

‘What is that Knocking?’

Poetry, Beauty, and the Shock of Grace

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If you were asked to choose a text, an image, from the Bible which captures the essence of revelation, the power and beauty of the divine Word – the shock of grace – what text, what image would you choose? The most obvious choice, the first image which might well come to mind is the Cross as we find it depicted in all four Gospels. But there are other images, other texts which could perhaps be considered. Some might, for example, be drawn to choose the image of Christ as the Good Shepherd. That, too, would be a fine and obvious choice.

But, this afternoon, I would like to propose for your consideration a text, an image, not from the New but from the Old Testament, an image from The Song of Songs. It’s a startling, unexpected image of a man, a lover, seeking in the dead of night to make contact with

his bride, his beloved, who is lying asleep. But who is this man, this lover, patient and impatient, standing outside in the cold, knocking and knocking. And who is the one lying fast asleep? The lover is, of course, none other than the living God, and his bride, his beloved, is an image – astonishing to relate – an image of ourselves. Wakened, half-wakened by the knocking, the bride exclaims:

I am asleep, but my heart is awake.

I hear my Beloved knocking.

‘Open to me, my sister, my love,

my dove, my perfect one,

for my head is covered with dew,

my locks with the drops of night.’

This is a text which reveals, like few other texts in Scripture, something of the innermost nature of God. And it contains two quite astonishing revelations: first, that the God whom we are seeking is somehow obsessively seeking us, poor finite creatures, seeking to capture our attention; and, second, that the God now

coming close to us is not appearing in the guise of a solemn dogmatist or moralist but rather as a lover and a poet.

This shock of grace, this discovery of God's devoted love for even the least of us, is something which has been experienced again and again by individual believers over the centuries. But only a very small number have found words to describe the experience. Allow me to read for you now a remarkable poem describing the experience by the Spanish Catholic poet Lope de Vega Carpio (1562-1613). The poem begins with de Vega registering astonishment at the fact that he, a poor sinner, can be the object of such an amazing love. The God approaching him in the night appears not only in the guise of the anxious lover of the Song of Songs but also as the wounded divine lover of the New Testament, Christ Jesus, the Man of Sorrows. Although the night is cold and all around is dark, the knocking persists. What will the Spanish poet do? Will he respond at once to the pressure of divine love. Will he at last open the door?

Sonnet XVIII

What have I that makes you sue for my friendship?
What interest brings you, dear Jesus,
to spend the dark winter at my door, covered in dew?

Oh how hard was my heart that I did not open to you!
What strange madness was it the cold frost of my
ingratitude chapped the wounds on your pure feet!

How many times did the angel say to me: Now, soul,
look out of your window, and you will see how
lovingly he persists in knocking?

And how many times, oh supreme beauty, did I
reply: 'I will open tomorrow', only to make the same
reply on the morrow!

When we need to gain understanding of a particular text in Scripture, such as the brief Song of Songs passage we've been considering, we instinctively look, and for good reason, to the work of theologians and exegetes. But, at times, it can be a lot more helpful, I

suggest, to look to the work of poets such as de Vega. The Scripture text, instead of being the object of mere scientific scrutiny and reflection, flames now with a new strength and radiance. Against all expectation, as here, it gathers to itself an almost fierce beauty that goes through us like a spear.

God – let me dare say it – is a poet. Yes, in his Word, he is of course a teacher of truth like no other, a veritable fountain of truth and goodness. But, in his revelation, God is also Beauty, ‘Beauty’s self and Beauty’s giver,’ as Hopkins puts it. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that very often it is through the enchantment of stories and poems that God best communicates his message, and best reveals to us something of the hidden, radiant beauty of his inmost nature. Poems such as The Song of Songs, texts such as The Book of Job, The Book of the Apocalypse, The Book of the Psalms and, most notably, the Parables of Jesus, make a powerful impact not only on our minds but also on our imagination and on our hearts. What stuns is the surprise, the bold original beauty of these poems, parables, and stories. Their words, bright and sharp

with vivid memorable images, burn like a torch, they fire and quicken our imagination.

Over the centuries poets have found words to evoke something of the strength and startling beauty of the person of Christ. What, during his life, had originally stunned the contemporaries of the Man of Nazareth, was the way he related to poor outcasts and to sinners. In the literature of Christian tradition, in poetry in particular, we find that same shock of grace being wonderfully and powerfully evoked. Here, for example, is a poem by the 17th century Anglican poet George Herbert. Entitled 'Love', it opens with Christ Jesus, Love Incarnate, inviting a struggling sinner, to come to his house as a guest, and eat with him. At first, the poor fellow holds back, aware of his great unworthiness. But there follows a conversation between the two, a conversation in which at every turn Christ has an answer to match and overcome the man's manifestly troubled self-doubt. In the end, by sheer loving insistence, Christ succeeds in wonderfully releasing the man from all his guilt and shame.

