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Grassroots Ministry: Contemplative Seeing

Jo O'Donovan rsm (The Congregation): 'Contemplative Seeing in Hopkins's *Windhover*'

When I was asked over a year ago to contribute to the series on Mercy Global Presence I was quite eager. But now, in these pandemic times, I have no words. I turn to my friend Hopkins hoping to find in his poetry a filter through which I might puncture the ocean of silence lockdowns bring, and to *The Windhover*, considered by him to be his best poem. The poem is really a rendering in a new key the passion of Christ. And it also speaks a word to us in pandemic times of restriction on how the patient plod we endure can hide a shine if only we can see. Hopkins is a poet of the senses, of seeing, a contemplative seeing, always subtly responding to being addressed by Another. In retirement I had time to develop my long-term interest in him. It may be I talked about him a lot. A sister once asked me: Jo, why are you so interested in Hopkins? Is he a saint or something? I responded he is 'something' alright, a great poet and I enjoy his poetry, and added defensively, he is also a kind of saint!

The God-world relation and where we are in it matters to me as I taught theology. I faithfully transferred what I believed and the mode in which I believed it, to young heads. And not wanting to destroy their nascent wonder, here and there I called on poets to speak for me their wordless God-speak. As we know, Hopkins, like Wordsworth moves beyond borders. He is a romantic poet. But the clouds in the first line of Wordsworth's *Daffodils* symbolise the poet's own loneliness, whereas in Hopkins, clouds firstly engage us with themselves. The varying skies over the Clwyd valley in N. Wales, fronting St. Beuno's, were peopled with clouds. With an almost scientific attention to all aspects of nature in his Welsh years, his 'salad days', he wrote *The Windhover* and his well-known nature sonnets. These poems ask us to look, to see, to hear, to taste and touch. Citing with relish a fragment from an early Greek philosopher, Parmenides, he writes: 'Nothing is so pregnant and straightforward to the truth as the simple *yes* and *is*'.

At first it might seem to us to be an atomistic universe, a collection of things material and animate with persons like our selves. But such a universe without the living God would be unthinkable for Hopkins. The biblical creator God of Hopkins creates a multileveled and varied creation to be a common home for a variety of creatures. And such a universe, with levels in earth, rock and waters, in plant and animal life, and in 'World's loveliest – men's selves' is one where each individual shouts out its own particular gifts or 'selvings', showing forth its particular beauty and pain. Thus Hopkins calls us to look at and listen to every created reality at its own level, for each is a word of the Creator addressed to us and calling for our attention. What we must attend to are not vague generalities or classifications, but the *inscape* of things, their form, or their pattern, as it appeals to our senses. Indeed, the poet does say that imagining and wording the inscape of things is the very soul of art and poetry.

Many literary critics read Hopkins as the innovative poet of the form or inscape of things. But we get a more complete appreciation of him when we read him in the light of his biblical Christian and indeed Catholic faith. The Creator did not leave us with just a two-tiered universe. It is a world at once plural and one. Plural in that each creature mimes the diversity of divine presence in its own distinctive way. And one, in that the Creator's inscape for the world is one. It is Christ who 'plays in ten thousand places' (*As Kingfishers* poem). As R.K.R. Thornton aptly sums up 'Hopkins can only write about one thing: Everything IS: and everything is Christ.' Hopkins says the aim of his poetry is to word Incarnation. He invites us to a contemplative seeing of earth and our place in it, a seeing with our feet on the ground and a 'faith with eyes wide open', to use St Augustine's phrase. *The Windhover* is such a poem. It invites us to seeing and hearing with the whole self. With the little kestrel we are inserted into the noble passion of creation that mimes variously the Creator's own passion in Christ. Indeed, many of his poems can be read like psalms to the divine passion and glory of God shining through all things.

The Windhover.
To Christ Our Lord.

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-
Of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon, in its riding
Of the rolling level underneath him steady air, and striding
High there, how he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing
In his ecstasy! Then off, off forth on swing,
As a skate's heel sweeps smooth on a bow-bend; the hurl and gliding
Rebuffed the big wind. My heart in hiding
Stirred for the bird, - the achieve of; the mastery of the thing!

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous. O my chevalier!

No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermillion.

Noel Maenefa, the dark hillock behind St Beuno's, with its rock chapel on top to which the Jesuit students sometimes went for liturgy, was a haunt for small hawks or kestrels. Up there, early one morning a kestrel, the poem's 'windhover' is 'caught' by the poet. The sharpness of 'Caught' alerts our attention to the very *thisness* of the kestrel – how its distinctive action shows off its selving, how it inscapes itself showing its revelatory depths. In his mind's eye, Hopkins sees the little hawk as royal, akin to the falcon of the French court, which was carried by the dauphin while riding. Such chivalric language gives nobility to the bird. We are seduced. The poet also seduced, waits with his heart in hiding. We rise with the bird as he strides in ecstasy and performs in the air. And when he reaches his high point, it is as if he has no more to give. The wimpling wing ring out bell-like in this heroic moment of stasis as he rebuffs the big wind. Such 'brute beauty and valour and act' exclaims Hopkins. The 'achieve' of the 'thing' in its natural state, whereas I, what am I doing? A moment of tension here and anxious questioning of self by the poet, but the capitalised AND leads to the answer. For in this new space the kestrel becomes a word for

Hopkins of another Knight, who was even more dangerous and lovely in his buckling on the Cross. Stirred with affection and relief, the poet cries out: 'O my chevalier'.

Hopkins finds a resting point here. Like the disciples who came down from the mountain of Tabor, in the final three lines the poet, at peace, lets the truth he has experienced bring healing to his life. Even though his years in Wales were some of the happiest, journal notes of the time mention that the arid scholastic philosophy/ theology programme of studies, left little room for imagination or spiritual nourishment. It was killing and deflating for a poet and literary man. But now recalling his baggage, he dismisses it; 'No wonder of it' he exclaims. For a larger world has broken in on him. And so the poet – ever the pastor – tells us readers that the windhover-Christ addresses us also bringing healing, heavenly and earthly, to our small passions and despairs. For the sheer plod of the everyday, even the silence and felt uselessness of lockdowns, can generate its own danger and loveliness. As when the plough's movement into earth's depths makes wet sillion shine. As when blue bleak embers fall, they gall themselves and gash gold vermillion. In this last parallel here, with its passion hints, the poet with the 'ah, my dear', of affection returns once again to his ever-present chevalier, Christ.

There is a realism about Hopkins' poetry and it can be very liberating. Liberating from the preoccupations with oneself – who or whatever that may be? – in the simple 'yes to what *is* there for us as other. And for eyes seeing with the faith of contemplative seeing, being liberated by a real divine presence, an Other that enjoys plurality and addresses it in mercy and love. Hopkins is quite biblical and sees creation as a major drama, a play of relations between God and the human. Like the windhover, each of us is inscaped to play a part in God's creative plan for the world that no one else can play. It is in this light that we can confidently say with St John Henry Newman, friend and mentor of the poet, that even in threatening times of loss, as during a pandemic, 'nothing in our lives is wasted.'