

8th Sunday after Pentecost August 7 2011

Gen 17:1-14,12-28 Romans 10:5-15 Mtt 14:22-33

Ad majorem Dei gloriam – To the greater glory of God Amen

“Pied Beauty”

Gerard Manley Hopkins

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 áll trádes, 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.

Today I want to talk not about traditional interpretations of the gospel story. Not about tale-tellers and brothers who sell their sibling into slavery. Not about how much faith is enough, and not about who will ascend into heaven. But I do want to talk about dappled things and about messing about in boats.



When we read the account of Jesus walking on water, we are reminded of many things. That Jesus is powerful; that he has control of nature. He calls his disciples to trust him. He rescues them when drowning. That he takes away fear and bids the disciples, and us, to "Take courage! And be not afraid." And in this pericope from Matthew's gospel that we've just heard, impetuous Peter does give us a window into our own struggles between faith and fear. But that's not what is at the heart of things for me today. What's at the heart of things for me today is how to apply, what Rowan Williams calls true religion, that is religion that leads to self examination rather than making claims over others.

I see images of boats crowded with people who have overcome their fear of storms and stepped onto a boat that represents hope, crowded with children sent into the world by desperate parents wanting freedom for their child. I see "People smugglers" who exploit the desperation of these refugees. I hear the words of our Immigration Minister maintaining that "There are no blanket exemptions and the message is very clear: if you come to Australia by boat, even if you are a minor or are claiming to be a minor, you can work on the basis that you will be returned to Malaysia". Then I read that the United Nations' children's agency is extremely concerned that 'unaccompanied minors' may be deported from Christmas Island and that the agency has called on the minister not to send them to Malaysia for processing. Clearly messing about in boats is dangerous.

It's a trauma to come to Australia as a boat person and it's an even greater trauma to then be deported. Children should not be used as a deterrent for people smugglers I hear myself say. No child should be sent to a country where there are no guarantees that they will be protected from harm. I cannot help myself from thinking what right do I have to send these people away. The writer of our gospel has the disciples battered, the Greek word translated here as battered literally means tortured, by the storm but then they are rescued by Jesus. Who will rescue the refugees I ask myself.

These refugees unloaded at Christmas Island are they pawns in a game I ask. What law have they broken? Then I read that the Australian Federal Police have conducted "fit to travel" assessments and collected bio data required under this deal. These refugees are moved to a detention facility at Phosphate Hill, where is that?

Phosphate Hill has not housed children since 2005. What facilities are there for these unaccompanied children? Security has been beefed up, with riot police and extra fencing. The asylum seekers are told that they will be sent to Malaysia. We are told that removals could begin today. Where do I stand in all this? I know it is a complicated issue. I know that it is reasonable to have control of our borders. I know that I cannot understand the processes played out here. Lord save me I am drowning in despair. "O you of little faith, why do you doubt?" There is a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I think it's in the 'Goblet of fire' that J.K. Rowling's has Professor Dumbledore warning Harry Potter "soon dark and difficult times are coming and you will have to choose between what is right and what is easy". Will I choose what is right? What 'Pied Beauty' is this; that requires one to look beyond a simplistic, untruthful, 'sound-bite' culture?

The writer of our gospel has Peter model a mixture of boldness and fear, strength and weakness, characteristic of us all. Thus we are all dappled things. The mystery that lies behind, beyond and within existence meets us in every aspect of life. It sings in all things. It is a question of being open to it with both tears and joy, open to the experience of living. The implication of this, of course, is that if we live fully aware, impelled by both wonder and love, the tension between this and the unjustness of life will grow ever more intense, not diminish, for there are no satisfying intellectual answers as to how they might be held together conceptually in a universe created by a loving God.

As I reflected on the readings for today and on refugee issues and boat people, I found myself playing with imagery inherent in the text. There is a copy of this reflection in the pew sheet. I hope that you will take it home as a reminder of dappled things and of the implications for us all, of messing about in boats.

Laus Deo semper – Praise be to God always.

Jenny Nelson
Christ Church South Yarra