The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian. 
Author: Sherman Alexie, Art by Ellen Forney. (Little, Brown & Company, New York, Boston 2007)

This is a diary of fourteen year old Arnold Spirit Jnr, growing up in a Spokane Indian reservation where he experiences rich relationships and extensive challenges. At a critical point Junior leaves the reservation school to attend the all-white school in the farm town nearby. His “jumping ship” has effects in both communities and in Junior himself. In leaving his home, Junior comes to value the love and sense of community that exist there in spite of disorganization and poverty. As a coming of age story, this diary is written with a certain tongue in cheek quality, with a sense that though the wounds inflicted by experience can be deep and leave their mark, nevertheless healing is always possible, and perhaps inevitable. The quality of the writing allows one to ache for Junior because of his physical disabilities, the bullying that he experiences, the romantic relationships that he imagines, the alienation from his great friend Rowdy caused by his moving away, the losses that he endures in the passing of his grandmother and sister, and the triumphs that he experiences on the basketball court. The diary introduces us to Junior’s parents and to some of the teachers who impacted him and encouraged him to dream. Accompanying the written text there are cartoons, because Junior can draw! They witness to the imagination of Junior, his capacity to poke fun, his ability to point to the depth and complexity of situations with a few simple lines.

Resonances in Religious Writers  The writing in The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian is warm…not cold or objective. It is written from the perspective of the heart. It is written as fictional autobiography. In terms of Catholic writers there are parallel perspectives found in the actual autobiographical writings of St Augustin of Hippo in North Africa from the fourth century, in St Ignatius of Loyola’s autobiography in the Europe of the 1500s, and in the modern era in the autobiographical writings of Henri Nouwen, Thomas Merton and Jean Vanier. Merton’s `Seven Story Mountain’’ autobiography was a bestseller in the 1950s and 1960s. In each of these writers there is a great sense of urgency, a willingness to risk, an unwillingness to settle for mediocrity, and a great capacity to be vulnerable and humble. All this whilst holding on to the conviction there is something unique, profound and good within the depths of one’s own personality and way of being in the world. The explicit dimension of an active and personal relationship with God is central in the Catholic writings, and not so defined in the consciousness of Junior, nevertheless the tone of their relentless searching for their true humanity and the truth of life strikes a similar chord.
Living in Two Worlds  Junior finds himself being a part of two cultures…the aboriginal culture of the reservation and the white culture of the town school. The reservation culture is characterised by poverty, chaos and low expectations. The town school is built on the assumption that attendance there puts one on the track to go someplace in life, and that material wealth is both possible and important. As the novel unfolds Junior uncovers the goodness and the weaknesses of both cultures. More significantly he experiences the tension of living in both cultures as he tries to develop and discover his own identity. He feels traitor-like guilt in choosing the white school over the reservation school, and yet he eventually experiences both inner and outer validation that this was for him the right move.

In terms of similar narratives in a religious vein, an iconic figure is Moses who grew up in two worlds…on the one hand the world of the court of the Pharaoh and on the other hand the world of his Jewish parents who were slaves in the Egypt of the day. Even though Moses enjoyed a privileged life being raised in a context of wealth and power, nevertheless he found within himself a strong passion for social justice, and eventually a call to leadership to lead his people to freedom. The skills and education he received in the court undoubtedly prepared him for the job of persuading the people to risk an unknown future rather than stay stuck in a context of oppression and lack of human dignity.

Choosing a Path…Obedience to a Call

When Jesus was on the point of adolescence he deliberately made the point of choosing his own path when he stayed behind in the Temple whilst his parents had begun their journey back to Nazareth after the Passover celebrations in Jerusalem. The Gospel of Luke tells us that Jesus was out there away from his parents for four days! When they eventually caught up with him engaged in conversation with the religion teachers in the Temple, Mary and Joseph were predictably both relieved and upset. But Jesus had the sense that this was for him the right place to be, that God wanted him there, that the truth of his life was at least for those few days to stay away from the village life of Nazareth and to be part of the commotion of an urban religious centre which of its nature was a cross roads of both conflict and rich encounter. Jesus of course returned to Nazareth for many years after that, and we don’t know if he had mixed feelings about this. We know that eventually he did head back to the city where he believed he was doing the work of God.

