24 February 2019: Choral Matins

Sexagesima

Job 28:1–11, Acts 14:8–17

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+May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Salvation.

To what serves mortal beauty —dangerous; does set dancingblood—the O-seal-that-so feature, flung prouder form
Than Purcell tune lets tread to? 'See: it does this: keeps warm
Men's wits to the things that are; 'what good means—where a glance
Master more may than gaze, 'gaze out of countenance.¹

I begin with this extraordinarily rich and complex – not to say incomprehensible – poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, because of the question it asks. To what serves mortal beauty? Or, more widely: what is the purpose of creation?

Hopkins’ answer, to which we will return, is not exactly the same as the answers we’ve heard already from the Bible.

Paul preaches the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. But in Lystra, faced with a gang of Greeks who want to parade him on their shoulders as a god, he doesn’t preach God in either of those phrases. God, in this sermon, is entirely knowable and understandable to anybody with an eye to the goodness of the world: a God to whom the whole creation bears witness; whom the very structure of creation reveals.

But in Hopkins’s poem, he is rather more ambivalent about the goodness of creation. Mortal beauty, the beauty of created things, can distract from God and it can be dangerous – but it also is a gift from God, that can give us a glimpse of what is really true. Of God, who is really true. Of that which is real; and that which is really real is God and only God.
And this is where we need to start, if we are to make sense of the poem we heard from the book of Job. It tells us about the wonders of creation; of the precious metals running in veins through the earth, of the fruitful soil, of the jewels lying hidden in mountains, rocks and cliffs. And it tells us, too, about the ingenuity of humanity: who mine for metals, who travel the world in search of jewels, who invent ever more ingenious ways to search for the wealth of the earth.

It reads as strikingly contemporary, to those of us who are conscious of the destruction human activity has caused. I grew up in north Derbyshire, limestone country – north of the Derbyshire mines where my grandad’s family worked, but among vast quarries, some still active and some abandoned, where limestone was cut out in great chunks for building, for agriculture, for aggregate on roads. So that last passage in the Job poem takes me back to school geography trips to those quarries:

They put their hand to the flinty rock and overturn mountains by the roots.
They cut out channels in the rocks and their eyes see every precious thing.

In the context of the poem, it’s a celebration of human ingenuity – but even there, it’s insufficient. Human ingenuity can achieve much – but it can’t lead to wisdom, and far less, to God. Humans can find precious metals and jewels, can design ways to mine and travel and farm – but humans can’t design the way to find God. God’s action is always sovereign and God is always beyond what humans can find and invent.

That’s the point of the Job poem; but I think there’s more to it than that. Human ingenuity, human agency, human activity always has the potential for a dark side. Like the mines and quarries in Derbyshire, that have stripped the earth of its once rich resources of lead, coal and limestone. Like the results of indiscriminately burning coal and oil, which we are only beginning to see and deal with.

To what serves mortal beauty – dangerous?

Only God’s ingenuity, agency and activity can be free of that dark side. Human ingenuity is always infected by fallenness – nothing we do can be entirely pure. However hard we try, every choice and plan we make has mixed motives and risks bringing about evil as well as good.

In other words, while our human creativity can echo divine creativity, it can only echo – unlike God, we can’t create things from nothing; and unlike God, the things we create are not always good. The riches of the earth are accessed through human creativity, even though
human creativity has its destructive side; but the riches of the earth are \textit{created} by divine creativity. Our creativity echoes God’s creativity; and so sparks us to search for God. It’s a search in which we always run the risk of being seduced away by the dark side of human creativity, by pride in our own achievements, or by a focus on the process rather than the goal. It’s a search where we will always and continually go wrong. But we must search, or we will not find.

Which is, of course, where we started with Hopkins. Hopkins is the supreme poet of the joy and beauty of creation; of the visibility of God through creation; and also of the ambiguity of all the created world, and especially of human activity. His most famous poem, God’s Grandeur, begins: “the world is charged with the grandeur of God. It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.” But it continues with a lament over the destruction that humans cause, because, sinful, we refuse to recognise God’s sovereignty. “Why do men then now not reck his rod?... all is seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil.”

Mortal beauty – the goods of the world, the goodness of being human – is, for Hopkins, a reminder that the goodness and beauty of God exist, but exist somewhere that is not necessarily here. Mortal beauty is dangerous if it leads us to focus on it – it is good if it keeps our wits warm to the fact that real beauty lies elsewhere, with God, and spurs us on to search out God’s beauty.

And that is more important than our fallenness. Because God, in sovereign love and mercy, does choose to reveal Godself. All we need to do is keep our eyes open. God doesn’t hide at the bottom of a mineshaft, waiting for us to dig deep enough to find him. God glints in unexpected places – allowing light to break through. God, the real reality, the one compared to whom all else is shadowy – allows that reality to become visible in our own, subreal existence. Hopkins says a lot about that, but so too, unexpectedly, does another poet: R.S. Thomas, with whom we shall finish.

I have seen the sun break through to illuminate a small field for a while, and gone my way and forgotten it. But that was the pearl of great price, the one field that had treasure in it. I realise now that I must give all that I have to possess it. Life is not hurrying
on to a receding future, nor hankering after
an imagined past. It is the turning
aside like Moses to the miracle
of the lit bush, to a brightness
that seemed as transitory as your youth
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.iii

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1 Gerard Manley Hopkins, “To what serves mortal beauty?” Poems (1918)
2 Hopkins, “God’s Grandeur”, Poems (1918)
5iii R.S. Thomas, “The Bright Field”