

The Image of Christ in Poetry  
*A sermon for the Second Sunday of Lent, 2020*  
*for All Saints', Leamington Spa*  
*by Rev. Dr Paul Edmondson, The Shakespeare Birthplace Trust.*

Genesis 12:1-4a; John 3:1-17.

*In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.*

If poetry is the language of love, then poetry is also - and we can be sure of this - the language of the Kingdom of God. To speak or to write poetry is to paint a picture with words, often to convey feelings and thoughts that lead the human heart and mind in different and unexpected directions. We write and read poetry because we want to tell and know the truth. We do not have to understand poetry, or explain it anymore than we can explain love or God. Our job is rather to make ourselves available to be transformed by it. Poetry, like the Kingdom of God, like love, *reads us* - like scripture - for the truth that within us.

Much of the Bible is poetry. Poetry is the language of the psalms, the language of the prophets, the language of Revelation, and I would say, the language of St Paul and St John. But poetry is also the language of Jesus, the embodiment of love, whose whole ministry was devoted to showing us the signs and truths of God's Kingdom. Jesus never explains God; he shows us God. The law he points us to is a law of devotion and love. And he himself uses metaphor and stories in order to convey his truth. The people whom he encountered were changed. They encountered the truth in him; they encountered the truth in themselves; and they were healed, or cured, or their minds were set at rest, and they found peace. The Kingdom of God, the love of God took hold in them, like yeast in a loaf of bread, and made them more generous and loving. I have been asked to speak about the image of Christ in poetry, but in fact to speak to about poetry is to speak about Christ.

We have just heard God speak to Abram in Genesis. It is the start of Abram's living a life of faith, a life of poetry. God calls him out from his country and his kindred and into 'the land that I will show you.' Abram is being called personally; God is inside his head and his heart, and wants to transform him through faith into a great nation so that, ultimately, 'all the families of the earth shall be blessed.' Abram does not answer back, or try to understand. Explanation would be useless. All Abram knows is that he has encountered the word of truth, 'So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.'

In our gospel reading, Nicodemus, the Pharisee, comes to Jesus by night, and they talk. As a Pharisee, a devoted Jewish theologian and lover of God, Nicodemus seeks explanation and definition: 'we know you are a teacher who has come from God', he says. But Jesus resists definition and control, and says, 'no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above'. And so their conversation continues - not without love (it is saturated with love) - but with Nicodemus speaking in prose, and Jesus replying in poetry. As a Church, we are used to speaking in prose, but 'the wind', says Jesus, 'blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the spirit.' Jesus goes on to talk about 'heavenly things': the Son of Man is the only one who has descended from the heaven; the Son of Man will be lifted up like the serpent on Moses's staff (which cured the Israelites from being bitten by snakes in the wilderness); the Son of God has been given to the world to save the world, to give eternal life to all who believe in him, not to condemn, but to save the world.

As Jesus speaks to us in poetry this morning, as Jesus lived among us as an embodied love poem, I would now like to present to you three poems that I hope communicate

something of the truth we are all seeking as followers of Jesus, as people who believe that we carry the light of Christ within us.

The first is 'A True Hymn' by the poet and priest George Herbert, a contemporary of Shakespeare's.

A True Hymn

My Joy, my Life, my Crown!  
 My heart was meaning all the day,  
                     Somewhat it fain would say,  
 And still it runneth muttering up and down  
 With only this, My Joy, my Life, my Crown!

Yet slight not those few words;  
 If truly said, they may take part  
                     Among the best in art:  
 The fineness which a hymn or psalm affords  
 Is when the soul unto the lines accords.

He who craves all the mind,  
 And all the soul, and strength, and time,  
                     If the words only rhyme,  
 Justly complains that somewhat is behind  
 To make His verse, or write a hymn in kind.

Whereas if the heart be moved,  
 Although the verse be somewhat scant,  
                     God doth supply the want;  
 As when the heart says, sighing to be approved,  
 "O, could I love!" and stops, God writeth, "Loved."

by George Herbert (1593-1633).

