

# THE BEAUTY OF CHRIST

*Gerald O'Collins*

ON THE WEST FRONT of the thirteenth-century cathedral of Amiens, there is a carved stone figure of Christ standing on evil beasts in serene majesty, and it is called 'le Beau Dieu'. The idea of presenting Christ as both beautiful and sovereign may typify the sensibility of the Middle Ages. But the theme of Christ's beauty goes back to sermons by St Augustine of Hippo, to the awesome and victoriously beautiful Christ in the Book of Revelation, and to his identification elsewhere in the New Testament with the radiantly beautiful Lady Wisdom of the Jewish Scriptures. Augustine provides one of the finest statements of this theme when commenting on a love song, on the royal wedding song that we know as Psalm 45:

He then is beautiful in heaven, beautiful on earth; beautiful in the womb, beautiful in his parents' arms; beautiful in his miracles; beautiful under the scourge; beautiful when inviting to life ... beautiful in laying down his life; beautiful in taking it up again; beautiful on the cross; beautiful in the sepulchre; beautiful in heaven.<sup>1</sup>

This eloquent passage from Augustine takes one 'from heaven to heaven'—that is to say, from Christ's pre-existent life 'before' the incarnation to his 'post-existent' life when risen from the dead. At every stage in that story, beauty characterizes Christ, even when he is laying down his life on the cross. Augustine's comments provide a framework for reflecting on Christ's beauty, and for doing so out of the communicative wealth of the Scriptures. But first let me take a stand on what I understand by beauty. Even a provisional account can help us to explore the life of meaning in the biblical texts.

<sup>1</sup> *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 44.3.

## Beauty

Drawing on St Thomas Aquinas, Jacques Maritain described beauty as follows:

For beauty three things are required: in the first place, integrity or perfection (*integritas sive perfectio*), for whatever is imperfect is *eo ipso* ugly; in the second, proportion or harmony (*proportio sive consonantia*); in the third, clarity (*claritas*), for there is a splendour in all objects that are called beautiful.<sup>2</sup>

These three qualities of beauty—an exquisite flawlessness, a harmonious proportion, and a radiance—point to what we perceive in beautiful objects. They have a proper completeness; they display a



Le Beau Dieu, Amiens Cathedral

perfect shape and order; and they enjoy a ‘luminosity’, or the right balance of colour and light through which they stand out appropriately. We rejoice in the ‘radiant form’ of some person, or delight in the ‘splendid’ performance of a symphony or a great drama.

What I have just said raises the crucial issue of participation in what is beautiful. Beauty attracts us, evokes our wonder and joy, and arouses a flood of delight and inconsolable longing. We fall in love with beauty, sing its praises, and want to stay in its presence. When Solomon succumbs to the beauty of Lady Wisdom, he wants to live with her forever: ‘When I enter my house, I shall find rest with

<sup>2</sup> *Art and Scholasticism*, translated by J. F. Scanlan (London: Sheed and Ward, 1930), 24-38, 159.

her; for companionship with her has no bitterness, and life with her has no pain, but gladness and joy' (Wisdom 8:16). At the same time, there is a mysterious quality to beauty which points beyond its mere visible expression, and leaves us asking: Where does that radiant loveliness come from, and why does it affect me in the way that it does? The mystery of beauty involves a depth of meaning which can never be exhausted. The significance of a beautiful person, a great piece of music, or a radiant painting cannot be plumbed and expressed once and for all, as the classic love poetry of the world has always witnessed. Even the masters of language lose their struggle with words and lapse into silence before the lovely object of their love. The impact of beauty is not only lasting but also total. Our whole existence is illuminated by what is beautiful.

At the same time, the experiences of reacting to what is beautiful and participating in it leave us with the question: is beauty something 'sensible', something we take in through our bodily senses? Is beauty to be met only in something which is material and wonderfully proportioned, materially speaking? Augustine wrote of God as 'the Beauty of all things beautiful'.<sup>3</sup>

The answer to that question is no. There is a beauty beyond what we can sense. God is utterly perfect, harmonious and radiantly splendid, that Beauty itself which perceptible earthly beauty reflects and in which it participates. St Gregory of Nyssa understood God to be not only beautiful but also the very essence and archetype of beauty (*De Virginitate*, 11.1-5). Centuries later St Bonaventure wrote about St Francis of Assisi moving from created reality to contemplate the most beautiful, beloved and wholly desirable God:

In beautiful things he saw Beauty itself, and through [the divine] vestiges imprinted on [created] things he followed his Beloved everywhere, making from all things a ladder by which he could climb up and embrace him who is utterly desirable.<sup>4</sup>

What Augustine, Gregory and Bonaventure wrote about the beauty of God is firmly based in the Bible.

