

5. Week Beginning 21st December Kavanagh's Christmas

The Irish poet and farmer Patrick Kavanagh had an instinctive awareness of the meaning of Incarnation. His was a sacramental imagination. Even in his descriptions of the most common things, his homespun words and wisdom carry in them hints of Heaven, enabling his readers to be open to them too.

*My father played the melodion
Outside at our gate;
There were stars in the morning east
And they danced to his music.*

In A Christmas Childhood Patrick Kavanagh remembers a Christmas morning when he was six years old. His father left the 'half-door' open and made music near the gate. The boy's memories of what he saw and heard filled him with excitement. 'One side of the potato-pit was white with frost – how wonderful that was, how wonderful!' and later, when he put his ear to the paling-post near the front window 'the music that came out was magical'.

There can be few poets who have captured, in homespun words and wisdom, something of the mystery of incarnation, better than the Irish farmer Patrick Kavanagh. Everything he wrote about the most common things carried hints of heaven. A man of the soul and of the soil, he was a poet of the ordinary, 'smelting into passion the commonplaces of life'.

Surrounded by his beloved fields, hills and pathways, his spirit was not confined by them – only liberated into the eternal. Through simple and familiar things he came to understand the universe. Ploughing, spraying the potatoes, milking, feeding sheep, a horse called Polly, a farmer called Maguire, and 'three whin bushes' called the 'Three Wise Men' approaching Inniskeen – such were Kavanagh's earthly windows into an incarnate heaven.

*Across the wild bogs his melodion called
To Lennons and Callans.
As I pulled on my trousers in a hurry
I knew some strange thing had happened.*

For Kavanagh, childhood, poetry and theology were all of a piece. His farm was his bible, Co. Monaghan his Bethlehem, his poetry was his prayer, and along the Inniskeen road he experienced his daily Emmaus revelations. Even his new long trousers were woven into the mystery. A natural contemplative, Kavanagh read God's signature in every face of nature; he expected angels to appear 'round the bends of old roads'.

In his novel Tarry Flynn the son returns from a day's work on the farm and tells his aging mother, 'The holy ghost is in the fields'. Confused, his mother asks him, 'is it something to do with the Catholic religion you mean?' her son assures her that 'it is something to do with every religion.'

*Outside in the cow-house my mother
Made the music of milking;
The light of her stable-lamp was a star
And the frost of Bethlehem made it twinkle.*

Though reared in a grim climate of poverty and survival, Kavanagh's imagination flourished. He had no fear of a punishing God. For him, the maker of an astonishing Creation could only be a beautiful and loving God, a tender mother who 'caresses the daily and nightly earth'. The miracle of continuing creation, of the renewal of the world each day and each season, filled him with a child's wonder. 'And in the green meadows,' he wrote, 'the maiden of spring is with child through the Holy Ghost.'

Kavanagh believed in a god of healing more than in a God of unlimited power, a God whose beauty was reflected more purely in the soft shape of a bluebell than in the hard face of the Catholic Church of his time. Though often described as a rough and rustic neighbour, he had an exquisitely childlike understanding of God's unconditional love. Kavanagh felt this profoundly when recovering from lung-cancer surgery in 1954. While walking alongside Dublin's Grand Canal he experienced, in ordinary sights and sounds, the renewal of his spiritual and bodily health. 'The green waters of the canal were pouring redemption on me,' he wrote.

From the beginning an intuitive awareness of the deeper meaning of incarnation filled his soul. Everything spoke to him of the mystery and holiness of our lives. His most quoted verse is

*God is in the bits and pieces of Every Day –
A kiss here and a laugh again, and sometimes tears,
A pearl necklace round the neck of poverty.*

Dominican Brother Tom Casey, a farmer and a bit of a poet himself, is a great fan of Patrick Kavanagh. 'Like all great poets,' Brother Tom said to me, 'Kavanagh invites us to look at the world and to see beauty in the things we take for granted. But he does more than that: he goes beneath the beauty and shows us the inner meaning.' Until one day we will finally recognise the face of our incarnate God of surprises and disguises everywhere.

When Kavanagh writes of his little bedroom only 'ten by twelve', with its sloping roof so low he cannot stand, he knows it's nothing more than a dusty attic. 'But its little window lets in the stars.' Here we have the sacramental imagination at its best. We find it again in his much-loved *The One* where he tells the local farmers, 'That beautiful, beautiful, beautiful God was breathing his love by a cut- away bog.'

*My father played the melodion,
My mother milked the cows,
And I had a prayer like a white rose
pinned on the Virgin Mary's blouse.*

Kavanagh's sacramentalising imagination around incarnation heard 'the cry of things young and elemental' everywhere, and, as a child, each visit to the uncultivated patch of wild weeds at the back of his house 'where sows root and hens scratch' was like 'dipping his fingers in the pockets of God'. Those pockets were his five senses. And they were never empty. He reminds us, in his poem Advent, that when the Christmas carols are over, the incarnate melody of the daily psalm begins – the music of what happens.

*We'll hear it in the whispered argument of a churning
Or in the streets where the village boys are lurching.
And we'll hear it among simple, decent men, too,
Who barrow dung in gardens under trees,
Wherever life pours ordinary plenty.*