

## Eight Sunday in Ordinary Time

Suffering Redeemed

March 03, 2019

Fr. Tim Clancy, S.J.

Gerald Manley Hopkins was a late nineteenth/early twentieth century Jesuit poet, the only Jesuit poet to make the canon of English literature. However when he entered the Jesuits he burned all the poetry he had written up to then as not serious or spiritual, and was forbidden to write any after then in the novitiate. In part this was because Hopkins was also very scrupulous, tormented by anxiety and depression and full of self-doubt. He was asked by a kind rector during his studies if he would write a poem commemorating a recent maritime disaster, the sinking of a steamship in which many poor immigrants were downed including four nuns. He entitled the poem “The Wreck of the Deutschland” the name of the ship, and it has become a classic in the history of English literature, to be found in most literature textbooks.

The Jesuits were shocked it was so well received by critics and encouraged him to continue writing. Nevertheless he was never assigned to write poetry as his apostolate. Rather he taught high schoolers Greek, poetry remained a hobby to be done in his spare time when not “working”.

Four sonnets in particular evoke his mental pain and suffering: They are called his “dark sonnets”. Today’s first reading reminded me of one of these in particular. Its one that has haunted me over the years when I fall into similar straits.

Thou are indeed just, Lord, if I contend  
With Thee; but sir, so what I plead is just.  
Why do sinners’ ways prosper? And why must  
Disappointment all I endeavor end?

Were thou my enemy, O thou my friend,  
How wouldst thou worst, I wonder, that thou dost  
Defeat, thwart me? Oh, the sots and thralls of lust  
Do in spare hours more thrive than I that spend

Sir, life upon thy cause. See, banks and brakes  
Now, leaved how thick, laced they are again  
With fretted chervil, look, and fresh winds shakes.

Them; birds build—but not I build; no but strain,  
Time’s eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.  
Mine, O thou Lord of life, send my roots rain.

I read today’s first reading from the Jewish wise man Sirach, as God’s response:

As the test of what the potter molds is in the furnace  
so in tribulation is the test of the just.  
The fruit of a tree shows the care it has had.

Hopkins’ fruit lay in his poetry, that resonates so strongly with those who also struggle psychologically. He measured his life by his work trying to get 15 year olds to pay

attention in a required Greek class, and judged himself a failure. But it was his poetry, his private passion that has proven to be his true ministry. His only published poem during his life was that first “Wreck of the Deutschland” but a friend of his, to whom he would send his poems, saw the genius in his work and published them all after he died, making Hopkins hobby a channel of God’s grace for the whole English speaking world.

We, too, do not always know the true fruit of our lives on others, students, children, neighbors, co-workers, even strangers, such as those who rely on Suncrest’s food bank, those aided by Catholic Charities, the children with Autism in Spokane, Indian students we help in Chennai, all those that we aid as a parish month in and month out, year in and year out.

Should your roots need rain, or better, when life disappoints you, remember the overlooked fruit of your own life and take solace in Sirach’s words: that such fruit shows the care a tree has had, even if perhaps unawares.