In The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian, Junior receives a call from one of his teachers, Mr. P. to leave the reservation. This happens during an extraordinary emotional encounter between Junior and the teacher after Junior had lost his temper in class, and had a flung a book that hit Mr. P in the face. Junior had discovered his mother’s name on his assigned math text and so the situation of his poverty hit him like a bolt from the blue and he threw the book! The upshot of the encounter is that Mr. P forgives Junior, and then almost demands of him that he leave the reservation in order to pursue a better life. Mr. P sees just how smart Junior is, and at the same time he is able to own up to his own former prejudice and limitations, and he is able to name the context of hopelessness on the reservation that he perhaps contributed to. He
doesn’t want Junior to become another victim of hopelessness. All this is played out in a kind of confession scene which is depicted in a cartoon drawing with Junior wearing a Roman collar hearing the teacher’s Confession!

**Beatitudes Echoes**

This text is filled with the issues that are highlighted in the Gospel of Matthew in the Sermon on the Mount. The situations are laced with both real poverty and poverty of spirit. The culture of the reservation is drenched in the sadness and depression of alcoholism. It is the cause of death and destruction amongst old and young. Junior’s sister who inspires him, and whom he in turn inspires, is a victim. Yet in the midst of brokenness and suffering, Junior’s parents at a foundational level are there for him, faithful to him, loving him. There are powerful mourning sequences in the novel when losses mount and become extreme and yet the gospel promise of comfort is somehow released in the telling of the tale. There are on-going situations of conflict between friends or potential friends and fights. Somehow through the mess of experience, there is growth in freedom and some of the people do indeed rise beyond their prejudices, their differences and their woes. “I hoped and prayed that they would someday forgive me for leaving them. I hoped and prayed that I would someday forgive myself for leaving them.” (p230)

“Happy are you when people abuse you….” (Matthew 5:13a) is not in itself a reality that one would welcome. In his young life, Junior is bullied. He experiences a lot of verbal and physical abuse because of his physical appearance and because of his speech impediment. When he goes to the town school he experiences racial prejudice. This is suffering. But he does not submit to it. He fights it both through his inner determination to be undeterred, and in the wisdom that he seeks in the elders…..especially his grandmother.

**Resurrection Echoes**

There is a moment in *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* when Junior and his best friend Rowdy climb a tall pine tree. It is a scary climb. They push each other to make the climb. They make it to the top. There they enjoy the vista of the beauty of the reservation stretching out below them. And in that moment they also appreciate each other in a new way. And then in the final sequence of the diary, after all the tragedies and hard knocks and the wounds that their friendship has experienced they play for hours on end a one on one pickup game of basketball together. They enjoy the game. They enjoy each other’s company. In the resurrection narratives in John’s Gospel we find Jesus enjoying the company of his friends. He cooks up a breakfast for them in the early morning on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. After all the trauma that had gone before, it seemed like the most natural thing to do.
The Chrysalids

The Chrysalids tells the story of a community in Labrador called Waknuk who are living in the aftermath of a devastating event that has caused people to live a manner of life similar to 18th century rural life. There’s a problem with genetic mutation which the community leaders are very stern about controlling. They are anxious to prevent any kind of contamination in plant, animal, or human. They proclaim a faith horizon which understands that the downfall of their original culture was brought about by God. And they look to the Bible and another text called Nicholson’s Repentances for wisdom in order to live a life of purity. Because of the fear of mutations and their possible consequences those who show any sign of physical difference are banished from the community and are forced to live in exile in the so called Fringes or even the Badlands across the Labrador frontier. Any crops or animals showing signs of genetic mutation are destroyed.

David Storm, a ten year old boy, is a member of the community. He gradually awakens to consciousness of his world…its rules and regulations, and oddities, through external events and experiences inside his own mind. He has an encounter with a young girl Sophie who is extremely anxious that he not notice her sixth toe, and he becomes aware in himself that he is able to communicate with his cousin Rosalind without being physically present to her. He also starts to notice the contradiction between these experiences and the very stern rules put up on posters in his house and proclaimed in church on Sundays that there is a normal way of being from which there cannot be deviation. Any different way of being is not from the mind of God, and is in fact a blasphemy, and cannot be tolerated. His grandfather and father are strong leaders and fierce defenders of this faith, seeing it as their role to protect the community from differences that could destroy it.

Through a series of episodes and inevitable crises we meet an array of characters across the range of political correctness. Inevitably those who disagree are in mortal conflict with the mainline ideology of the society and they must try to escape to freedom and perhaps a better life.

