

“Christ: Immortal Diamond”

Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

The current midweek series is titled, “Easter People: Alive with Hope.” I like to think of Christians as “Easter people” – people alive with hope in Christ Jesus. Christ Jesus comes to us daily, searching us out in our fear and anxiety. The messianic event of Christ Jesus is in the shape of the cross and resurrection. To live the hope of Easter is to know that the reality of darkness and death has been overcome by light and newness of life. The cross and resurrection are two sides of one coin: there is no resurrection without the cross and there is no cross without resurrection. Christ uses our human suffering to bring about resurrection.

In the history of the church there are many examples of people who have embodied the Easter hope of the living Christ. One such person was Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J. (1844-1889). Hopkins was an English Jesuit priest, and professor of Classics at University College Dublin, in Dublin, Ireland. Hopkins’ poetry has made him one of the most well known poets of the Victorian era, and a voice of Christian hope. Anyone who has studied English Literature has almost certainly encountered Hopkins’ poetry. Hopkins’ writings are significant because of the way that they attempt to convey the presence of the Word (Logos) in creation. Hopkins was influenced by the “Logos theology” of medieval theologian John Duns Scotus, in which each living thing has been uniquely created receiving the image of the divine Logos.

In today’s meditation, I would like to look at one of Hopkins’ later poems written in 1888, titled, “That Nature is a Heraclitian Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection.” In this poem Hopkins evokes the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who believed that fire was the most elemental part of the world. Fire is created by what it also consumes. For Heraclitus, nature is always in a constant state of flux. If you have heard the adage, “one cannot step into the same river twice” you are familiar with Heraclitus. Much of our modern scientific view of the world has shown Heraclitus to be correct about a world of constant change and motion. As human beings we live in a world of constant and rapid change that can have a debilitating effect upon us. Anxiety about our own mortality as part of an ever-changing world is something that Hopkins keenly felt and wrote about.

Hopkins begins this poem with a series of metaphors for clouds, then for the wind that moves the clouds and “beats the earth bare.” The imagery of the poem moves earthward to the soil and human footprints that have become crusted and hard after trudging laborers have left “manmarks” in the soil. Against this expansive landscape, humanity’s lifespan seems terribly short.

This cycle of constant change also contains the “fire” or death that will blot humanity out. “Man, how fast his fire dint, / his mark on mind, is gone!” shows that humanity seems of little importance in the vast movement of nature. Individuals, who have shone like stars, are extinguished. In death, darkness seems to win. “Vastness blurs and time beats level” shows how in the scope of time, individuals seem to mean nothing, and over time little trace is left of even their presence.

Hopkins writes, “Enough!” describing God’s intervention into human history. The resurrection is “a beacon, an eternal beam” shone across the deck of humanity’s foundering ship. Though we die and our flesh leaves behind only ash, “In a flash...I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am.” In the resurrection of Christ, humanity is given the eternal and immortal nature of Christ.

Hopkins describes this transformation in the image of an “immortal diamond.” A diamond is pure carbon, a substance produced by great heat and pressure that shines like nothing else and is incredibly hard. Like the biblical image of the “pearl of great price” (Matt. 13:45-46) that describes the kingdom, Hopkins uses a diamond to describe the light and immortal density of the resurrection.

Hopkins used the words “I am” twice in the verse, “I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am.” In the final line of the poem “I am” is now embedded in the word “diamond.”

To understand the resurrection is to notice that my life is now embedded in the risen Christ. Luther called this the “joyful exchange” – that Christ takes upon himself my humanity and in exchange gives me his divinity. Using Hopkins’ metaphor of the immortal diamond, to live in the hope of the resurrection means that through the trials and pressures of life, Christ is creating something of eternal permanence inside each of us that has both hardness and brilliance.

Like the image of an “immortal diamond,” John wrote of the Word - “*The light shines in the darkness, and darkness did not overcome it.*” Living in the hope of resurrection is to realize that death and darkness can no longer overwhelm light and life. Though human life is brief, through the resurrection, we already contain an eternity that Christ shares with us. Where the risen Word is present, darkness cannot overcome the light of hope. To be people of Easter means living unreservedly in the ongoing Easter reality that is Christ Jesus.

In his Letter to the Colossians, Paul wrote of Christ the Word, “*He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead.*” Evoking the creative Word, Paul wrote, “*He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*” During Easter we remember and give thanks that the beloved Son of God made peace, reconciling all things to himself, the origin of all that exists. Easter is about being rescued from darkness, sin and death and brought into a kingdom light and life to which we have access to each day. Hopkins used the metaphor of “a beacon, an eternal beam” shone across the deck of humanity’s foundering ship. This image still describes humanity’s struggle during a time of great trial and challenge. Easter is not simply an old tale told to make us feel better about a future we cannot yet see. Easter is about a present reality available to us now. In the resurrection, God says “Enough!” offering to share in us the “immortal diamond” that is the risen Christ. Amen.

