

Praising, that's it!

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Covid 19 has provided a pretext for some people to wallow in an almost gleeful loathing of humanity in general. They proclaim the plague is God's punishment for our 'sins', citing homosexuality, for example. Or they proclaim it is Gaia's revenge on humanity's hubris, as if she were a goddess with consciousness and the authority of natural law. But by nature, women can have ten or more children with many of them dying in infancy. It is not wrong for medical science to try stop them dying, fight diseases. Then contraception is 'against natural law' (the argument for banning it used in the papal encyclical *Humanae Vitae*) but right both for the woman and the planet. Certainly, as a species, we should not abuse the Earth or our fellow creatures – humans or other animals – and should work for policies to stop that. But there have been plagues long before humans were as powerful as we are today, indeed even before there were any humans on Earth at all. Rather than loathing, there is plenty to love and praise in most people, who struggle to live decently and kindly. So as Jane Austen says in *Mansfield Park*: 'Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious subjects as soon as I can, impatient to restore everybody not greatly in fault themselves to tolerable comfort, and to have done with all the rest.'

I live alone and when the first strict lockdown came, the little park at the end of my street was vital to me and other local people. I walked in it every day and watched the great London plane trees coming into leaf again. I saw squirrels bouncing along and plenty of birds, among others, the pied wagtail, alone at first but who then found a mate, grey wagtail (with yellow front), dunnoek, a pair of sparrows (many happy returns!), a flock of starlings, wrens and lots of robins. I saw one robin regularly carrying food to a nest in the hedge. I love them but what lifted my spirits, above all, was seeing the people in the park. Walking round the park, we had to keep our distance but

could still greet each other. I saw young couples, a mother picking up her three-year-old, who had run and tripped over, comforting him: 'We'll put a plaster on that knee when we get home.' Another mother with two small children called one back who had gone too far, in a language I don't know (could it be Bulgarian?). The usual little party of drunks were chucking a ball to a Jack Russell, while cracking jokes about the government and cackling.

When the lockdown eased a bit and the weather got warmer, small groups formed to picnic on the grass, the playground in the park reopened. A young father was pushing a baby, about eight months old, on the swing. As I walked past, each time it swung back the baby gave me a huge grin. The cafe in the next street re-opened (the owner told me how hard it had been for her having to keep it closed for so long). 'Fellowship is life,' said William Morris. People sat outside it again, chatting and arguing in Portuguese, as I went past each day to get my newspaper. We could now drink and chat in a neighbour's garden or be with children or grandchildren for real, rather than just seeing them on a screen. All this greatly cheered me up and I felt a burst of praise for it all.

I thought about likeness in difference. I love the fact that Londoners speak so many different languages, but in many respects we are alike. I could not understand the Bulgarian words with which the mother called her child, but I understood what she meant, as well as I understood the English mother speaking to her son who had fallen over. And there is not only likeness in difference between humans, but between us and birds and other animals. The mother (or father) robin was feeding its young, just as human parents do. Humans belong to the fauna of the park and the planet, as fellow creatures with the rest. I praise them, as well as the birds and trees. I remembered the joyful morning hymn:

The Earth is awaking the sky and the ocean
The river, the forest, the mountain and plain.
The city is stirring its living commotion;
The pulse of the world is reviving again.

Though I think the word ‘commotion’ was put in to rhyme with ‘ocean’, I’ve always loved the last line of that verse and remembered it when, after the strict lockdown, the playground and the café were ‘reviving again’. The likeness in difference and difference in likeness of all the people of London is a foretaste of the imagined beautiful city of kindness in Revelation, where ‘tears are wiped away’. Of course, London is also the city of dreadful night where the price of a home is exorbitant. But that ‘foretaste’ is compelling and my heart leaps up. Children need praise to flourish. Likewise, praising a good idea helps it to flourish. When we get an inkling in what is already there of how things might be, it can encourage us to pursue and embody it in reality.

The National Health Service is a good idea. During this pandemic nurses, doctors and other staff are working heroically to look after those with the deadly disease. Some of them have given their lives. During the strict lockdown we had our weekly clap for the NHS. Whole communities came out to clap on Thursdays. People came out in our street too and the gay couple in the end house, who both work for the NHS, were very touched (they did not join in the clapping because they thought they would have been clapping themselves). Others who deserve praise are bus drivers, those delivering our food, post, and parcels of goods ordered online, together with thousands more ordinary people just bravely carrying on with the job.

Praise is also due to people trying to work from home in a small flat, perhaps with bored and lonely children off school, sometimes driving each other up the wall. In the recent Black Lives Matter protest we saw Patrick Hutchinson, a black professional trainer and grandfather, carrying a far-right white thug to safety: ‘I scooped him up in a fireman’s carry and marched him out.’ The powerful image went viral and strangely echoed pictures of Jesus carrying his own cross. Praise be to them all.

St Francis’ *Canticle of the Creatures* expresses a tremendous love for the sun and moon, the



Singing Robin. commons.wikimedia.org

Earth with its creatures and praises God for them, It begins:

Praise be to you, my Lord, with all your creatures,
especially Sir Brother Sun,
who brings the day; you give us light through him.
And he is beautiful and radiant in his shining.

He goes on to praise people, especially those having a hard time:

Praise be to you, my Lord,
for those who forgive for your love’s sake,
and suffer sickness and distress.

It is a passionate, positive poem, paraphrased in the hymn ‘All Creatures of our God and King’. But why not praise the things and the people themselves, rather than praising God for them? The urge to praise is the same; it is the ‘creatures’ that are the richness and delight of the *Canticle*.