Waknuk Theology

The form of religious life promoted in Waknuk is strict and stern. Stereotypically it might be characterized as Jansenistic (a strict trend in 16th century Roman Catholicism, or Puritanical (a strict trend in 17th century Protestantism.) The call to integrity is grounded on the one hand in a fear of hell, and on the other hand in a need to prove by one’s deeds and by one’s prosperity that one is indeed one of the Chosen Ones. In the case of Waknuk, religion is used as a means of maintaining the physical integrity of the community by guarding against deviations that might put the community in jeopardy. God is used as a force for control and order. Whilst Christian theology understands that God is both great and good, the approach to religion in Waknuk strongly emphasises God as a power, God as watchful, God as one to be feared, God as strong. The understanding that God is good, that God is love, that God is compassion, that God is gentle
and tender, that God is forgiving, that God has a special place in the heart for those who are weak, vulnerable, marginalized, different…this understanding of God is absent. This is where the theology of Waknuk misses the mark as compared with most Christian theologies.

The Interpretation of Holy Books

The people of Waknuk follow two religious texts: The Bible and Nicholson’s Repentances. The latter is a fictional work, but of course for the former that is not the case. In October 1965 the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church promulgated a Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, and it is clear from that document that the Catholic Church in fact takes the Bible very seriously as the Word of God. The document also asserts that the “authentic” interpretation of the Word of God in the Tradition of the Church is also mightily important. The Council Fathers of that era in the mid twentieth century wanted the Catholic community to have much more access to the Bible than they had had in previous centuries; they wanted them to understand that Jesus was as really present in the proclamation of the Word at the Eucharist as he was in the transformed bread and wine. They encouraged Catholics to educate themselves about the Bible, and to learn to use the Bible as a way of praying to God and come to discern the movement of God’s Spirit in their own lives through such prayer and reflection.

The Vatican II document on Divine Revelation was an important moment to draw attention to issues concerning the literal interpretation of the Bible. These issues had naturally come to the fore in the 18th century when Protestant theologians began critiquing the plausibility of contradictions found in the Biblical text, for example two versions of the story of creation. Issues of literal interpretation also came to the fore in the 19th century when the theory of evolution attributed to Charles Darwin gained traction. In the ensuing decades there was much debate among Catholic thinkers about these matters. Subsequently Pope Pius XII produced a landmark encyclical in the 1940s…Divine Afflante Spiritu…stating that there were many different kinds of writing in the Bible, and that it was crucial to understand the intent of the individual authors of each text to interpret each of them properly. There is poetry in the Bible, there is history in the Bible, there is myth in the Bible, and various other kinds of writing. The human authors of the Bible were writing from the assumptions and world views of their society; they had never seen pictures from space showing a brilliant blue planet. But they did have a faith based insight that everything that is came from the hand of God, and we are made in the image of the same God. However, in interpreting what one means by the “image of God” Christian religious thinkers have for the most part seen the phrase as a way of affirming the value and dignity of every human being, imbuing both their unique gifts and their limitations with something of a divine quality. Unfortunately for those people of Waknuk who were judged to be “different”, the interpretation of sacred texts was prejudiced, narrow and fearful.
The Role of Religion in Society

There is always a debate going forward in society regarding the proper role for religion in a culture. In the society in which Jesus lived for instance the religious authorities and the political authorities were one and the same body in so far as it was a Jewish culture. But because it was a society occupied by the Roman Empire there were two authorities...such that Jesus could say: “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.” (Matthew 22:21) As Christianity developed it frequently became closely entwined with the political authority. Only a few hundred years ago in Europe the rule was made that whatever religion the political head of a territory belonged to, then the people would belong to that religion! Freedom of religion as we understand it was an idea that took many years of reflection to evolve. In our era there is a conscious effort to separate the State from the Church but because the Church is part of a local culture, a complete separation is not possible. Pope Benedict XVI critiques the fact that religion is being pushed into the private sphere, whereas he thinks that religion has a role to play in the public sphere as a legitimate participant in the public dialogue through which society evolves.

Petra the mystic

One of the characters in The Chrysalids who takes on greater importance as the story develops is Petra…David’s little sister. She has amazing mental powers. Her mind is able to pick up signals from as far away as Sealand (New Zealand). It is to there that the people with telepathic powers finally make their escape. Petra is very gifted and supersensitive and knows what is going forward well before it takes place. Many cultures have their own way of honoring those with special gifts and powers. Our religious tradition for example recognizes holy people as “saints”. Religious traditions also typically include people who have the gift of mysticism…those who appear to have a special communication with God, who are vividly in touch with the movements and promptings of the Holy Spirit. The Catholic religious writer Ruth Burrows refers to those who experience “light on” mysticism…meaning that their sense of the presence of the goodness and mystery of God is so real that it is almost perceptible. The effect of God’s touch within the heart of the person is so real that the person’s heart lights up with great feelings of love for God, and for everyone else too. It is helpful to the whole community to know that such people are around.

