

The Wreck of the *Deutschland*

Sermon for the 17th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C, 6 October 2019

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor, ACT Australia

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Habakkuk 1: 1-4, 2: 1-4; Psalm 37: 1-9; 2 Timothy 1: 1-14; Luke 17: 5-10

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

I take as my text some words of Jesus from today's Gospel: "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'be uprooted and planted in the sea', and it would obey you" (Luke 17: 6).

On a stormy, winter night in December 1875, the British-built German passenger steamer *Deutschland* ran hard aground on a sandbar near the Thames estuary. Rescue boats took two days and a night to get through the storm, while the waves pounded the hundred-metre long iron ship. Some 60 passengers, nearly a quarter of those embarked, lost their lives. Most of them drowned while trying to escape the lower decks, while in desperation one woman hanged herself, and a man cut his wrists. Among those drowned were five Roman Catholic nuns, who had been exiled from Germany

thanks to Bismarck's anti-Catholic legislation in Prussia. They were bound via England for the United States, and a new life on the Franciscan missions in Missouri, but it wasn't to be.

Witnesses reported that at the height of the storm a tall nun thrust her head through a skylight and was heard to call "O Christ, come quickly." When Cardinal Manning preached at their funeral, he painted a picture of serene, saintly action on the nuns' part, but without mention of what a shockingly difficult problem their seemingly senseless death poses for faith. The nuns believed that they were in God's hands, and yet they died with all the rest. For Cardinal Manning, and for many preachers then and since, the difficulties and loose ends of life, its setbacks and uncertainties, don't rate the same place as do the settled convictions of faith—the belief that God's will is being done no matter what appearances to the contrary.

There was another English Catholic at the time who took a keen interest in this tragedy, but who presented the story in a rather different light. I refer to the Jesuit priest Gerard Manley Hopkins and a poem he wrote for a Catholic periodical, though the editors thought it would be too demanding for the Catholic faithful and so they refused to publish it. His poem became well known nonetheless; it's called 'The Wreck of the Deutschland'. If you don't

know it, you can look it up easily online later on. In Hopkins' poem there's no triumphalism, and no easy answers, but there is a keen sense of how unexpected and how awful this tragedy was. Nowhere does Hopkins claim any obvious divine theme or purpose. Yet he knew God was in the midst of it, and that the sacrifice of Christ could be connected to it, though not in any easy, obvious, reassuring way: a God, as he puts it in the poem,

throned behind
Death with a sovereignty that heeds but hides, bodes but abides.
(Stanza 32)¹

The challenge for Hopkins was to hold on to Christian faith without denying the often ill-fitting and distressing facts of life. This is quite a high-wire act, and perhaps the truest reason why those well-meaning Catholic editors wouldn't publish his poem. Surely the faithful prefer certainties, and the Church does better when it offers a safe, comfortable ideology. This high-wire act is the one that what we might call progressive Christianity tries to walk in our own time: to keep the confidence of faith open to the complexities of life, and the complexities of life open to the confidence of faith.

Writing about this challenge, as expressed in Hopkins' poem, English theologian Ben Quash has this to say.

¹ <http://www.bartleby.com/122/4.html>

Hopkins believes that an appropriately complex form of legibility is attainable for eyes trained to see Christ at the heart of the world. It is not easily to be won, and it is not glibly to be articulated, but its attainability is an article of faith.²

This complex form of intelligibility is what mature Christians learn. They learn not to expect to have it all worked out, but to trust that Jesus is with them in the midst of complex and confronting circumstances.

The tall nun knew that. She was somehow able to interpret her own imminent drowning and that of her sisters as Christ coming to them, and quickly. With her in mind I think of my text this morning, with its mulberry tree uprooted and planted in the sea—equally unlikely, strange and illogical, more like a Zen *koan* than a piece of Christian wisdom. Yet for Jesus in our gospel today the unlikely message is that he stands alongside his children with a presence that changes things once we come to perceive and to trust that presence. As unlikely as it is to be able to uproot a stubborn mulberry tree and plant it in the sea—as unlikely as Jesus’ tongue-in-cheek invitation to try some salt water hydroponics—it’s unlikely that we can hold Christ together with all the world’s complexity in the one Church, and in the one Christian breast. But this is what Jesus promises us today.

² Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 204.

In today's Gospel we find a further strange illustration from Jesus, about a servant who needs to learn his place in the scheme of things. With some fairly frank and forthright advice, Jesus tells his disciples that it's not about them but about him; it's not about what they're doing, and what sense they might or might not make of their circumstances, but about what he's doing. The servants of Jesus learn that even tough conditions and demands begin to look different once they realise that it's not about them, but about Jesus—that they fit into a bigger picture than they'd imagined.

