Elsewhere he speaks of, 'God's better beauty, grace',⁴ and in a poem in honour of the martyr Margaret Clitheroe, he talks of 'the Christed beauty of her mind.' So what does it mean to 'Act in God's eye what in God's eye he is – Christ?' Once again, Hopkins revels in variety and distinctiveness – 'Christ plays in ten thousand places' and his loveliness is seen in ten thousand different kinds of lives. In a meditation, Hopkins put it this way, 'To lift up the hands in prayer gives God glory, but a man with a dungfork in his hand, a woman with a sloppail, gives him glory too.'⁵ Colossians spoke of 'a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.' Hopkins reminds us is that there is no limit to the type of calling, to the kind of person, that may be 'worthy of the Lord.'

Another poem fills out what it might be to 'act Christ'. 'Felix Randall' is about the death of a young blacksmith, whom Hopkins as a priest had tended in his final illness. He had watched his energetic muscular body waste away; he had watched Felix move from anger and misery to acceptance and peace, aided by the sacraments he administered. Hopkins wrote movingly of the effect this had on him:

This seeing the sick endears them to us, us too it endears.
My tongue had taught thee comfort, touch had quenched thy tears,
Thy tears that touched my heart, child, Felix, poor Felix Randall.

Here Christ is seen playing in both priest and penitent, in both patient and carer: in the tenderness of Hopkins' ministrations and in the gratitude and courageous acceptance of Felix. And once again, it is the individual human being that matters, as the poem insists through the repetition of his name.

CONCLUSION

Our own world is dominated by haste: we have little time for wonder. The speed that we crave is made possible by immense systems of organisation, created and maintained by human ingenuity. But these systems can function only by forgetting our individuality, by reducing our faces to numbers. Christ plays in the faces of a thousand men and women like Felix Randall, sick, frightened and helpless. But he will not be noticed in a list of National Insurance numbers. The kingfisher catches fire as it flashes past because it makes you slow down to attend to it. But the million images flashing across your computer screen will never catch fire, because you can never attend to the depth of each one. Hopkins reminds us that we need to slow down. And it is in slowing down that we may rediscover the 'juice and the joy' that he talks about, 'the grandeur of God' and the beauty of Christ in the faces of those whom we meet.

⁴ *To What Serves Mortal Beauty?*

⁵ Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Selected Prose*, ed. Gerald Roberts, OUP 1980, p.108.