<sup>3</sup> *Confessions*, 3.6; see 9.4.

<sup>4</sup> *The Life of St Francis*, in *Bonaventure*, translated by Ewert Cousins (New York: Paulist, 1978), 263. In this passage, Bonaventure echoes the Book of Wisdom and the language of love used by the Song of Songs.

The Old Testament frequently highlights something very similar: the 'glory' of God, or the radiant, powerful presence of God. When Jerusalem is restored, the luminous presence of God will appear over Jerusalem, which is called to reflect 'the glory of the Lord' and welcome home her children (Isaiah 60:1-5). Talk of the shining glory of God goes together with the biblical scenarios of fire and light. It is in a flame of fire out of a bush that God speaks to Moses (Exodus 3:1-6). The New Testament goes beyond speaking of God as dwelling 'in unapproachable light' (1 Timothy 6:16) to declare simply: 'God is light' (1 John 1:5).

Even if no biblical writer ever says that 'God dwells in unapproachable beauty' or that 'God is beauty', some books of the Scriptures directly celebrate the peerless beauty of a divine personification, Lady Wisdom. Solomon declared this 'pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty' to be 'more beautiful than the sun'; he 'became enamoured of her beauty', and desired to 'take her' as his bride and teacher (Wisdom 7:25,29; 8:2,9). She is understood to be the agent of divine creation, with all its beautiful works. From 'the greatness and beauty' of these created things comes 'a corresponding perception of their Creator', the very 'Author of beauty' and hence of Lady Wisdom, who is the radiantly beautiful 'reflection' or 'spotless mirror' image of God the Creator (Wisdom 7:26; 13:3-5). In different ways the Scriptures celebrate the splendid glory of God and the divine beauty. Let us turn now to Christ's story and fill out the beauty revealed at the various stages listed by Augustine.

### ***The Story of Christ***

When Matthew and Luke begin their Gospels with the 'infancy narratives', they do not directly describe the beauty of Jesus in his mother's womb or after his birth. That he was 'beautiful in the womb' is hinted at by the joyful exchange between two pregnant mothers, Elizabeth and Mary (Luke 1:39-56). The beauty of the Christ Child likewise emerges indirectly, through the joy of the shepherds, who visit Bethlehem and go away 'glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen' (Luke 2:20), and through the impact of the Child on the two old people in Jerusalem, Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:25-38). They have waited so long for this moment, they delight in the beautiful Christ Child, and now they can die in peace. Matthew writes

of the magi being ‘overwhelmed with joy’ when they finally arrive at the goal of their journey and can present the newborn Jesus with their gifts (Matthew 2:10-11). The angels in the nativity story also play their part in pointing to the beauty of the Christ Child (Luke 2:8-14). Our Christmas carols repeatedly pick up the wonder and joy of the angels over the birth of this unique and uniquely beautiful Child. For the Gospel writers angels are themselves memorably beautiful, and the beauty of these heavenly visitors mirrors the beauty of the One who has just been born. The infancy narratives present the birth of Jesus in terms of the ‘glory’ of God which shines on earth (Luke 2:9); they also speak of the star, the light from which guides the Magi to Bethlehem (Matthew 2:9-10).

A straight line leads from these biblical passages to the liturgy. Beauty threads its way through the Christmas services of worship. The opening prayer at the Roman Catholic Midnight Mass, for instance, describes ‘this holy night’ as radiant with the splendour and beauty of Christ. The first reading, Isaiah 9:2-7, signals the beautiful light of God which now shines upon those who have ‘walked in darkness’. The second reading presents the Nativity as ‘the manifestation of the glory [or radiant beauty] of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ’ (Titus 2:11-14). Then the Gospel tells of the divine beauty or glory shining around the shepherds when they watch over their flocks by night (Luke 2:1-14).