A Discussion about Norms

In view of the debate happening around bullying and the need to deal with it effectively the Ontario Catholic Trustees Association authored a document in 2012 named “Respecting Difference” with a view to ensuring that all members of Catholic school communities work together in an atmosphere of safety and respect for the dignity of everybody. They named thirteen categories in which one needed to underline the importance of this acceptance and respect….race, colour, ancestry, place of origin, citizenship, ethnic origin, disability, creed (includes religion), sex, sexual orientation, age, family state and marital status. Even though our
Church declares the fundamental equality of all people, and even though the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights asserts this equality, there nevertheless remain huge challenges in the world in this regard. If one looks back over several hundred years one can affirm that there has been much progress made globally and in many countries, but there is a long way to go. The Chrysalids, written back in the 1950s, opens a gateway to enter into a rich conversation about what it is that makes us human, and how we need to accommodate to each other’s values and differences, and how unjust discrimination in all sectors of society needs to be pushed against. Several of the values that operate in Waknuk are contrary to key principles of Catholic Social Teaching which underline human dignity and the imperative to look out for the poor and marginalized in one’s culture. Waknuk condemns difference. Waknuk does the opposite of respecting difference. Waknuk does allow some exceptionalities but only when they serve the interests of Waknuk such as allowing horses that are strong and large but clearly deviant to be part of the work force.

Wyndham was writing from a post-World War II perspective where awareness of both the Jewish Holocaust and the nuclear bombing of Japan was in the forefront of global consciousness. We can ask ourselves about the forms of extremism that exist in our times, the fears and insecurities that can lead to extremism, the prejudices that insiders continue to hold towards outsiders and strangers. We can be perhaps helped in our reflection by drawing out the meaning of St Paul’s assertion that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28) Back in his day people were shocked by the inclusive manner of Jesus in both speech and action. He included in his followers people from quite different and opposed backgrounds. He included women in a way that was very unusual for his day. He reached out to those suffering from leprosy in a way that was very shocking. He welcomed the poor, the soldiers, the tax collectors, and foreigners. With regard to all these groups we can look to great prophets and leaders of the last few hundred years who have pushed the envelope towards equality and justice for all. The Waknuk narrative provides us an entry point to such a line of reflection, and the possibility of confronting some of our phobias.
The Merchant of Venice
Author: William Shakespeare

The Merchant of Venice tells the story of a wealthy Venetian businessman, Antonio, whose fortune failed because in order to help a close friend, Bassanio, pursue a love match, he entered into an unwise business arrangement with Shylock, a money lender. Shylock took him to court when news came that Antonio’s ships had gone down at sea and it appeared he was unable to pay his debts. There is however a happy ending for Antonio when Shylock loses the court case thanks to the quick witted arguments of a disguised clever female lawyer, Portia, who happens to be the person that Bassanio is in love with. In the course of the narrative Bassanio’s friend Gratiano meets Portia’s friend Nerrissa and they fall in love, and a second friend of Bassanio, Lorenzo, falls in love with Shylock’s daughter, Jessica. All ends happily for the three couples, and for Antonio who finds out that in fact the ships did not go down, but not for Shylock who is forced by the court to convert from Judaism to Christianity.

The Post Holocaust Context

There are those who say that the Merchant of Venice is a comedy because it has a happy ending, and there are those who see it as a tragedy because of the sad ending for Shylock, the Jewish moneylender. Even though the play was written in the Elizabethan era the context in which it is viewed in the present time is the focus for much discussion. After all this play is currently performed in the post-Holocaust era when the world is still grappling to come to terms with the killing of six million Jews in the second world war. It is performed in an era when there is heightened awareness of discrimination based on religion, ethnicity, and race. It is played in an era when the State of Israel is not recognized diplomatically by several of its neighbours, and when the question of Palestinian statehood is unresolved. The stereotypical portrayal of Shylock in the Merchant of Venice is not flattering; he is shown up as mean, hard hearted, arrogant and insensitive. Some might suggest that Shakespeare’s Shylock reinforces attitudes of anti-Semitism because it highlights those prejudices that were a common part of European societal culture down through the centuries. The breeding of these attitudes contributed to deep social alienation, and eventually a genocide.