And at this point it might help to mention a disputed translation in our Habbakuk reading this morning. We hear at the end of our reading that 'the righteous will live by their faith', which we read as an exhortation to have faith—to have *more* faith. But, then, that can just bring us back to focusing on ourselves, on how our faith is shaping up. And focusing on our own faith exposes us to all the doubts and uncertainties that can swamp us as we try to be faithful. But another, better, and more reassuring way to translate this line is to say that 'the righteous shall live by his faithfulness'—that is, we'll live *by God's faithfulness*. Again, then, as in our Gospel today, it's not our faith that's centre stage, but rather it's God's faithfulness to which we look. And safe in the arms of this faithful God, who will never let us go, we discover that having faith doesn't mean twisting

and struggling, or having everything worked out. Instead we can let God's faithfulness work in us, doing God's work through us—as our Psalm reassures us this morning, “*He will make your righteousness shine as clear as the light: and your innocence as the noonday.*” God will do it! We needn't worry about manufacturing faith for ourselves.

As for the challenges and disappointments that we can expect to face in the Christian life, a major one is the difficulty of living with the Church and sharing in its frustrations. ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’ is alert to these challenges, as are our readings today. Remember that the nuns were in exile from a secular Protestant state that disdained their faith. Meanwhile, Hopkins’ England was increasingly self-satisfied and religiously sceptical. The tragedy at the heart of his poem is partly a reflection on the overconfidence of a newly industrialized age, with less and less place for God in people’s imagination. I recall another poem from a decade earlier with yet more imagery of the sea, addressing this very collapse of faith: a poem by Matthew Arnold, called ‘Dover Beach’.

The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear

And naked shingles of the world.³

But of course problems for the Church and its faith are not new. Our 2 Timothy reading today is an attempt to gee-up a depressed and wavering young leader in the very early Church. His mentor, whose advice we listen in on today, reminds him of his apostolic commission, of the faith of previous generations that he shares, and of God's big picture that holds it all together. These are the same resources that are available to Christians today as we struggle with faith: the assurance of God's call in our baptism and confirmation, the fellowship of a trans-generational community that puts the struggles of our own lifetimes into some sort of context, and the big picture of God's loving purposes that we celebrate week by week in the Eucharist.

So Jesus' words in our Gospel today are aimed at reassuring and strengthening his disciples in the face of oppressive challenges. Jesus' unsparing advice doesn't deny those challenges, but it does put them in perspective. In the midst of the sea, you'll nevertheless see your problems reframed, just like you'll see that mulberry tree replanted—just like that nun in the storm, who knew Christ was with her and her sisters. This is not to deny the danger, but to reframe it. As Ben Quash says of that tall nun,

³ <http://www.victorianweb.org/victorian/authors/arnold/writings/doverbeach.html>

Her witness contributes to the formation of an interpretative environment, or 'world', in which certain experiences can be seen and endured differently from the way they might otherwise have been.⁴

For any of you who are still finding your feet in the Christian life, or who're trying to take your faith more seriously, all this is an invitation to take heart. There's much to discourage Christians today, to distract us, and to swamp us. So we need to develop and to maintain good habits of daily prayer, reflecting on the scriptures, and joining together week by week in the Eucharist. None of this is optional. How else can we learn to make out the watermark of Christ that's woven through the complexities, disappointments and discouragements of life? Yet as we do all that, and as we learn to discover Christ in the midst of the perplexing and ill-fitting, we grow a healthy, mature and attractive faith that will in turn attract others.

Hopkins was no triumphalist, and the ill-fitting horror of that shipwreck is very clear from his poem, yet at one point he dares to speculate that a faith like that of the tall nun might actually do others some good. Frustrated Catholic that he was, in a land of half-hearted Anglicans, Hopkins even wondered if, in God's mercy, the tall nun's death might just be a seed for the conversion of England:

⁴ Quash, 205.

a bell to, ring of it, and
Startle the poor sheep back! Is the shipwreck then a harvest,
does tempest carry the grain for thee?

(Stanza 31)

Friends, here is an unfamiliar, no-nonsense Christ who calls us to mature faith. The unlikely image of the mulberry tree in the middle of the sea, like the unlikely witness of that drowning nun 144 years ago, summons us to a hard-won, grown-up Christianity that's fit for the real world.

The Lord be with you ...