

Readings for Ascension Sunday

12th May 2024

First Reading: Acts 1:11

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. While staying with them, he ordered them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the promise of the Father. "This," he said, "is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now."

So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?" He replied, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." When he had said this, as they were watching, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. While he was going and they were gazing up toward heaven, suddenly two men in white robes stood by them. They said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

Second Reading: Ephesians 1:15-23

I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and for this reason I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation as you come to know him, so that, with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us who believe, according to the working of his great power. God put this power to work in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.

Gospel: St Luke 24:44-53

Jesus said to the disciples, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them. While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven. And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy; and they were continually in the temple blessing God.

A Reflection for Ascension Sunday

from Rev'd David Higgon

As king fishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;

As king fishers 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.

Gerard Manley Hopkins 1844 –1889

Today we celebrate the feast of the ascension, Jesus Christ's ascension to heaven.

Our faith tells us that the one who ascends, doesn't leave his humanity behind when he ascends to heaven, he is still the one called Son of Man. Jesus the man who died on the Cross for us, becomes as true God, a priest for us, present with us. But how do we understand this mystery? Rather than trying to answer by referring to bible commentaries or the complexities of theology, I want to consider a poetic response.

Thanks to David [Bastow], I now know that in Anglo Saxon times, a poet by the name of Cynewulf, when describing Christ's ascension used the metaphor of Christ as a bird ascending in the sky and moving easily between heaven and earth. The poem I want to look at also feature a bird, it is Gerald Manley Hopkin's *As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;*

I have always been drawn to the brilliance of how Hopkins shaped words to convey the essence of a living thing in how he describes the natural world. He is more than a nature poet, he was also a priest and in his poetry there is revealed a deeper spiritual meaning.

As king fishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;

The opening line conveys a sudden flash of brilliance: *As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame*. I remember catching my first glimpse of a kingfisher, it was just as Hopkins describes it, a flash of brilliant fire as the bird left a streak of electric blue and orange in its trail. In a spiritual sense Hopkins reveals in this image of the kingfisher something of the virtue of grace, as a form of beauty in the world. As the bird moves through the air it seems to charge the atmosphere with a glow and brilliance that dazzle, and so do all gracious actions, they create an after effect that leaves an imprint on people. Gracious and generous actions, like beautiful movements, leave behind powerful impressions that energize and transform people and communities.

For Hopkins, each person is created to be a source of grace to other living things by the way they speak and act, by the way they reflect Christ's actions, by the way they embody Christ's words in the way that Christ himself transfigures the world by his coming and going.

The things that are special in our lives, the fire of love, the joy of music, the glow of happiness, and the overflow of goodness that reside in Christ-like hearts, when they are expressed, they leave trails that linger in the minds of others, both visible and audible. When we do what God created us to do — be a source of grace to others, a channel of charity, a spark of life, and a voice of truth and justice, they too leave trails that linger in the minds of others, both visible and audible.

When a person lives a life of justice, Hopkins says:

*I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace; that keeps all his goings graces.*

All good deeds and just actions emit grace — God's presence in the world bringing light into the darkness, God's voice bringing music to the ears, and God's word transfiguring the world. Grace charges an atmosphere and renews the face of the earth. When each person — whatever their station or vocation in life:

Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is,

When they are a source of grace to others, then the world revels with joy.

Hopkins in the poem sees the presence of the Risen and ascended Christ as being amongst us in the here and now. He says: For Christ plays in ten thousand places. All God's creatures imitate Christ as they fill each other's lives with beauty and music, laughter and warmth, love and goodness. In this hidden, mysterious way God is everywhere:

*Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the father through the features of men's faces.*

In all the darkness and pain of our world, Hopkins takes us to what is essential, that God delights in his creation and that lovely in limbs, grace moves in effortless, natural motions and reflects the playfulness of God. Christ plays in ten thousand places, and his surprising appearances take on a myriad of forms. Grace smiles, plays, sings, dances, and revels; It flashes and sparkles with the splendour of colour. Grace is youthful, energetic, and ebullient, lifting the spirits and rejoicing the heart. Grace is a divine energy, God's life-giving spirit that brings joy out of sorrow and brightness out of gloom. Grace gives flavour and relish to human existence, a salt and spice that dispel the blandness of monotonous routine. Mysterious as God's grace is, it expresses itself throughout all of creation in the

movements, sounds, colours, words, gestures, and actions of all living things that come and go — the invisible things of God being known by the visible things.

Hopkins' poem begins with the little things and mounts to the greater things. Progressing from the motion of kingfishers and dragonflies to the beating of the heart "crying *What I do is me: for that I came,*"

Hopkins captures the essence of grace: it abounds in the world in inexhaustible supply, ever giving and replenishing itself. Awaiting to erupt in each person's soul, grace is God's constant activity in the world, Christ's playing "in ten thousand places" in small ways and big ways — from beautiful smiles to gracious civility and gifts of love. Every time someone makes a kind gesture, or welcomes a stranger, a kingfisher catches fire. With each smile, dragonflies draw flame. Whenever gentle words, sounds of music, or inspired eloquence move the heart, a tolling bell echoes and awakens the spirit. When good people perform spiritual and practical works of mercy, grace abounds as their inmost being, "selves — goes itself" in its generous charity.

These are some of the ordinary comings and "goings" that are graces, leaving behind their powerful aftereffects in their display of divine energy that charges the world. *As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame.*