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.

Yet quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
If I lacked anything.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said: you shall be he.

I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear
I cannot look on thee.

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

Truth, Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.

And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
My dear, then I will serve.

You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
So I did sit and eat.

Amazing how, in just a few lines, the Gospel shock of grace can find such clear expression! No one who reads this work or hears it being read can fail to be impressed. As it happens, in the middle of the 20th century this poem by Herbert made a tremendous impact on the French mystic and philosopher Simone Weil. Simone had been raised as a secular Jew and had no knowledge of Christian mysticism. She was introduced to the poem by a young English Catholic. 'I learned it by heart,' she tells us, 'concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines.' And then she adds: 'I used to think I was merely reciting it as a beautiful poem, but without my knowing it the recitation had the virtue of a prayer. It was during one of these recitations that Christ himself came down and took possession of me.'

An almost exact contemporary of Simone Weil was Mother Teresa of Calcutta. She, too, as it happens, was deeply affected by reading a poem by George Herbert. Not the poem entitled 'Love' in her case but a different Herbert poem, one entitled 'Matins.' In this poem Herbert registers his astonishment at the seeming urgency of desire God manifests in seeking to capture

the poet's love and attention – God behaving, it would seem, like a lover doing all he can to woo and attract his beloved. That God should bother to pursue with such passion the love of a mere mortal and a fallen mortal at that, is something that always amazed Mother Teresa. One day many years ago, I remember, she turned to me in Calcutta and remarked: 'That God is high, transcendent, all-powerful, almighty, I can understand that because I am so small. But that God has become small, and that he thirsts for my love, *begs* for it – I *cannot* understand it, I *cannot* understand it!'

It is that same untamed, divine love which Herbert describes in his poem. One tiny stanza in the work particularly impressed Mother Teresa. She goes out of her way to cite it in her letter. The poet Herbert is here addressing God directly:

My God, what is a heart
That you should'st it so eye and woo,
Pouring upon it all thy art
As if thou hadst nothing else to do?

‘I don’t know,’ Mother Teresa writes, ‘if you have seen these few lines before, but they fill and empty me.’ In that one tiny phrase, ‘they fill and empty me,’ Mother Teresa has described perfectly the paradoxical impact which beauty makes. On the one hand, if the beauty concerned is truly stunning, it floods us with a deep sense of calm. But, at the same time, and this is the paradox, it awakens within us a restless desire to attain to what might be called the beauty behind the beauty – to that hidden beauty which is God. That’s why, when listening to a great piece of music or to a great poem, you can suddenly find yourself in tears. But it is not sadness. You are instead pierced through with longing. In such cases, beauty, one can say, makes an impact like nothing else on earth.

We are living in an age of astonishing technological progress and, for that reason, people are inclined to turn, not so much to the world of poetry and imaginative literature, but to the world of science in order to gain an understanding of the world around them and within them. And that’s understandable. But the work of artists and poets brings to our world something which even the genius of science cannot

bring, something of unique importance. That 'something,' far from being a dreamy remoteness, a kind of escapist reverie, is in fact 'fresh as snow, cold as water, hard as stone.' A single line from a great poem can bring us to our senses and can awaken our minds like almost nothing else.

So, poetry, I would say, is a necessary language. Why necessary? Because it offers something unique, not the kind of profound, detailed information which science can offer. Instead, it offers vision. And we need vision just as we need water. Without it we dry up, we perish. Because of the living poetry of the sacraments of baptism and marriage, and the ritual poetry of the Mass, we as Catholic Christians, although most of us may not be conscious of it, are probably more in tune with the language of poetry, with the language of sign, symbol, and metaphor, than are all other believers across the world in all the other religions. As Catholics we know in our bones, if not in our heads, that in order to be fully alive on this earth we need the play and passion of poetry and the vision it brings. We know it in our bones.

Simone Weil, who for years experienced what it was like to work in crushing factory conditions, remarks: 'Workers need poetry more than bread. They need that their life should be a poem. They need some light from eternity.' And again: 'No poetry concerning the people is authentic if fatigue does not figure in it and the hunger and thirst that come from fatigue.'

But what about the actual reading of individual poems? Obviously, it requires an effort of concentration rather similar to the effort one makes in getting to know another person. Once, however, the breakthrough has been made, you have, as a reader, a gift of perception that can open the door into a whole new world of vision. Unfortunately, however, potential readers have often been put off by well-meaning but uninspired teaching in schools. As a result, when confronted by a poem, I can feel like I am facing an exam, and one I know I'm going to fail. The whole thing almost seems designed not to give me pleasure but to make me feel dumb! I am denied access to a world that could literally transform my understanding of the world. The American poet, William Carlos Williams, writes:

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.