This biblical language underpins the theme of beauty introduced by Johann Sebastian Bach in his *Christmas Oratorio* when he acclaims the birth of ‘the most beautiful of all human beings’. St Robert Southwell adapted the scriptural language of fire and love in his image of ‘a pretty Babe all burning bright’ who appears on Christmas day (‘The Burning Babe’). Christian artists have rightly excelled themselves in depicting the most beautiful Child, whose beauty is mirrored in the beauty of his Mother as she holds him in her arms or gazes upon him with intense love. One thinks in particular of Murillo, with his delicate colour and ethereal forms, and a number of Italian painters. In his *Jesus’ Christmas Party*, Nicholas Allan makes the same point at a popular level: everyone loves a newborn baby and everyone should love Jesus, the most special and beautiful Baby the world has ever seen.

***The most  
beautiful Child,  
mirrored in the  
beauty of his  
Mother***

*Beautiful in His Ministry*

In his *Confessions*, Augustine addresses God as the divine Beauty, reaching him through his five senses—through hearing, sight, smell, taste and touch:

*You called and cried to me and broke open my deafness. You sent forth your beams and shone upon me and chased away my blindness. You breathed fragrance upon me, and I drew in my breath and now pant for you. I tasted you, and now hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I have burned for your peace .... (10.38)*

These words deserve to be applied to the birth of Jesus. For it enabled human beings to hear, see, smell, taste and touch the very incarnation of the divine beauty. The infinitely beautiful God reached out to us and became available through our five senses.

Augustine sums up the story of Jesus in his ministry as his being 'beautiful in his miracles' and 'beautiful when inviting to life'. Once again, the Gospel writers make no attempt to describe directly the exquisite appearance of Jesus. But even though they never tell us what he looked like, they certainly suggest his wonderful beauty through their accounts of his impact on others. People flock to him; if there ever was a magnetic, attractive personality, he is it. Mark has Peter and his companions say to Jesus, 'everyone is searching for you' (Mark 1:37). In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says to his audience: 'Come to me all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest' (Matthew 11:28). If the poor and overburdened take on his light yoke, they will find enduring peace. As beautiful, divine Wisdom in person,<sup>5</sup> Jesus invites his hearers to take up the yoke of his message rather than put, or rather leave, their necks under the yoke of the law. He hardly needs to invite his audience to come to him. They know from others, or have already experienced, how tender, welcoming and comforting he proves to be. They want to stay in his presence and share in the mysterious grace of his person. The sick and sinful receive from him healing and a joyful wholeness.

The preaching of Jesus reported by Matthew and by Luke provides grounds for concluding that Jesus thought of himself in terms of

<sup>5</sup> The passage echoes what Ben Sirach says of the serenity with which Lady Wisdom has blessed his life (Ecclesiasticus 51: 23-27).

wisdom and made it possible for his followers to recognise him as the divine Wisdom come in person. This is tantamount to acknowledging in him the divine Beauty.<sup>6</sup> Likewise the Letter to the Hebrews calls him 'the reflection of God's glory' (Hebrews 1:3).<sup>7</sup> As one might expect, the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit transfigured what early Christians believed about Jesus. Nevertheless, their beliefs regularly reached back to the ministry of Jesus and to what they remembered him saying, or at least implying, about himself. This helped them to see in him the radiant splendour of the divine beauty.

During his lifetime one group, in particular, sensed that beauty in him. Children were drawn, in a special way, to the beauty and joy of Jesus' company. In the rural society of ancient Galilee, children were sent off as soon as possible to take care of sheep or in other ways prove themselves to be producers and not merely consumers. Since they did not know the Torah, they were low on the religious and social scale. Yet Jesus showed himself their special friend; he did things for them (Mark 5:35-43).<sup>8</sup> When his disciples wanted to keep them away, Jesus became indignant, took some children into his arms, blessed them, and declared that the kingdom of heaven belonged to them. Children heard him hold them up as models for adults: 'Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it' (Mark 10:13-16). To illustrate the new attitude to God that he required, Jesus singled out children; he did not say, 'Unless you become like priests and prophets, you will never enter the kingdom of God'. He expected all to show a trusting, childlike attitude to their heavenly Father. For Jesus, the seeming incapacity of children turned out to be their greatest asset. The fact that they had nothing to give or show in order to enter the kingdom of heaven made them receptive to all that God offered them. They could accept and appreciate the unique gift that they had not worked to deserve.

