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The Third Sunday in Advent

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BLESSED HOPE

I listened recently to a clergyman (no one I knew) speaking on the theme of hope: a great theme, and he knew how to talk. It became apparent, however, that the more he talked the less he was saying. In particular I was struck by what he managed not to say: what we might hope for, and what we should hope in. His was a vague, generic hope, without any actual content, and without any actual foundation: which is to say, not hope at all, just bland reassurance.

The question of hope is one of the great themes of this Advent season, as it is of human life as a whole. What may we hope for? And what may we hope in? And how do we lay hold of this hope? One of Thomas Hardy's poems, "The darkling thrush", leads us into these questions. It opens with the poet in 'bleak mid-winter', leaning upon "a coppice-gate/When Frost was spectre-gray,/ And Winter's dregs made desolate/ The weakening eye of day". In the tangle of dead vines, the poet sees "strings of broken lyres", the traditional symbol of death's victory over poetry itself. (One is inevitably reminded by theme and rhyme (with "lyres") of "bare ruined choirs/where late the sweet birds sang"). The theme is one as old as poetry itself: in nature's annual dying, and the inevitable, irrevocable passage of time (the poem is dated 1900), he sees the defeat of the human spirit also.

The land's sharp features seemed to be

The Century's corpse outleant,

His crypt the cloudy canopy,

The wind his death lament.

For Christian faith, midwinter is a time to celebrate the new birth given to us by the one born in Bethlehem; a time to prepare for the Lord's coming with souls fervent with the fire of the Spirit (the parable of the wise and foolish virgins, Matthew 25:1-13). Not so for the poet.

The ancient pulse of germ and birth

Was shrunken hard and dry,
And every spirit upon earth
Seemed fervourless as I.

It is perhaps illuminating to recall that in 1900 Hardy was sixty years old, enduring an unhappy marriage, and, after the savage critical response to *Jude the Obscure*, had given up writing novels. His first collection of poetry, published in 1898, had been received without enthusiasm. His own prospects may have seemed rather bleak.

Yet in this landscape of inevitable death and defeat both natural and human, something inexplicable happens.

At once a voice arose among
The bleak twigs overhead
In a full-throated evensong
Of joy illimited;
An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,
In blast-beruffled plume,
Had chosen thus to fling his soul
Upon the growing gloom.

Himself an "aged thrush" the poet may well have wondered what this bird has to sing about. With no "household fires" to warm him, winter may mean death. As the allusion to "evensong" suggest, his song is a kind of *Nunc Dimittis*, the song of aged Simeon as he goes to his death (Luke 2: 29-32).

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air

Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew

And I was unaware.

In this "ecstatic sound" he hears the fervour of spirit which nature's dying gives no reason for. Something more than "terrestrial" must explain this "joy illimited". Perhaps there was "some blessed Hope, whereof he knew/And I was unaware". The phrase "blessed Hope" comes from the Prayer Book's collect for the Second Sunday in Advent, and is the final, unmistakable hint of the poet's meaning.

The poet sees that Hope cannot be hope for, or hope in, "terrestrial things", which must inevitably pass away. For hope to be hope – a sure and certain expectation, which no winter can chill – it must, first, be hope for God – who is the "joy illimited" above all "terrestrial things". Second, hope must be established in God, in confidence of his power – that most "ancient pulse of germ and birth", the 'Ancient of Days', whose eternal son is born of a Virgin to regenerate us in the fervour of the Spirit. Thirdly, hope must be known, and known through God's revealing of it to us. I don't know what Hardy's religious views were, but on the evidence of this poem, I would guess he was a reluctant agnostic, who could long for this "blessed Hope" but was unable to know its certainty. He leans on the "coppice-gate", and listens wonderingly and wistfully to the thrush's song; but does not go through.

The poet has brought us thus far. At the Advent gate of the Christian year, he has tuned our ears to the thrush's wordless "carolings". For us to go through this gate, we must hear and receive the words which the Church's faith supplies for this music, words which are found in all the carols and hymns of this season. Insistently and joyously do these holy words declare the Advent of Hope into the world. For the Word of Hope has been made flesh, and born of Mary, for us "to embrace and ever hold fast" with all the powers of our mind and will.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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