Judaism and Catholicism: renewal of a relationship

There is still active controversy over the Roman Catholic Church’s leadership in its manner of dealing with the Holocaust. Many Catholic leaders actively helped Jewish people to escape capture during the war years. These included Pope Pius XII, and Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, the future Pope John XXIII. However Pope Pius XII has been frequently critiqued for not speaking out publicly and more aggressively on this issue, and there is a vigorous debate among his biographers on this issue.
When he came into papal office in 1958 Pope John XXIII made a point of reaching out to the Jewish community, and what was especially notable was how he changed the prayers in the Catholic Good Friday service to language that was not insulting to Jews, and more pastoral in tone. In 1964 Pope Paul VI became the first pope to visit the Holy Land and he was warmly received there. He visited the holy places, but did not visit Israel’s national Holocaust museum and memorial. He did meet the President of Israel, but not Israel’s Chief Rabbi. Pope John Paul II (himself a Pole) was the first pope to visit the concentration camp in Auschwitz, and the first Pope in the modern era to visit a synagogue. In the Jubilee Year 2000 Pope John Paul II made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land to many of the sites that were significant for Jews and Christians, (including those that Pope Paul VI had avoided) and he pointedly apologized for the wrongs that Jews had suffered at the hands of Christians down the centuries. “I assure the Jewish people the Catholic Church…is deeply saddened by the hatred, acts of persecution and displays of anti-Semitism directed against the Jews by Christians at any time and in any place.” “No words are strong enough to deplore the terrible tragedy of the Holocaust”.

What was especially important for Catholic/Jewish relations in the era since the Holocaust was the 1965 Vatican II Council Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions where it is stated that “neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his (Jesus’) passion.” (Flannery: Documents of Vatican II, 741) “The Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against people or any harassment of them on the basis of their race, color, condition in life or religion.” (Flannery, 742) Nine years later the Vatican sought to give practical expression to the sentiments expressed at the Second Vatican Council Declaration in a 1974 document entitled Guidelines on Religious Relations with the Jews where it sought genuine dialogue with the Jewish community, recognition of all those elements held in common in the public prayer of each community, and excellent education for Catholics vis-à-vis Jews so that they would speak from a position of enlightenment rather than one of ignorance.

For centuries Jews and Christians lived at a psychological distance from each other, and when they spoke about each other it was in a confrontational tone. But it was not a non-relationship of equals since Jews were very much a minority in the population of the countries they inhabited. Frequently Jews were persecuted in societies that were led by Christians, and were forced to live separate lives. The Church in its teaching about Jews was disparaging.

In latter decades there has been a great effort made by Christians and Jews to bridge the psychological gap somewhat. Many efforts at dialogue on many levels are on-going in an effort to promote mutual respect and to emphasise what it is that Jews and Christians hold in common. The original covenant with Abraham belongs to both communities, as does the covenant with Moses, all the writings and wisdom of the Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament which include the creation accounts, the prophets, the psalms and the wisdom literature.
All of this is of course part of a journey of historic proportions. The Vatican and State of Israel entered into full formal diplomatic relations in 1993…something that would have been unthinkable a hundred years earlier.

**The Quality of Mercy**

One of the renowned speeches of The Merchant of Venice takes place in the court scene when Portia and Shylock argue over the legitimacy of Shylock’s claim to a pound of Antonio’s flesh. After Antonio admits to the original agreement, Portia endeavours to persuade Shylock to be merciful. From those who are aware of a religious horizon, the notion of mercy has tremendous resonance. For those who have made mistakes in life, caused harm, blundered in certain circumstances, embarrassed friend and family by their actions, mercy is a needed companion. Shakespeare has Portia speak of mercy in a stunningly beautiful, ordered, yet simple manner. The psalms speak of God being “slow to anger, and rich in mercy”, and in an eighteen line piece of poetic magic Shakespeare unpacks that sentiment…pointing to the gentleness of mercy, the freedom through which it comes, the good that it does for both giver and receiver, the breadth of its influence and power, its place inside the hearts of kings, and in the heart of God. The speaking conjures up iconic gospel images of the merciful Jesus…..writing words in sand when several men wanted to stone to death a woman who was caught in the act of adultery, offering forgiveness to the ‘good thief’ as they both faced death whilst hanging on a cross, and begging forgiveness for those who mocked him. The power of the writing reaches back into the history of the ages and the deliberations of every judge in any era or culture. The depth in the writing touches the experience of each of us as human beings who have known what it is to be powerful, and also what it is to be vulnerable.
Several poems by the 19th century Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins SJ (1844-1889) are included in the collection Themes on the Journey, Reflections in Poetry, edited by James Barry (Nelson Canada 1989). They include God’s Grandeur, a sonnet written in 1877, when Hopkins was thirty three years old. Hopkins is a renowned wordsmith because of the manner in which he created revolutionary rhythms in his writings. This note focuses on the religious meaning of this poem, and not much on its form and structure, even though those do contribute powerfully in conveying the meaning of the poem.