A US-Italian film that was first shown in December 1999, *Jesus*, ended with a striking tribute to Jesus as the beautiful friend of children.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> On the wisdom theme in the preaching of Jesus, see Aidan O'Boyle, *Towards a Contemporary Wisdom Christology* (Rome: Gregorian UP, 2003), 121-149.

<sup>7</sup> Very appropriately, this passage from the opening verses of Hebrews provides the second reading for the Roman Catholic liturgy's daytime Mass on Christmas Day.

<sup>8</sup> In John's Gospel a boy does something for Jesus, by providing the five barley loaves and two fish (John 6:9) from which Jesus miraculously produces enough for five thousand hungry people.

<sup>9</sup> One should add that Jesus also showed himself a realistic friend of children; he knew that they could be petulant and hard to satisfy (Luke 7:32).

The film took its viewers through his life, death and resurrection, and then leapt forward two thousand years to the waterfront of Valletta (Malta). His long hair now cropped, Jesus stood there in jeans as a crowd of small children ran up to him. The film ended with his taking a tiny child in his arms and walking off with the others crowded around him. The beautiful Jesus exited with the beautiful children.

Before leaving the beauty of Jesus manifested in his ministry, we should recall two further items: his transfiguration and his self-presentation as the bridegroom. According to the Synoptic Gospels, Peter, James and John went up a high mountain with Jesus and saw him 'transfigured', as divine glory gleamed through him; his face shone like the sun, and two heavenly figures (the prophet Elijah and the law-giver Moses) talked with him (Mark 9:2-8; Matthew 17:1-8; Luke 9:28-36). The disciples reacted not only with astonished awe but also with a desire to prolong the vision of the radiantly beautiful Lord that they were experiencing. In the new 'mysteries of light' added to the joyful, sorrowful and glorious mysteries of the rosary, the transfiguration is the 'mystery of light' *par excellence*. As he was naming the moments when the divine beauty of Christ shone through, Augustine could well have added, 'beautiful in his transfiguration'.<sup>10</sup>

The Synoptic Gospels likewise report words of Jesus which imply that, in the joyful time of salvation, he had come as 'the bridegroom' for his followers (Mark 2:19-20; Matthew 9:15; Luke 5:34-35). The parable of the wise and foolish bridesmaids, which presents the coming of the kingdom in terms of the coming of the bridegroom and the need to be prepared (Matthew 25:1-13), left its audience with the question: Who was this mysterious bridegroom if not Christ himself? This language evokes many Old Testament passages, such as the psalm which prompted Augustine's reflections on the beauty of Christ. An ode for a royal wedding, Psalm 45 highlights the glory, majesty and beauty of the king: 'You are the most handsome of men; grace is

<sup>10</sup> Some commentators on John point out that, while it includes no specific story of the transfiguration, the theme pervades the whole Gospel. It begins with the confession: 'the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory' (John 1:14). Then the miracles are understood to be 'signs' that reveal his divine 'glory' (John 2:11). Right through the Gospel, the radiant glory of Christ shines through; it is not limited to a particular episode on a mountain that involves only three disciples. See Dorothy Lee, 'Transfiguration and the Gospel of John', in *In Many and Diverse Ways: In Honour of Jacques Dupuis*, edited by Daniel Kendall and Gerald O'Collins (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 158-169.



poured upon your lips .... Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one, in your glory and majesty.' (Psalm 45:2-3)

Christians were to apply this spousal language to the union between Christ and the Church, for instance in the Letter to the Ephesians (5:25-33). The Bible ends with the Book of Revelation and its promise of marriage between the gloriously beautiful Christ and his Church (Revelation 21-22). The awesome splendour of the exalted Christ is evoked in the vision with which this book begins (1:9-20). The theme of Christ as the supremely beautiful bridegroom, for whom we are all waiting, was to have a long future, not least in the way that mystics would draw on the Song of Songs to express their ecstatic union with their divine Spouse.

