



‘A dayspring to the dimness of us’

Teresa White FCJ

The events told of in Gerard Manley Hopkins’ ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ may have occurred far away in distance and time from Teresa White FCJ’s Holy Week in east London this year, but the poem still spoke to her powerfully about God’s providence. At a time when we perhaps all need to be reminded of it, the words of the poem can speak to us about ‘a mercy that outrides the all of water.’

The 17th century French preacher, Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet, says that in scripture we listen to God speaking *sa langue naturelle*¹: he sees scripture as God’s natural language. I like that, like the picture of unhurried, relaxed communication it conveys. And I agree. God does indeed speak to us through sacred scripture, for in a special way, the words of scripture lead us to into God’s world. But it is also true that God has many other ways of touching us through the power of words, and I have come to believe that in poetry God speaks to us in what I sometimes think of as God’s ‘mother tongue’, the language of paradox and mystery.

Poetry calls us to be more-than-usually attentive to words and the underlying thoughts they express; it invites the reader to be inwardly reflective, to contemplate profound realities. Poets seem to have a sixth sense, an innate gift, which somehow opens a door pointing towards the momentary but not illusory experience of (as Francis Thompson so beautifully put it in his poem, ‘In No Strange Land’²) knowing the unknowable, viewing the invisible, touching the intangible, clutching the inapprehensible. Poetry, with its special characteristics, including



rhythm, imagery and sometimes rhyme, is far more than a collection of memorable soundbites. It conveys a concentrated awareness of the here, the now, the fragile, the fleeting. Using words alone to communicate its message, poetry creates its own inward landscape and atmosphere, and through it, the soul is expanded and reminded of its spiritual cravings and

needs. At its core is the quest for wisdom of heart and mind.

Through poetry, I believe we can, in some sense, begin to see the world with God’s eyes. Recently, the truth of this was brought home to me quite forcibly when, during Holy Week, I found myself prompted to re-read [Gerard Manley Hopkins’ ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’](#). I had come fresh to the poem after an interval of many years and reflecting on it later, I realised that God had spoken to me vividly through this poem. Pondering it in the context of Holy Week as we lived it this year, in the shadow of the coronavirus pandemic, I found it unspeakably moving. The account of the wreck itself moved me to tears: 57 men, women and children, German emigrants seeking a better life in America, were lost. In spite of the fact that the

Deutschland foundered in the winter of 1875, while I, in 2020, looking out of my window under lockdown conditions, was surrounded by evidence of spring (there was a profusion of cherry blossom, bluebells and camellias in the little park opposite our house in Poplar), it all seemed so real to me: ‘the hurtle of hell’, the snows, the freezing water, the helplessness. I felt I could hear the tall nun who ‘rears herself to divine/ Ears’, calling out loudly and often, ‘O Christ, Christ, come quickly’. We know she did this because survivors later said that her words were audible above the shouts of terror and the turbulence of the fierce storm.

The names of the five Franciscan nuns mentioned in the poem are inscribed on the gravestone in St Patrick’s Catholic cemetery in Leytonstone, east London, where four of them – the body of one was not recovered – were buried: Barbara Hultenschmidt, Henrica Fassbender (not found), Norberta Reinkober, Aurea Badziura, Brigitta Damhorst. It is not known which of these names belonged to the gaunt woman, six feet tall, whose words inspired Hopkins to write this beautiful poem. From contemporary newspaper reports, we do know that she was the superior of the little group, and that she encouraged the other nuns in their last moments, inviting them to clasp hands, and thus they died together. We may not know her name, but because of this poem, her words of faith in the face of certain death will never be forgotten. The poet says of this woman, ‘Ah! There was a heart right!/ There was single eye!’ And I thought, [‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God’](#).

The disaster happened on 7 December, the eve of the feast of the [Immaculate Conception](#) of Our Lady. Hopkins does not pass over this coincidence – he treats it, rather, as a sign of God’s providence. Mary, he says, gave birth to the Word of God, and that tall, unnamed nun also brought forth God’s Word: she ‘... heard and kept thee and uttered thee outright’. And because it seems that many humans respond

more readily, more fully, to the providence of God when it is dispensed through the hands of a mother, one of the most popular depictions of Mary in Christian art is as the compassionate [Mother of Mercy](#), sheltering people under her outspread cloak. Thinking of Mary, the poet speaks of ‘lovely-felicitous Providence’, of its ‘feathery delicacy’, of its tenderness and patience. He equates providence with ‘a mercy that outrides/ The all of water’. But providence is also ‘Ground of being, and granite of it’, and God is ‘throned behind/ Death with a sovereignty that heeds but hides, bodes but abides’.

The overarching theme of ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ is the profound mystery of the providence of God. In the first lines of the poem, ‘Thou mastering me/ God! giver of breath and bread’, the poet bows before this eternal mystery, seeing belief in providence as the intuitive human response to God’s infinite beauty and love, to God’s power and the terror it can inspire. In simple terms, providence means recognising that, in spite of appearances to the contrary, there is a creative, saving purpose in everything that happens, to us and to our world, our universe. But it remains a mystery that we can never fully grasp, only accept in faith and trust: ‘His mystery must be instressed, stressed;/ For I greet him the days I meet him, and bless when I understand.’

The notion of providence is appealing. It communicates a caring presence, expressed through a compassionate ‘humanness’, which we interpret as God’s loving engagement with the whole of creation. At its simplest, to be provident means to bless, to shelter, to heal, to provide what is needed. In our time, we are living amid global terrorism, conflict and ecological degradation, and for thousands of people in different parts of the world, crushing poverty and unjust structures. And we are deeply aware that the current pandemic has brought even more fears and threats into our troubled lives. Against this background, there could hardly be a more comforting message than encouragement to trust in the

providence of God, to place all that happens to us in God's hands. We do not understand God's ways – Hopkins addresses God as 'lightning and love' – but through providence we believe that the destructive forces within us and in our world can never break the bond that connects us with the everlasting love of God. St Paul's words give expression to what seems to be a human instinct to trust in God in darkness, in isolation, even in death: 'I am certain of this: neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power, or height or depth, nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord.'³

As I came to the end of the poem, vulnerable to its beauty, having wrestled with its obscurities and been borne along by its swiftness, I found I could respond to its message: we need to experience the depths of darkness and suffering if we are to come to resurrection. This revelation is memorably expressed in the last stanza: 'Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us'. The coronavirus pandemic, too, will end. New life follows death.

Sister Teresa White belongs to the Faithful Companions of Jesus. A former teacher, she spent many years in the ministry of spirituality at Katherine House, a retreat and conference centre run by her congregation in Salford.

¹ *Sermon pour la III Dimanche Après Pasques, sur la Providence*

² See:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2017/jun/26/poem-of-the-week-in-no-strange-land-by-francis-thompson>

³ Romans 8: 38, 39