God’s Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil crushed. Why do men then now not wreck his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wear’s man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil

Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last light off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs –

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! Bright wings.
**Faith-Insight**

A religious faith dimension is explicit in “God’s Grandeur” in its first line and in its final lines. Hopkins affirms the reality of God’s extraordinary presence and love within everything, and over everything. In the early lines it is an assertive, energetic, active presence. In the final lines we find a compassionate, wakeful, less obtrusive yet overarching presence.

Hopkins portrays the world through the eyes of faith, allowing his imagination to capture a glimpse of invisible grace at work in the world. To move into this horizon involves a leap of trust in the Christian faith tradition and wisdom that has been passed down through the centuries. This faith-insight affirms that there is more to the world than only appearances. Though with the right disposition and an alert imagination, appearances themselves can help us. Appearances can clue us in to something else that is going on, an extraordinary mystery that pulls us in. Whilst the physicist grapples to reveal the presence of subatomic particles to explain the nature of things, this poet brings something of the deep nature of things into high relief through Hopkins’ inner sense that God is near. On the one hand is painted an image of a God who is out front there, striding, bursting onto the scene, giving all, flaming out, evoking something of the glory and majesty of the white knight, and on the other hand there is the image of a mother presence….extensive, warm, contemplative, and enabling and inviting goodness to emerge at its own pace.

**A Commitment to Finding God in all things**

Hopkins was a member of the Society of Jesus, also known as the Jesuits. This is a Catholic religious order of priests and brothers, about twenty thousand in number, started by St Ignatius of Loyola in Europe in the 16th century. One of hallmarks of the spirituality of St Ignatius is to endeavour to find God in all things, and to act in all things for the greater glory of God...ad maiorem dei gloriam. Hopkins had joined the Jesuits about ten years before he wrote this poem, and he was therefore living in a faith community that embraced the notion that there is an inexpressible love and energy breaking out in the world and breaking in to our hearts.

**A God Who Is Not Missed?**

According to Hopkins’ faith-insight God’s energy suffuses the world, and God’s awesome beauty and majesty is in the texture of everything. In the world of Hopkins, God is not missing and would certainly be missed, different from the culture in which we live where it is often the case that there is no whisper of a God thought or the possibility of one. Perhaps there is some contemporary cultural acknowledgment of the possibility of a faith dimension in the way that our world addresses the beauty of the world of water and tree and animal…but this happens not so easily, or not at all, in the world of parking lots and malls and noise and neon lights.
The Problem With Progress

Hopkins is writing in the context of the early days of the industrial revolution in England and he observes the change that is happening in the landscape as mining developed and railway lines laced through the countryside, and forests were cleared, and technology began to upend our relationship to nature. He observes us as humans distancing ourselves from the earth as we claim power over the planet and harness its energies to our needs and desires. He notices that humans are not paying attention to the grandeur without or within because if they were they would not be wreaking havoc on the surroundings. Hopkins’ focus here is not on the oppression that humans cause to each other, but rather on the effect of human action upon the planet. He manages at the same to convey the sweat and tears that have gone into making this change, the difficulty and drudgery of it. The costs to the planet are named, the costs to humanity and to the poor are implied.

A Way Out of Trouble

And yet even though there is this terrible mess unfolding before his eyes Hopkins’ is able to recognise a narrative of redemption. “There lives the deepest freshness deep down things.” Somehow there is a power within the universe able to transform the worst of the worst, utterly respectful, utterly at home here, patient beyond belief, unrecognized, waiting. We know from experience that when forests burn to the ground, they soon come to live again, not just as wounded scars, but abundantly and fresh. There are tales of extraordinary resilience witnessed to in all sectors of life. And yet we know from our current situation that wonderful species on our planet are being irretrievably lost. From a human perspective it is difficult to square that circle. But Hopkins writes from a God perspective. His poem calls up echoes of the baptism of Jesus where the voice of God proclaims God’s love for his Son, and the Holy Spirit hovers as a dove. Even though the world bears the deep scars caused by the work of human intervention and exploitation, there is a purifying presence in the core of things, and it remakes things and it offers a promise of relief, brightness, joy, and hope. We can only harness that power by the grace of God.