In similar vein, that other great American poet, Mary Oliver, declares: 'Poetry is a life-cherishing force. For poems are not words, after all, but fires for the cold, ropes let down to the lost, something as necessary as bread in the pockets of the hungry.'

In Ireland, I'm happy to say, people still look in significant numbers to the work of poets exactly in the way Mary Oliver describes. Poetry is not regarded as mere icing on the cake but as bread necessary for survival. One poet to whom Irish people turn with a great sense of gratitude is the 20th century Catholic author Patrick Kavanagh. Kavanagh, at a certain point in his life, found himself overwhelmed by what he called 'the nature of God's mind'. The poet admits to having failed in the past to say yes to God. Nevertheless, to his enormous surprise, he finds that

God, far from giving up on him, continued to seek his love. Kavanagh's experience, therefore, was not of a God of cold condemnation, a remote deity, but rather of a God intimately close to his creation, a God of almost unimaginable beauty and compassion, 'breathing His love,' Kavanagh says, and astonishingly radiant in colour in even the most remote, out-of-the-way Irish bog:

Green, blue, yellow and red –
God is down in the swamps and marshes
Sensational as April and almost incredible
the flowering of our catharsis ...
That beautiful, beautiful, beautiful God
breathing his love by a cut-away bog.

In another poem Kavanagh writes:

I learned, I learned, when one might be inclined
To think, too late, you cannot recover your losses –
I learned something of the nature of God's mind,
Not the abstract Creator but He who caresses
The daily and nightly earth; He who refuses

To take no for an answer.

The course I am giving in these weeks and months at the Angelicum is entitled 'God and the Poets.' One of the students from several years ago was a young Dutch seminarian called Hendrik. Poetry had never held much interest for him but, during the course, he found, to his enormous surprise, that certain poems captured and held his attention. He was hooked. Although the poems didn't offer any new or major information, they enabled him nevertheless to see and experience in a wholly fresh way things which he thought he had already seen and understood. Fired by this enthusiasm, he wrote about his discovery to his parish priest in Holland. The parish priest, by return of post, wrote back, declaring: 'We, as priests, share with our parishioners the tough reality we live in. This is a reality that is mainly without any poetry, hard and without compassion, the banality of our daily life. Stronger yet, poetry is a lie. In the streets of our cities there is no poetry, in the homes of our people there is no poetry, so in our churches there should be no poetry. People do not know it. Therefore, you should not use poetry to

convey the message of the Gospel ... You just have to teach your people how to behave as good Christians.'

Although, on the one hand, I admire the acknowledgement here of the tough challenges of life which we all have to face, what I don't admire is the way the priest risks reducing the marvel of the Christian vision to a hard-nosed moralism and dogmatism. One of the things which disappointed me more than a little in the priest's letter was his declaration that 'in the homes of our people there is no poetry.' Well, I suppose it depends on your perspective, but I absolutely disagree. Yes, there are struggles in family life, and yes there is a daily grind and even banality, and yes there can even at times be tragedy, but that doesn't mean for a moment that there is no colour of any kind, no life of vision, no poetry. The love a father has for his small children is, in itself, a poem and, likewise, the love of a mother.

Allow me, then, by way of an answer to the priest's statement, to share with you, an event, a small event from my own childhood, one which still shines bright in

my memory. I recall it here with the hope that it might awaken comparable memories of your own from your own childhoods.

I was one of 8 children, the second youngest. My father was ill most of my life, dying when I was 14. But, as a father, he came into his own on Saturday nights when, one by one, we were bathed by my mother, and then we would climb up the stairs to join him sitting in his usual chair next to the fire. When you arrived, it was your moment to kneel down in front of him. He would take the towel off our shoulders, all the while continuing to speak – we were held spellbound by his words – and he would dry our hair with the towel and then lift his hands up to fire and let them rest on our heads. And he would do this over and over. It was almost a kind of baptism. First, the water of cleansing and then the fire! I tried once, years ago, to capture the magic of this early memory in a poem. Allow me to read it for you now. It's entitled 'The Second Youngest'.

The Second Youngest

My hair still dripping wet
after the bath and with, at last,
the large white towel which had
hung over my shoulders
now in his hands
I thought, as I knelt on the ground
before my father
and he dried my hair and talked,
I was the son of a god.

It was the same
warmth, the same repeated ritual
for all of us – my four brothers
and my three sisters –
when, in turn, after our bath
we would climb
the dark stairs to the lighted room
where my father sat in his chair.

We were, I suppose, like small
initiates: the girls
in their coloured night-gowns
and red slippers, and the boys
with our white towels
across our shoulders, wearing pyjamas
but naked from the waist up.

No pilgrims of the Absolute,
it's clear, no shining devotees
in saffron ever looked
as radiant and cleansed as we did
or ever climbed
to their illumined states of soul
as we climbed up those stairs!