### *Beautiful in his Passion*

Augustine can seem bold and even audacious when he writes of Christ being 'beautiful under the scourge' and 'beautiful on the cross'. Has Augustine forgotten Second Isaiah, and those words about God's servant being cruelly disfigured through which the Christian tradition and liturgy have seen the suffering and death of Christ (Isaiah 52:13-53:12)? It is precisely in his most eloquent passage about the crucifixion (1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5) that Paul calls the crucified Christ 'the power of God and the wisdom of God' (1 Corinthians 1:24). But Paul appreciates that we face here a mysterious, hidden wisdom. The divine wisdom and beauty revealed in Christ's passion are in no way self-evident; we meet here a unique challenge to faith. This is the beauty to be found in the weak and suffering men and women with whom Christ identifies himself (Matthew 25:31-46). His passion continues in them, until the end of history. In the words of Pascal, 'Jesus will be in agony until the end of the world'.<sup>11</sup> One might adapt here Paul's teaching about power being made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 13:4), and say that the power of his beauty is manifested perfectly in the weakness and ugliness of his crucifixion.

Countless Christians and others have seen the *Pietà* by Michelangelo in St Peter's Basilica, or at least a photograph or replica

<sup>11</sup> *Pensées*, 736 (sometimes numbered 552 or 919).



*Pietà (St Peter's Basilica), by Michelangelo*

of it. Created when the artist was in his early twenties, this dramatically intense work represents the Virgin Mary holding the body of her Son across her lap and grieving over his death. Yet the physical beauty of two bodies takes away something of the grief and suffering from an emotionally charged scene. Later in his life Michelangelo carved other versions of the *Pietà*. One is now kept in the museum of the cathedral in Florence; Michelangelo himself mutilated and abandoned it, only for the work to be restored and completed by a mediocre artist. Another is the *Rondanini Pietà* (in the Castello Sforzesco, Milan), on which he was still working a few days before his death when he was almost ninety.

The first work places Nicodemus above and Mary Magdalene on the left, both helping the Virgin Mary to support the body which has been taken down from the cross. Her face is close to the face of her dead Son, and she is interlaced with him in a painful union that merges their two bodies physically and spiritually.

This physical and spiritual union emerges even more powerfully from the unfinished splendour of the *Rondanini Pietà*, which folds the body of the Virgin into that of the dead Christ. This work expresses the spiritual, inner, even divine beauty of suffering, rather than the external beauty of a young athlete dying in the prime of his life.

Few, if any, among Western painters have equalled Rembrandt in his ability to portray the beauty of Christ in his passion and death. This Dutch artist's images of Christ standing before Pilate, on the way to Calvary, or nailed to the cross itself let a mysterious, haunting beauty gleam through the pain and weakness of the suffering Christ. The power of Christ's beauty is manifested in the horror of his crucifixion, where he is weak, abandoned and powerless.



*The Rondanini Pietà*

### *Beautiful in His Resurrection*

Augustine calls Christ beautiful 'in laying down his life' and 'in taking it up again'. These words obviously echo what Jesus says in the Gospel of John: 'I lay down my life in order to take it up again' (John 10:17). Here Augustine may have had in mind Christ's self-description in the very same passage of the Fourth Gospel: 'I am the good [beautiful] shepherd' (John 10:14). Although it is normally translated 'good', the Greek adjective *kalos* also means beautiful. It is applied in the Book of Wisdom to Lady Wisdom; she is both beautiful and good. Christ is likewise beautiful and good in laying down his life and taking it up

again. In his death and resurrection he is revealed as the beautiful shepherd, who 'knows his own', calls them by name, and is known by them (John 10:14, 3-4). We find this mutual knowledge dramatically exemplified a few chapters later in John's Gospel, when the risen Christ calls Mary Magdalene by name; she recognises his voice and clings with love to her Master, now gloriously risen from the dead (John 20:16-17).

Angels are present in the Easter stories of all four Gospels and provide an image of heavenly beauty that accompanies and mirrors the new risen life of Christ. The angelic beauty that reflects the beauty of the risen Christ reaches its climax in Matthew's 'angel of the Lord': 'His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow' (Matthew 28:3). In his majestic beauty, this angel functions as a kind of double for the risen Jesus, who is not described in any of the Easter narratives of the Gospels. It is left to another book of the New Testament to evoke directly the awesome beauty of the resurrected and exalted Lord, whose 'face was like the sun shining with full force' (Revelation 1:16). No wonder then that, when the Book of Revelation portrays the heavenly Jerusalem, it reports a vision of the future in terms of the glorious splendour of God and his Son: 'The city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb' (Revelation 21:23).

