Hints and rumours of the living God

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The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out like shining from shook foil.

SO WROTE THE POET GERARD MANLEY HOPKINS, thereby ranging himself on one side of a debate that has raged for centuries. In Europe, at least, during the period called the Enlightenment, most theologians would have agreed with the general sentiment of Hopkins' lines. From the argument from design – that God is a 'great watchmaker', whose creation shows the intelligence of the creator – to the benevolent and optimistic theologies of Schleiermacher and Ritschl, theologians generally held that creation is in tune with its maker, and can and does reveal the orderly and gracious nature of God.[1]

Karl Barth put a stop to that kind of easy theological alliance. His theology, reacting against a self-deceiving liberalism that had left itself no critical distance from its environment, focused on the absence of God from the world we live in. Our world is seldom, actually, God's creation. Most of the time it is our own creation, of fantasy and delusion, a closed circle which God shatters with violence. In this world of our making, the sense of the absence of God is often the most authentic religious response. And our only hope of coming close, even to that knowledge that we cannot recognize God in the world we have made, is God's own redeeming action in Jesus Christ.

Our understanding of how sacraments work is very much conditioned by this debate. Are sacraments a natural extension of the fact that the whole of creation is redolent of God, or are sacraments only to be understood in the light of the incarnation? Is 'sacramentality' something that you would expect to find in every religious movement, or is it essentially a Christian invention, based on the Christian claims about God taking on flesh, and so making the physical world transparent to divine meaning?

More immediately, to ask whether symbols are universal begs a question about how signs signify.

How are we to avoid a soft-focus religiosity, in which all that matters is the general feeling of being involved in something meaningful, even if it is almost impossible to decide what the meaning actually is? How symbolic can a symbol be when no one is quite sure what it symbolizes? I cannot see why it is, religiously speaking, very interesting that some of the vital elements of the universe have had symbolic significance in many different cultures and religious traditions.

I suspect that a line of thought which begins with universals and seeks connections between the way in which symbols function from one culture to another may not lead to any more startling conclusion than that people are symbol-makers. They will use all the material that they are given to make poems and allusions, and metaphors and symbols and webs and structures of allusive meaning, whether formally religious or not. Is all of this 'sacramental'? If it is using a physical symbol to express something that is not entirely physical, or not physical alone, and if that something expressed is in some sense 'religious', then it may be fairly described as 'sacramental', in the most general sense of the phrase. But it is not a sacrament. What starts as a genuine desire to see God in everything, and to give proper value to God as the creator of all that is, ends up with losing sight of God as *personal*, and therefore characterful. God made everything, and is indeed in everything, but God is not equally recognizable in everything. I have tried very hard to come at the sacraments from the general sacramentality of the universe, but I just cannot do it. I might end up there, eventually, by the end of this argument, but for the moment I find I need to start from the Christian centre of gravity, and work my way outwards. I need to find out what I am talking about, before I can talk about it.

'Do this in remembrance of me': the sacraments of Christ

The definition of a sacrament as 'an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual meaning' is strikingly unbiblical. The New Testament is quite straightforward about why we have the sacrament of the eucharist: we have it and do it because Jesus told us to. So, at the simplest level, sacraments are memorials. We eat bread and drink wine in memory of the Last Supper, and we are baptized in memory of Jesus' baptism. Many Protestants would say that they

did not want to go much further than that into a sacramental theology.

But, of course, it is not that simple. The practice of the faithful doing this in memory of Jesus already carries with it a lot of assumptions about meaning, including the assumptions that the New Testament accounts suggest Jesus himself gave to this act. The first three Gospels and 1 Corinthians suggest that Jesus identified the bread that he shared in his last pre-resurrection meal with his disciples as his body. In the context of the gospel narrative, the allusions to sacrifice are clear: Jesus is speaking of his forthcoming death in sacrificial terms. But in 1 Corinthians there is already a fairly strong theology of 'incorporation' – that eating the bread brings us very directly into contact with each other and with the Lord.

So already the simple line on sacraments, that we do them 'in memory', is beginning to get complicated. And the complications multiply when we go on to ask: Who do we do this in memory of and why? Why is it important to remember this particular man? What does the faithful repetition of this action imply about our understanding of Jesus?