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Easter Week 2 midweek meditation reading: Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)

The three poems below were written across roughly a twenty year period and show Hopkins’ development as a writer. *Easter* (1866) is a fairly straightforward poem that shows glimpses of what would become Hopkins’ future style. “Gather gladness from the skies; Take a lesson from the ground; Flowers do ope their heavenward eyes,” reveal his concern for the manner in which creation itself worships God. Written eleven years later, *God’s Grandeur*, reveals the tension between God’s continual presence in creation and humanity’s increasing distance from it. Manley described a time of intense industrialization, “all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell.” Another eleven years later, *That Nature is a Heraclitian Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection*, shows the mature poet meditating on the constant flux of creation and the finality of death. Yet the poem proclaims, “In a flash, at a trumpet crash, I am all at once what Christ is, ' since he was what I am.” In the midst of the eternal flux of nature, the resurrection restores to humanity Christ’s eternal nature as light, hope and new identity.

Easter (1866)

Break the box and shed the nard;
Stop not now to count the cost;
Hither bring pearl, opal, sard;
Reck not what the poor have lost;
Upon Christ throw all away:
Know ye, this is Easter Day.

Build His church and deck His shrine,
Empty though it be on earth;
Ye have kept your choicest wine—
Let it flow for heavenly mirth;
Pluck the harp and breathe the horn:
Know ye not 'tis Easter morn?

Gather gladness from the skies;
Take a lesson from the ground;
Flowers do ope their heavenward eyes
And a Spring-time joy have found;
Earth throws Winter's robes away,
Decks herself for Easter Day.

Beauty now for ashes wear,
Perfumes for the garb of woe,
Chaplets for dishevelled hair,
Dances for sad footsteps slow;
Open wide your hearts that they
Let in joy this Easter Day.

Seek God's house in happy throng;
Crowded let His table be;
Mingle praises, prayer, and song,
Singing to the Trinity.
Henceforth let your souls always
Make each morn an Easter Day.

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God's Grandeur (1877)

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection (1888)

Cloud-puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows | flaunt forth, then chevy on an air-
Built thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in gay-gangs | they throng; they glitter in marches.
Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash, | wherever an elm arches,
Shivelights and shadowtackle in long | lashes lace, lance, and pair.
Delightfully the bright wind boisterous | ropes, wrestles, beats earth bare
Of yestertempest's creases; | in pool and rut peel parches
Squandering ooze to squeezed | dough, crust, dust; stanches, starches
Squadroned masks and manmarks | treadmire toil there
Footfretted in it. Million-fuelèd, | nature's bonfire burns on.
But quench her bonniest, dearest | to her, her clearest-selvèd spark
Man, how fast his firedint, | his mark on mind, is gone!
Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark
Drowned. O pity and indig | nation! Manshape, that shone
Sheer off, disseveral, a star, | death blots black out; nor mark
Is any of him at all so stark
But vastness blurs and time | beats level. Enough! the Resurrection,
A heart's-clarion! Away grief's gasping, | joyless days, dejection.
Across my foundering deck shone
A beacon, an eternal beam. | Flesh fade, and mortal trash
Fall to the residuary worm; | world's wildfire, leave but ash:
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,
I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.

Book recommendations:

Gerard Manley Hopkins: Poems and Prose. Edited by W.H. Gardner, Penguin Classics, reprint edition, 1985.

Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Major Works. Edited by Catherine Phillips. (Oxford World's Classics) Oxford University Press, reprint edition, 2009.

The Gospel in Gerard Manley Hopkins: Selections from his poems, letters, journals and spiritual writings. Edited by Margaret R. Ellsberg. Plough Publishing House, 2017.

Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J. (1844-1889)

Gerard Manley Hopkins was an English Jesuit priest, and professor of Greek and Latin at University College Dublin, in Dublin, Ireland. Published posthumously, his poetry has made him one of the most well known poets of the Victorian era. His poetry is significant for two reasons. First, his highly unique rhythmic pattern of “sprung rhythm” was influential in the later development of modern free verse. Second, Hopkins was influenced by the theology of medieval theologian John Duns Scotus, in which each living thing has been uniquely created receiving the image of the divine Logos. No two living things are alike, each is unique, the result of no two words of the Creator being the same. Individual identity is therefore a gift of the Creator that is extended not only to humanity, but to all living things. Hopkins died of typhoid fever at forty-four years of age. His poetry was influential upon T. S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, and W. H. Auden. His writing is a tremendous example of the creative intersection between theology and the arts.