St Paul writes of the glory of God on the face of the risen Christ, and connects our chance of knowing this radiant glory with the primeval act by which God first created light:

It is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6)

What the death and resurrection bring to all believers—the knowledge of the divine glory—sets them apart from Moses. When Moses prayed to see the divine glory, God warned him:

'You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live.' And the Lord continued, 'See, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock; and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen'. (Exodus 33:20-23)

This passage contains bold anthropomorphisms—the Lord’s *hand* and *back*. The writer wants to stress that, even for the favoured Moses, God remains hidden, even when most vividly present. Paul, however, appreciates how faith and baptism bring a unique illumination, a knowledge of God’s glory revealed in the radiant face of his risen Son. As the Revealer *par excellence*, Christ communicates God’s beauty and loving goodness. If God is love and beauty, Jesus is that love and beauty in person.

### **Redeeming Beauty**

Augustine’s list of times closes with the risen and exalted Christ being ‘beautiful in heaven’. But his whole commentary on Psalm 45 is also concerned with the impact of that glorious beauty on those in need of redemption. Dostoevsky declared in *The Idiot*, ‘It is beauty that will save the world’; and we might add, ‘It is beauty that is already saving the world’. We are led through beauty to truth and goodness.

Experience shows how the presence and power of beauty persistently provide a remedy for the meaninglessness that plagues so many lives. Falling in love with some beautiful person liberates us from chaotic wanderings, and brings order and direction to our lives. Beauty’s revelation illuminates and transforms. Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* not only shows how beauty and goodness change the hard heart of old Scrooge; it also touches those who read the work, or see versions of it on the screen or on the stage. A truly beautiful story, it can deliver us from a self-absorbed existence and give a fresh shape and meaning to our own stories.

Down through the centuries saints, writers and artists have witnessed to the redeeming impact of Christ’s beauty in their lives. So the medieval hymn *Jesu dulcis memoria* (‘The sweet thought of Jesus’):

O Jesu! Thou the beauty art	<i>Jesu decus angelicum</i>
Of angel worlds above;	<i>in aure dulce canticum</i>
Thy name is music to the heart,	<i>in ore mel mirificum</i>
Enchanting it with love.	<i>in corde nectar caelicum</i>

**Beauty  
illuminates and  
transforms**

The anonymous author of this hymn knew the enthralling beauty and sweetness of Jesus and his name. And so too did St Ignatius Loyola. The Two Standards meditation of his *Spiritual Exercises* invites retreatant to let the beauty of Christ have its proper impact: ‘The first Point is to

consider how Christ our Lord puts Himself in a great field of that region of Jerusalem, in a humble, beautiful and attractive place' (Exx 144).

Ignatius gave his heart to the beautiful Christ, as did one of Ignatius' Jesuit followers, Gerard Manley Hopkins, three centuries later. His masterpiece, 'The Windhover', catches the beauty of a falcon in flight, and takes us to the crucified and risen Jesus, who is 'a billion times told lovelier'. In a famous sermon on Christ, Hopkins said: 'There met in Jesus Christ all that can make man lovely and loveable'. No wonder then that he went on to admit: 'I look forward with eager desire to seeing the matchless beauty of Christ's body in the heavenly light'. Yet 'far higher than beauty of the body', Hopkins added, 'comes the beauty of his character'. He ended his sermon by urging the congregation to praise the beautiful Christ over and over again in their hearts.<sup>12</sup>

At a special consistory in 2001, Cardinal Godfried Danneels, Archbishop of Malines-Brussels, suggested to his brother cardinals that the way into the culture of our time was through an appeal to beauty. By that door we can bring contemporary people to a sense of the truth and goodness of God. If we approach these latter two attributes of God directly, our audience may well remain sceptical or unmoved. Like Pilate, they can say: 'What is truth?'; and, while attracted by the ideal of goodness, they can feel put off by their sense of sinful inadequacy. It is beauty, the Cardinal suggested, that can provide them with a way into Christianity.

To that I would add: the door to Christ could well be his beauty. Beauty does not depend on us. Beauty always comes to us as a gift. The beautiful Christ invites us to open ourselves up, become flooded with delight, stay in his lovely presence, and let the impact of his unique beauty shape our whole existence, now and forever.

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<sup>12</sup> *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, edited by Christopher Devlin (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1959), 34-38.