If you start from the New Testament, that is, from the side of the argument that believes that sacramental theology can only come out of a theology of redemption, not a theology of creation, then you are arguing that the principle of sacramentality comes out of the historical life, death and resurrection of one person, at one time – the man, Jesus. Independent of that history, we would not know that there is a sacramental principle at work in creation.

That seems like rather a sweeping claim. It does not mean that, independent from belief in the incarnation, there is no understanding of the fact that God can be discovered in and illuminated by many aspects of the physical world. Finding God in the physical is not a sacrament, although once you have sacraments, they may well illuminate our contact with the world in all kinds of ways that may be labelled 'sacramental'.

A sacrament, I am suggesting, is about what God does in Jesus. A sacrament is about God coming directly into our world and thereby opening up new possibilities. In his baptism and in his death, Jesus stands in a place that is rightfully ours, a place made by sin and separation from God. In both baptism and the cross those of us who read the stories with the hindsight knowledge of the resurrection see the almost unbearable irony of God separated from God by a sin

that is ours. But since this is God at work, the separation is also a work of re-creation. God is always, in all things, creative. What is created out of separation is a place, a person, where God and humanity meet and are one, where death and life are reconciled, where the physical and the spiritual illuminate each other. And we are called and enabled not just to view that place and person but to be there, to stand in Jesus' place, and be reconciled and reconciling. This is the mark of a sacrament, where we have a place made for us to participate in the life of God, and, through that participation, to share God's life with others. To sum this up with someone else's words: 'In so far as the Church is the extension of the incarnation, the sacraments are the extension of the atonement'.[2]

Creation and recreation

So the possibility of sacraments comes out of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. Only here do we see creation and re-creation at work together, creator and creature fully at one. You have to start here. But once you have done that, knowledge and illumination spill out all over the place. Because, of course, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is also the creator. The desire of God to be with what is not-God, to go out in sheer exuberance into otherness, this second person of the Trinity is also always active in creation. St John's Gospel tells us that 'without him was not anything made that was made'.

The dualities between God and world, life and death, immanent and transcendent are not abolished, but a theology of the sacraments makes it plain that they must be held together, and that they only have meaning when they are. When the Christian participates in the sacrament of the eucharist, she does not become, for that moment, someone different, She is still fully herself, and fully 'in Christ'. She properly stands in the place of the Son, and calls God 'Abba, Father', and yet she knows herself still to be 'first Adam', outside of this relationship which God creates between Son and Father and which the Holy Spirit holds open for us to step into.

Here, very directly, is the heart of the divide over whether all of creation is sacramental, or whether sacrament and redemption are bound up together. Is God in the sacraments just 'doing what comes naturally', as an extension of what is done in creation, or does the incarnation make a new possibility, that was not there before?

Sacraments, being physical things, involving us in an activity, but not necessarily requiring of us great understanding, can quickly

become day-to-day things. They can easily lend themselves to a slide from God's presence in the bread and wine to God's presence in other symbols, and a good theology of creation can underpin this slide. The Reformers were suspicious of this kind of attitude. They wanted to concentrate on what God has done for us, once for all, completed, on the cross, and they suspected that the sacraments lead us to look, instead, at what God does for us day by day, in creation.

Now, of course, that is a false dichotomy, but it needs to be examined, because at its heart lies a serious question. If God is naturally inclined to use what he has made to illuminate his relationship with us, then why was the incarnation necessary at all? If 'sacramentality' is natural, then why was the cross necessary?

I suspect that part of an answer to that is that, at least in modern writing about the sacramentality of the whole world, there is a distinctly soft-centred approach. God is to be found in what is beautiful and what is majestic, in the tamed and domesticated physical world that is the reality for most of us in the western industrialized nations, who do not, in fact, have a close and interdependent relationship with nature. But the Gospels tell us that God comes in Jesus into a life of hardship, rejection, suffering and death – the physical realities that we would rather not think about, and that we seldom see as 'sacramental'.

In other words, whatever else the incarnation is about, and whatever else the sacraments incorporate us into, it is not about quick solutions to problems, or about hiding the painfulness of reality. The world is a deeply wounded place, and God, its creator, comes to live in it as one who is himself vulnerable to those wounds. The sacraments offer incorporation *into* that kind of life, not salvation *from* it. But they offer it in the firm hope that God's creative and recreative power, that can bring creation out of nothing and can raise Jesus from the dead, is always and everywhere at work.