Note that there are excellent commentaries available online on the works of Gerald Manley Hopkins. See www.shmoop.com as an example.
“Visitors” by Sarah Ellis

This is a story of two girlfriends, Katie, the author, and Ellen, on a weekend summer hike up a mountain to a cross-country ski hut. They play lots of word games together on the walk and then they arrive, set up for the night, and enjoy the beautiful surroundings. As they are relaxing after supper suddenly into the clearing two visitors appear, Sith and Bab, male and female. They are strange but not scary, and the four engage in a conversation involving riddles. As the evening develops Sith plays the mouth organ, and the other three dance, and enjoy for a moment the freedom and exhilaration of motion. But then in dancing Katie sprains her ankle. She has to stop whilst the others continue the dance, and she notices how skinny Ellen has become and recalls her friend’s struggles with an eating disorder. She suddenly has an insight into an unsolved riddle and shouts it out so loudly that it causes the music to stop, and suddenly the visitors are no longer there. Next morning, when Ellen checks out the campsite where the strangers said they were camping, there is no evidence of campers. Back on their own site the pair noticed that where they danced was a hair’s breath from a cliff’s edge.

Old Testament Visitors

One of the most famous visitor stories in the Bible is found in the Book of Genesis, chapter 18, where three men visit Abraham who is sitting by the entrance to his tent during the hottest part of the day near an oak tree at Mamre. Abraham welcomes the visitors, and provides them water. He goes into the tent and finds his wife Sarah and asks her to prepare fresh bread. He runs to his cattle and takes a fine and tender calf and has a servant prepare it for cooking. Then with cream and milk and the calf he spreads out the meal for visitors, and Abraham stands to the side whilst the visitors eat. They ask to speak with his wife Sarah, and assure her that within the year she will bear a son, even though she was well advanced in age. Sarah laughs at the prospect. When the visitors notice that she is laughing at them, Sarah denies it. Abraham accompanies the visitors and shows them the way to Sodom.

New Testament Visitors

One of the most famous visitor stories in the New Testament is found in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 2, when the wise men come to Jerusalem from the east searching for the infant king of the Jews. They had seen his star rising. It halts over the place where the child is, and it fills them with delight! They enter the house and see the child and his mother Mary, and they
open their treasures and offer gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Warned in a dream to avoid King Herod on their way home, they head back to their country by a different route.

Visitor stories often contain gaps regarding the identity of the visitors…who they are precisely, where they come from, why they are here. Often there is an edge of insecurity and a sense of mystery and surprise. There is a call to trust. There is a call to sound judgment. But when the visitors are good they invariably come bearing gifts….sometimes material things that foreshadow the arch of a life or the fullness of identity, sometimes just words that include a call to trust and to deeper faith, and sometimes as instanced here a gift of music and presence that both heals and protects.

“Moonface” by Richardo Keens-Douglas

Moonface is an almost fourteen year old farm boy who contracts a disease that is spreading across the world at a rapid pace. People start avoiding him, and even hurting his family such that the tires of the family car are slashed and an arsonist destroys the toolshed. Then one night Moonface receives a visit from a boy around his own age and they become friends. When they go into town the two of them are laughed at and Moonface thinks he is going to lose his friend, but the friend reveals that he already knows that Moonface is ill. Subsequently the stranger admits that he is from outer space and he invites Moonface to join him there where he will be fully accepted for who he is and will be cured. But as he is climbing into the spaceship Moonface changes his mind and decides to stay with his family, trusting that people will eventually grow to be less afraid, and trusting that a cure for his disease can be discovered. At the moment of parting the stranger admits that his name is also Moonface.

