

**God's Uncompetitive Kingdom**  
**25<sup>th</sup> Sunday, Year A**  
**18 September 2011**

Ask me who the best religious poet of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is and I will unhesitatingly answer Gerard Manley Hopkins. It is not just that he makes central Christian doctrines come alive out of observed phenomena in the natural world. He also has the knack of making God real in very human situations that wouldn't have occurred to most of us to write about.

In *The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo*, excerpts from which are on the front cover of this morning's Grapevine, a beautiful woman is sitting in front of a mirror regarding with horror and panic what advancing age is doing to her good looks. Here is a situation that no amount of Botox injections will put right. But in the second half of the poem her attention is directed to the source of true beauty, and to that striking and original beauty that will be ours in the life of the world to come. Hopkins says it better and with greater depth than my trite and banal description.

Yet in his lifetime Hopkins was not recognised for the immense talent in the service of the gospel that he was. When the ship *The Deutschland* was wrecked off the English coast drowning pretty much everyone on board, including some German nuns, the head of the Jesuit house Hopkins was stationed in asked him to write a few inspiring lines on the subject. What emerged from the request was *The Wreck of the Deutschland*, one of the most moving and profound reflections on Divine providence ever penned. But its unusual rhythms and dense concentrations of word patterns caused

embarrassment and incomprehension amongst those expecting some straightforward devotional doggerel.

If it hadn't been for Robert Bridges, his friend and fellow poet, Hopkins poetry would have disappeared into oblivion. Even so this was only a limited recognition Bridges won for him, and only after his death. It wasn't until the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the literary public and the Christian world got Hopkins, and he became the shining beacon we now know him to be.

Likewise his career as a priest seemed like a record of bungling underachievement. The Jesuits tried hard to find the right niche for him in which he could minister happily and effectively. But he was put off by the squalor and degradation of the lives of the working poor he ministered to in Birmingham, and was perplexed by the bored undergraduates who didn't want to learn in Dublin. By the time of his death at a comparatively young age it looked as though his awkward and depressive personality had condemned him to a lifetime of being a square peg in a round hole.

Contrast this with the career of Canon H P Liddon, who had been for a time an inspiring influence on Hopkins during his anglo-catholic phase as an undergraduate at Oxford. The personal fascination Liddon exercised over many, his brilliance and skill as a pulpit orator, made him a mesmerising influence in the Victorian church. When he hit the big time at St Paul's Cathedral his Sunday afternoon sermons routinely drew an audience of 3 to 4,000. He died praised and admired by many.

Yet today, apart from a few church historians, few people know about him. And even they can sometimes render an ambivalent verdict on his achievement. For in some ways he had been altogether too smooth, his theological base shallow, narrow and rigid, his take on contemporary church life rather backward looking, and his personal counsel, as Hopkins had concluded, somewhat lacking in depth, range and resonance. Comparing and contrasting Liddon and Hopkins it might be possible to conclude that the one had been a show pony who had had his day in the sun in his lifetime, whereas the other, such an apparent failure in his lifetime, has only just begun his enriching ministry to the whole Christian world now and in the ages to come.

When we are zealous in our Christian walk, when we are committed members of the Church, when we are keen to see the ways of the Kingdom advance among us, there can sometimes emerge a temptation to start getting very concerned about whether our fellow workers for the Kingdom are pulling their weight. Tied up with our notions of natural fairness can emerge a critical assessment of whether others are working as hard as us, as effectively as us, as wisely as us. Of course high standards are important, and sometimes the people in charge have to make judgement calls about what to do about those who are particularly inertia bound and incompetent, but by and large it is rather too easy to become hyper critical about the contributions of others to the Kingdom. And by and large it is not our concern as to how others are doing in their labours, as to how much they are doing in their ministries, and as whether they are being rather too

generously rewarded and acknowledged for their contribution.

We do not have extra sensory perception, we cannot read minds and hearts, and therefore cannot know what are the struggles, and trials and temptations that beset our brothers and sisters in Christ, the real story as it were that underlies their outward performance. And our perspective is very limited – we are not able to stand back and get the big picture, the wider view, of the meaning and achievements of their life journey. This God's eye view sees all the angles, catches all the perspectives, on each Christian's efforts over a lifetime. And this God's eye perspective is generous and magnanimous in a way that often surprises and scandalises us.

I have called this sermon God's uncompetitive Kingdom. In the Kingdom our growth towards union with God is not a competitive event in which we are marked for our spiritual skills, and awarded prizes for our spiritual stamina and achievements. It is only in the comedy series Fr Ted that a golden priest of the year award is an annual Diocesan event. And in the Kingdom we have to come to terms with the fact that the landowner thought it was fair, good and just that all the workers got paid a generous amount sufficient to feed their families. When our natural sense of fairness is scandalized by this story it is interesting to note the source of our affronted feelings.

In my childhood as the Sunday roast was laid on the table we were allowed the treat of a glass of lemonade. But how to make sure that we all received the same amount? This was done by each of the three of us taking it in weekly turns to be the one who poured the drinks with all of us watching

intently with a laser like concentration as the glasses were filled on the top of the side board. Woe betide the person who filled one of the glasses just a little more than the other – anguished cries of, “Its not fair,” rent the air. And that is my point about our natural sense of fairness – sometimes it is fuelled by a childish fear of missing out.

But supposing that we are all going to get what we need – supposing that generous provision will be made for all in the Kingdom – supposing that sometimes even those who appeared to make a mess of everything in their life on earth turned out to be the real achievers in the Kingdom, then perhaps we can stop worrying about how high the lemonade appears to be in our glass.