Herbert writes about a phrase repeated in the mind and heart of a believer, 'my Joy, my Life, my Crown'. We all know what it is like to repeat the humming of a tune to ourselves, or to speak aloud to ourselves certain words and phrases through our working day. The speaker of the poem is living a poem, and his poem is 'my Joy, my Life, my Crown'. Three nouns. But these are enough, because 'The fineness which a hymn or psalm affords / Is when the soul unto the lines accords'. If truly spoken, 'my Joy, my Life, my Crown' are where art begins, and where art is best, because they are loving and true. In the third verse, Herbert acknowledges that some people might seek more from a poem. Just as we try to love God with all of our mind, soul, strength, and, Herbert adds, our 'time', so we might want a poem to be more devoted, stronger. We might find fault if we perceive that a poem is not doing enough 'to make *His* verse' ('His' with a capital 'H' here refers to God). Herbert then returns to the poetry of the heart. The verse might be 'scant' but so long as the heart is moved, then 'God doth supply the want'. God supplies anything we lack in our language, and understands and loves us for our worship, so long as we are true and loving. We know that we always fall short, and so we cry "'O, could I love!". But God completes our limited words and turns them into a new poem: 'God writeth, "Loved."' We are loved, and God, the poet, completes the love poem of our lives and worship for us: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' "'O,

could I love!” is our cry of belief in Herbert’s poem; and “loved” is the sound of God’s reply, and the image of Christ. The image of Christ in this poem is of a believer seeking to be true in prayer, and realising love afresh.

The second poem is also by a poet and a priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins.

As kingfishers catch fire

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 dó is me: for that I came.*

I say móre: 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.

by Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889).

Hopkins shocks us as a poet; he shocks us with difficulty, and we realise immediately that we are encountering an order of words that seem to require a different part of our brain, if we are properly to tune into them. The first line that is easy to understand is line five: ‘Each mortal thing does one thing and the same’. What? Well, it declares the truth of itself which is inside itself: it ‘Deals out that being indoors each one dwells’. Whether we are a kingfisher, a dragonfly, or a stone falling into a well, and momentarily making a splash like a note of music, or a bell ringing, we all of us are unique, and cry ‘What I do is me: for that I came.’ To declare ourselves, our uniqueness, says Hopkins, is to realise our vocation, our reason for being.

But then the poem turns and moves inwardly, and deeper. To be just and true to ourselves is to become Christ in the eyes of God. To know ourselves and to live truly is to find the inner Christ within us. And so, concludes Hopkins, Christ is in myriad places, acting through our truest selves, ‘Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his / To the Father through the features of men's faces.’ Hopkins’s image of Christ is shown to us through our very selves. We read this poem and we realise - if we realise we are a self at all - that we have Christ within us; it is a poem of the incarnation. We are the image of Christ, says Hopkins, because we are human, and his poem enables us to realise the truth of this.

Our third and final poem is by our former Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy. It comes from her collection of love poems called *Rapture*, which is, I think, her equivalent to *The Song of the Songs* in the Bible. Remember: if poetry is the language of love, then poetry is also the language of the Kingdom of God. Listen to this love poem as someone who finds not only her lover, but the Kingdom of God as well:

River

Down by the river, under the trees, love waits for me  
to walk from the journeying years of my time and arrive.  
I part the leaves and they toss me a blessing of rain.

The river stirs and turns consoling and fondling itself  
with watery hands, its clear limbs parting and closing.  
Grey as a secret, the heron bows its head on the bank.

I drop my past on the grass and open my arms, which ache  
as though they held up this heavy sky, or had pressed  
against window glass all night as my eyes sieved the stars;

open my mouth, wordless at last meeting love at last, dry  
from travelling so long, shy of a prayer. You step from the shade,  
and I feel love come to my arms and cover my mouth, feel

my soul swoop and ease itself into my skin, like a bird  
threading a river. Then I can look love full in the face, see  
who you are I have come this far to find, the love of my life.

I find here an earthly love born again because of the effect of the natural world on the poet; I find an image of repentance as the poet drops her 'past on the grass', an image of prayer as she opens her arms, an allusion to the crucifixion in those aching arms that seem to hold up 'this heavy sky'. And then perhaps Christ steps into the poet, into the poem. The poet has been watching, waiting all night, sieving the stars, and is tired, feels 'shy of a prayer', but the lover appears, holds and kisses the poet, and her soul eases itself into her skin, 'like a bird threading a river', like the Holy Spirit moving across the waters of a new creation. When read for the Kingdom of God, as well as for love, then this earthly is touched by heaven: 'on earth as it is in heaven'.

If poetry is the language of love, then poetry is also the language of the Kingdom of God. To read poetry closely, carefully, with devotion, is to seek the Kingdom of God. You can try this with any love poem, or love song. Choose an old favourite, or a new one, and read or listen to it carefully - as though it were the voice of God singing to you a song about how much you are loved. We read poetry for similar reasons that we seek God's Kingdom, or read scripture: because we want to love, and to be loved, because we want to know the truth, and to grow within it. In growing we transform ourselves, and in loving we transform others as well. That is why we pray, 'Thy Kingdom come', because we want to become part of God's poem: '[in poetry], as it is in Heaven.'

Amen.