

AS KINGFISHERS CATCH FIRE

By

Gerard Manley Hopkins

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies dráw fláme;
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *Whát I do is me: for that I came.*
Í say móre: the just man justices;
Kéeps gráce: thát keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—
Christ—for Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.

We need to try and understand this virus among us as a newcomer in an existing panoply of creatures who are associated with us – some kill, yes, but many do not. We can mourn in deep solidarity with those who mourn, but anxiety will not help those left behind. The next time a cloud of anxiety rises up within us, let us reflect that the flowers, birds, trees and other living creatures around us even in an urban environment are not in lockdown. Stop to listen to the birdsong. Their praises cannot be stamped out, in spite of our mortality and disease. The Christian hopeful message of Easter cannot be suppressed. God's grace is continuously at work in unselfish acts of self-emptying, love and sacrifice even in the midst of the pandemic.

Central to the poem is the idea that the world is God's creation, and therefore everything in it is glorifying him just by being itself: The kingfishers and dragonflies catching the glint of the sun are calling out, "I am me! This is who I am and what I do!"

Then in the second paragraph he declares that the same principle applies to the "just" man – a man (or woman) who is seeking God and living for him, i.e. acting "in God's eye what in God's eye he is." As a kingfisher is created to dive for fish and a dragonfly to hover and dart after bugs, so each of us is created with a sense of purpose and seeks to fulfil that purpose. For the Christian (literally "little Christ") that purpose is to reflect Christ. And, Hopkins says, we do! Each of us, through our unique personalities, our gifts, our compassions, even our weaknesses and griefs glorify God. As Iraneaus said, "The glory of God is the human person fully alive."

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) was an English poet, a convert to Catholicism (1866) and was ordained as a Jesuit priest (1877). He ministered briefly in St Aloysius', Glasgow.