Hope of what might be – awaiting salvation

This is an eschatological vision, and one that can only be honestly held out by those who hold to the sacrament of the death of Jesus. The sacraments remind us that we are called to be sons of God like the Son of God,[3] not jumping straight from creation to resurrection, but going, as Jesus did, through birth and life and death. That is the importance of the physicality of the sacraments. Not that they evoke that natural religious response to what is lovely, but, quite the contrary, that they demand an unnatural, counter-intuitive, perception of

God's presence in what seems as alien from God's creative power as anything could be.

The sacraments are a symbol of hope because they talk about the reality of where we are and how the world is, and make that, in itself, a sign of God at work. What is done by God on the cross is indeed complete, because it is the bringing together of God and not-God. God who is life overflowing into creation incorporates into himself death and the destruction of creation, and recreates out of that a new way of allowing created beings into his liveliness, which is the original intention of creation.

So the sacraments hold together the fulfilment of the end with the reality of the present, and our part is to make sure we do not deny either. What God has done for us is indeed complete, and we are assured of it and our part in it, but it is not done without us. It is precisely *our* lives that are being transformed, not just the life of that historical man, Jesus, but the lives of all who are made in the image of God's Son. We have been saved, we are being saved, day by day, and we await our final salvation. Only in the sacraments do all those moments coalesce.

'The proof of the pudding': how do sacraments work?

If it is argued that a sacrament is more than just any old external object that symbolizes something more than is shown on the surface, and if it is also more than just a 'memorial', what is it? Do sacraments 'do' something that is more than just intellectual or imaginative illumination? What might it mean to say that a sacrament 'works', that it conveys something, or changes something?

That question has got harder to answer now that churches are places of personal, private religion. When admission to the sacraments was a symbol of full admission to a society, it must have seemed easier to know how sacraments 'worked'. Those who were known to have put themselves outside the rules of their society – by adultery, for example – would also be excluded from the body of that society at worship. But it would be a bold priest who took such a step nowadays. Now, 'sin' is treated very much as a private matter, not something that breaks the bonds of community, and so not something that needs to be signalled clearly by exclusion from the sacraments of unity and communion.

Not that I would necessarily welcome a return to a practice of using exclusion from the sacraments as a means of punishment. For one thing, the Church's own practice too often recognized only

sexual sins as 'real' sins, worthy of meriting such a punishment, as though only sexual sins could ever be damaging to the society around, with little thought given to sins of anger or usury. Furthermore, if the sacraments are really a place that God the Spirit holds open for us to step into the redeeming work of the Father and stand with the Son, then they are also, surely, the last things that can be used to punish and exclude. The great post-communion prayer of the Anglican Series 2 liturgy speaks of the Father who 'meets us in the Son and brings us home'. If God can be so profligate in his love, it hardly befits the Church to be more mean-minded.

But what is broken by that severing of the bonds between admission to the sacraments and admission to the community is precisely the understanding of the necessarily corporate nature of the sacraments. To be 'incorporated' into the Son in the life of the Trinity involves being 'incorporated' at the same time into the society of 'the Church' – that great multitude of saints past, present and to come. It is very hard to see how this can be symbolized by an unwillingness to be a part of the Church as it actually is, represented by those kneeling beside us as we hold out our hands at the altar. It is equally hard to see how it can be represented by a church that believes the life of the Trinity only happens on Sundays.

Too much of the theology that looks to find the sacramental nature of God at work in the world at large is actually talking about how individuals are intellectually or emotionally illuminated by particular experiences. They 'find God' through a vision or an experience that changes their understanding of God and their relationship with God, but not necessarily with the others who share in God's life. Instead, that moment or event of illumination may, in fact, be a means of separating them from others who have not had that experience.

Certainly, a theology of the sacraments should make sense of those flashes of illumination, those experiences of the powerful presence of God. But it should also make sense of the faithful and uneventful daily lives lived in trust. In other words, the effectiveness of sacraments does not depend upon a unanimity of understanding among those who share in them. Those who 'do this in memory' of Jesus, and those who see the transformation of the bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ, are both performing mere acts of intellectual interpretation, unless they are also stepping into the circle of God's life, and holding out their hands to those stand-

ing beside them. Some will see only those hands immediately held out, and some will see the shining vistas of the saints of God, and neither will be here nor there unless their seeing helps them to hold out their own hands to those not yet in the circle, those not yet 'incorporated', those not yet aware that their home is so close and their invitation never withdrawn.