I was five or at most
six years old, the second youngest.
But once I had
braved the darkness of the stairs
alone, my trial was over.

From shadows into light
the door opened, and I stepped
into the hush of the room.

So vivid, I remember, that bright
threshold! But real
illumination came, moments
later, when I knelt down
next to the fire, as near
as I could to my father's chair,
and bowed my head.

I remember, as soon
as he began to dry my hair
with the towel
and warm my hair with his hands
lifting his two palms
to the fire
and letting them rest on my head,

I thought I was the son of a god.

What a dark and strange world it would be if there were no poetry in our lives, no poetry in our homes, no poetry in our churches! What a betrayal of the Gospel if preachers were permitted to talk only about morality but denied the right to speak of the poetry and beauty of the Gospel.

In this context I remember a conversation with an elderly priest in Trinidad. He was a man who was much revered, a man close to God and to the people. But, when he arrived first in Trinidad as a young priest, he found himself so shocked by what he perceived as the decadent lifestyle of the people, he felt it was his duty every Sunday to preach on one subject only, sex and hell! A great black lady in the congregation would sometimes stand up in silent protest, and he would change the topic. But, one Sunday, although she had already stood up, he held to his theme and started banging the pulpit. At this point the brave woman shouted out for the first and only time in her rich Trinidadian accent: 'Fadder, Fadder, we all know we is sinners down here. Tell us something we don't know!'

What the people long to know, what all of us long to know, and what is at the very heart of Scripture, is knowledge, living knowledge about the nature of God. One of the texts which reveals it most powerfully is the text from the Song of Songs we have been considering in which God speaks to us not as a dogmatic or moral theologian but as a lover and a poet. Some of us might be inclined to think 'I am too weak, too much of a sinner, to expect God to approach me with such humility, such grace. God will never come to me in prayer, asking, pleading for my attention, my love.' But that is not the case. God, with untamed love, knocks continually on the heart of each one of us. Stirred by this revelation, St Catherine of Siena exclaims in one of her prayers: 'O eternal, infinite God! O mad lover! Are you really in need of your creature? It seems to me you are for you act as if you could not live without her ... Why then are you so mad?'

Beauty calls to us continually, it strikes on the heart, it knocks, sometimes, very loud, sometimes very quiet. Perhaps you will have noticed, for example, how, at a certain moment in a First Communion celebration, the

beauty, the spiritual beauty of the event, can have an extraordinary impact on parents. They see their child, in all innocence, go up to receive God in the Eucharist for the first time. And it's as if something suddenly strikes and wounds the heart. There are tears and, with that, a sudden piercing desire to recover a lost innocence, perhaps, a lost contact with God. We don't have to be mystics or saints to have an experience of this kind. If we are even half-awake in life, in prayer, all of us, in one form or another, sooner or later hear the Beloved knocking. 'His still soft call,' Henry Vaughan calls it, 'Christ's progress':

When my Lord's head is filled with dew, and all
His locks are wet with the clear drops of night.

So, yes, the Beloved comes to us, but there is a question: will those to whom he comes, will Vaughan and Lope de Vega, and will you and I, open wide the door to the One who is waiting outside in the dark? Both Vaughan and de Vega confess that, in their weakness, they tend to put off the moment of surrender: 'Tomorrow,' de Vega declares, 'I will wake to

welcome him.' This honest admission on the part of the great Spanish poet alerts us to the fact that it does require no small courage to open ourselves up, once and for all, to the living God. We are afraid of what we might lose, of what might be demanded of us. But, if you think of it, all the men and women of faith whom we know, and all the saints of our tradition, tell us over and over that there is no reason to be afraid. The Lord who is knocking on our heart, the Lord who has come to visit us in the night, brings with him unimaginable blessing. In the Old Testament, when Abraham and Sarah were visited by the three strange figures, they had no idea how in time their simple welcome would be so wonderfully and so unexpectedly rewarded.

Here and now, in all our lives, there is a call of beauty, a knocking on the heart, which in time will make great demands on us. But, far from being a threat, what the knocking means in practice is nothing less than a call to freedom and joy, an invitation to a life of intimacy with God beyond our wildest dreams. We have no reason to be afraid. How instructive, therefore, how revealing in this context, are these few lines from a poem by D. H. Lawrence:

What is the knocking?

What is the knocking at the door in the night?

It is somebody wants to do us harm.

No, no, it is the three strange angels.

Admit them, admit them.

In a moment I'd like to read again those last few lines, bringing this short paper to a close. But, first, I want to thank all of you once again very sincerely for your presence here this afternoon and for your presence in my life over the years. What a privilege, what a delight it is to find myself, on this occasion, addressing, attempting to address, in the presence of family, of students, and of friends, this great and sacred theme: poetry, beauty and the shock of grace.

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