Another example is Hopkins’ poem ‘Pied Beauty’ (reprinted on page 19), which begins ‘Glory be to God for dappled things’ and ends:

With swift, slow; sweet, sour, adazzle, dim;
he fathers forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

Isn't it 'the dappled things' themselves that have so elated Hopkins? Why not just praise them? Actually, he *is* praising them; they are the power of the poem. Atheist William Morris's utopian novel *News from Nowhere* was published in 1890, just 23 years after Hopkins wrote 'Pied Beauty'. At the end of the novel, Ellen the heroine exclaims: 'O me! O me! How I love the Earth, and the seasons and weather and all things that deal with it and all that grows out of it.' Nevertheless, perhaps an imaginary creator of them all is a poetic reminder that we are one Earth, one ecosystem and belong together as part of life on Earth, which means we should take care of one another.

The Catholic Church's liturgy has prayers for the hours of the day from morning till night with psalms of praise. The Church of England has kept Morning Prayer and Evensong, praising God in the morning and evening. With the same feeling we can praise the morning and evening themselves. Not long before the lockdown my journalist daughter had interviewed a Mapuche leader for the BBC. The Mapuche are an indigenous people of Chile. He told her:

At five in the morning everyone was up, checking on the animals. We were always taught, from when we were very little, to go out early in the morning, when all the force of nature is there and take in nature's energy. You have to look at the volcanoes because our ancestors are there and they reflect all our knowledge. You have to get up early and walk in the mountains, and be inspired.

This reminded of my father, who in the early morning would bellow at us: 'Rise and shine!' It's lovely to go out in the early morning, he would say, and we would feed our animals before breakfast too. After hearing the Mapuche interview, I found that I was going out early on a sunny morning into our park, St Martin's Gardens, to stand on the mound in the middle and look at the trees and the new day in praise. The park was an overflow from the cemetery of St Martin's in the Fields and bones are buried under the mound, ancestral Londoners.

Noon and evening each have a different light and a different feeling. P.G. Wodehouse describes the magic atmosphere of evensong in a

country church. Then comes end of the day when night falls.

As well as going through the day, the church's liturgy goes round the year through the seasons, with Christmas and new birth at the winter solstice and death and resurrection in the spring at Easter. This harvest hymn also goes round the year:

We plough the fields and scatter
the good seed on the land,
but it is fed and watered
by God's almighty hand;
he sends the snow in winter,
the warmth to swell the grain,
the breezes and the sunshine
and soft refreshing rain.
All good gifts around us
are sent from heaven above,
then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord
for all his love.

Again the hymn praises God for the seasons and the harvest. But why don't we just praise them for themselves?. So many poems and songs praise God. The Chilean singer-songwriter Violetta Parra's '*Gracias a la Vida*' ('Thank you, life!) expresses the same exultation but does not mention God at all.

We are one of Earth's animals, the ones who can speak. After love and kindness, wording is our most essential human power. We can get to know the Earth and its creatures and describe them through scientific research and in other ways. We can speak about them and for them in poetry and song. We also produce art and music.

I think it was a great shame that in the English Revolution many of those on the side of increasing social justice and democracy were puritans. Puritans, including future Quakers, fought in Cromwell's army, stabled their horses in Winchester Cathedral, smashed the stained-glass west window and other windows, damaged statues, cutting off some of the saints' heads. They did the same to other beautiful buildings. The people of Winchester were so distressed that they saved the fragments of broken glass and later mended their great west window. In June 1947 Parliament abolished Christmas Day as a holiday. Puritans had been campaigning against it for decades. For example, in the 1580s in his

Anatomic of Abuses Philip Stubbs had written: 'More mischief is that time committed than in all the year besides, what masking and mumming, ... what dicing and carding, what eating and drinking, what banqueting and feasting is then used, more than in all the year besides, to the great dishonour of God and impoverishing of the realm.'

Quakers were averse to colour and wore sober clothes. In their meetings they abolished music, poetry and song ('embodied word'), together with the liturgy of the hours of the day and the seasons. Their poetic and musical iconoclasm paralleled the artistic iconoclasm that had been expressed in smashing statues and stained glass windows. Perhaps they believed 'pure spirit' was somehow 'higher' or 'purer' than embodiment, whereas embodiment is the core – the crux – of the Christian story. Rather as the medieval theologian Joachim of Fiore thought that in the course of history there had been an age of the Father, followed by the current age of the Son, with an age of the Spirit to come, perhaps Quakers thought they had reached the age of the Spirit. They have a good record in caring for the oppressed and campaigning for social justice.

In our speaking, particularly in poems, stories and songs, we not only describe what we see but also imagine all sorts of things. Poets and others

have imagined a whole supernatural realm, including God or gods. As suggested above, one benefit of imagining a single creator of the Earth and all its creatures is the insight that we are one life, one ecosystem. The extraordinary development of imagining God as three-in-one is elaborated in Augustine's theology of the Trinity. God's name for himself when he speaks to Moses in the burning bush is 'I AM'. In the theology of the Trinity God the Father personifies origin and Being. He knows and expresses himself so perfectly that his self-knowledge becomes personified as Word, which contains the whole of himself – God the Son. Father and Son love each other with all that they are, so that their love becomes personified as Spirit (love, fellowship ('communion')). So Being generates Word and together they breathe Love, which flows round again into Being and Word ('circumincession').

This complex imagined God has been regarded as a baffling psychological conundrum but is also poetically rich. It is suggestive both of the course of evolution and of an ideal human model. In evolution, being develops into life and then into living, speaking beings. Humans are and are alive, they can know or seek to know and word it. Ideally, the model intimates, our being and wording should flow into loving, both our nearest and dearest, and it all as one I AM. Praise be!

Pied Beauty

Glory be to God for dappled things –
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

Gerard Manley Hopkins