That is not to say that the meaning of the sacraments, the efficacy of the sacraments, is not something that *we* do. There is a story that C. S. Lewis tells about how, as a pious and unhappy child, he was convinced that his prayers would only work if he was really sincere, and really concentrating. And so night after night, having said his prayers, he would climb into bed, and then be filled with the morbid conviction that he had not done them properly, and so that he must repeat them, over and over, until he got them 'right'. As the mother of small children, I find it immensely comforting to know that the sacrament will take me into its world, even if I have barely managed to hear one word of the service, or think one thought that I would recognize as 'prayer'. I present myself, in the condition that I am actually in, and wait for other hands to help me up, other voices to pray for me. I hope that I may sometimes repay the favour when others are distracted or absent-minded.

God's life and our life

None of this gets us very much closer to the question of how sacraments 'work'. It is easy to *say* that they draw us into the life of God, but what might that actually mean? And, again, it is surely necessary to return to the starting place of sacramentality – the life of Jesus.

The problem with so much of what is said about the sacraments is that it seems to be disproved by the ongoing dismal life of the real and depressing Church. How can we look at the Church universal, fractured, compromised, small-minded and irrelevant as it often is, and claim that in it the sacraments that draw us into the life of God are offered?

But the incarnation is all about that very reality. Since we just cannot make it into the image of God's life by ourselves, God makes himself into the image of our life. That is the whole point of sacraments – they illustrate that overwhelming and humbling knowledge that God has of us. We are not capable of transforming anything, so God gives us what is ordinary, what is plain, what is wholly part of our mundane life, and yet is also wholly filled with

God. God is where we are, so that we can meet God there. God brings God's life into ours, because we cannot take our lives into God's any other way.

William Temple, the great Anglican churchman and Archbishop of Canterbury, said that sacraments are a way of holding transcendence and immanence together,[4] and the point is that they are a way of God's own making, because that is something we are simply not capable of doing on our own. The shattering thing about the incarnation is that it shows that God and humanity are very close, and that they are so *by God's own choice*, and despite everything that we can do and have done to ruin that imaging.

And, at last, this might be a way back to seeing the sacramental principle at work in other ways, outside the pure and formal sacraments of the Church. For what God wills, God wills through all eternity. The incarnation is not a change in God – God does not change – and so the closeness that God remakes between the world and his own life is the closeness of creation, as well as the closeness of redemption. God's willingness, or, to put it yet more strongly, God's desire, to share God's life with what is not God is the mark of the God who creates and the God who redeems. The Holy Spirit, the life-giver, broods over the face of the waters of chaos in the beginning, to pour out God's creative life, and the same Spirit is poured out on us in baptism to bring us to new life.

Throughout the whole sweep of the biblical story that is what can be seen: God creating and recreating means of showing people that they share in God's own life. This is the 'sacramental' activity that is a mark of the trinitarian God: to be among us, to use what is natural to us, to infuse the world he has made with the creative possibilities of sharing in his life.

The life of the Trinity is not something that happens only in church. It is the means whereby the whole of creation has life. God has created us in order to share himself with us, and all insights into the activity of God are part of that sharing. But in the sacraments, the sharing becomes very precise. We know that we stand in the place that the Son has made for us, and that we do so because the Spirit gives us the life of Christ and enables us to call God 'Father'. We know not just that we can catch hints of the activity of God, rumours of God's presence, but that we are central to God's life, that we are heirs and co-heirs with God's Son.

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NOTES

1 It is actually deeply unfair to suggest that Hopkins belongs just on one side of this debate. Although he noted the presence of God in nature with the poetry of joy, very few of his poems lack a sense of sin and separation from God, and, in his own life, he also knew the absence of God, and wrote about it poignantly:

> With witness I speak this. But where I say
> Hours I mean years, mean life. And my lament
> Is cries countless, cries like dead letters sent
> To dearest him that lives alas! away.

2 N. Clark, *An approach to the theology of the sacraments* (SCM, 1956), p 74.

3 Yes, I really did say that we are *all* called to be sons of God. By this I wish to make it clear that the place we *all* take in the life of the Trinity is the place that the Son has made for us, and that this is exactly the same for men and women. So it may sound sexist, but it is meant to be the opposite.

4 I found this allusion to Temple in J. Macquarrie, *A guide to the sacraments* (SCM, 1997), p 8.