The Gospels and Discrimination

The Gospels indicate to us that in the time of Jesus there was extreme discrimination against people who were ill. This was especially true of those who had contracted leprosy, but it was also true for those who suffered with other ailments. It was assumed that if you were sick you were a sinner. The Gospel of Mark in chapter 10 tells of a blind man at Jericho who when he heard that Jesus was passing nearby shouted out, ‘Son of David, Jesus, have pity on me’, and then it goes on to say that many of the people around scolded him and told him to be quiet. The Gospel of John in chapter 9 reports the cure of a blind man that includes the disciples of Jesus asking the question, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, for him to have been born blind?” Jesus answers that neither the blind man nor his parents sinned.
Responding to Prejudice

Even though we might immediately think that the attitudes found in the New Testament regarding sickness are totally foreign to our cultural era a moment’s reflection reminds us otherwise. The outbreak of AIDS in the 1980s brought with it an avalanche of discriminatory and prejudicial attitudes. Also, for each community group representing a particular difficulty or disability, the journey to accessibility and a better quality of life has been without exception somewhat of a struggle, and never quite plain sailing. In the modern culture, the deaf, the blind, and the lame etc., are always in need of strong advocates to keep society awake to their needs and their legitimate hopes going forward. The Conferences for Catholic Bishops across the world have been vigorous in denouncing prejudice and in promoting the rights of the sick and disabled, and in articulating the importance of the dignity of the person. The pastoral commitment of the Roman Catholic community to the sick, the disabled and the needy is active and assertive in every part of the world where the Catholic faith community is rooted. It is an imperative flowing from the example and teaching of Jesus passed down the ages, and rising from within all human hearts inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Another Ascension

Moonface discovered a new sense of confidence as a result of the affirmation he received from the space visitor. He was no longer alone, and his hopes were lifted even as the space ship lifted off. The New Testament story of the Ascension of Jesus into heaven has a similar feel because our faith tells us that Jesus shares in everything that we are and yet he belongs in another dimension. The Acts of the Apostles tells us that the Holy Spirit has been sent to be with us even though Jesus has departed so that we don’t rely only on the memory of his being around, but experience active strengthening to face our challenges and to live after the manner of the saints by the grace of God.

“Doing Something” by R. P MacIntyre

This story tells about a meeting between fourteen year old Kenny and a girl named Cynthia at a restaurant where there is a commercial shoot audition being organized. Kenny’s sister Karen and her friends are trying out at the audition. Karen’s and Kenny’s parents are playing golf and Kenny’s Dad has forbidden his son to take out the motor boat. Kenny is at a loose end, but then he decides to enter the restaurant and promptly falls on his face because of a knee injury. He is brought over to the booth where his sister is sitting with Cynthia…a total knockout in Kenny’s mind. Karen heads out to the audition. Kenny wants to impress Cynthia and he invites her for a boat ride! Then Cynthia reveals that she is blind! Kenny feels put on the spot, but goes ahead with the boat ride proposal. When they are on the water, Cynthia asks to go water skiing! They talk about this, and Kenny agrees, but in the middle of the ride he realizes he has to make a quick turn to avoid the movie shoot on the beach. There’s no difficulty because Cynthia is an expert
skier. In the meantime Karen’s misses out on a role in the movie shoot because of the water skier who stole the show. When the movie crew show up to get permission to use the shots they have taken, Kenny’s father learns the truth of what happened. Kenny is grounded for a month. But he does meet Cynthia again a few weeks later for a happy ending.

The story is full of humour as it describe Kenny’s feelings, fears and hopes, his awkwardness, his dilemmas, and his triumphs. The author has a way with words, and a gift in evoking not just smiles, but laughter out loud!

**Gospel Humour**

Mark 7:37 remarks that the crowds of people listening to Jesus heard him with delight. Jesus was rebutting an argument of some of the religious leaders at the time. Much of the time religion is spoken of in serious terms because we are dealing with sacred matters of ultimate concern. Certainly the Gospel narrative is a serious story given the tragedies of John the Baptist’s and Jesus’ deaths which bracket them. Yet we can imagine the laughter that Jesus elicited as he taught from the boat on the edge of the lake, or on the hill, or in the precincts of the Temple. The Judaeo-Christian religion teaches that humans are made in the image and likeness of God. Since smiling and laughter is such an intrinsic part of human community and nature, then it is surely present in the heart of the God who created us all.

**When the Passive become Active**

Several times in the Gospels we find Jesus dealing with blind people. In the Gospel of John, chapter 9, there is a long story of his encounter with a man born blind and his parents on the one hand, and the reluctant and unbelieving authorities on the other. It is interesting to note how the blind man in this story stands up for himself and for Jesus in defending the cure that happened to him. Society perhaps would like the disabled person to be passive and non-assertive, but in the gospel miracle stories this is seldom the case. The people who need help actively engage. They make their presence felt. In *Doing Something*, Cynthia who is living with a disability, sets the agenda, and provokes in Kenny the living of a fuller life.

**“The Jade Peony” by Wayson Choy**

This is a story told by Sek Lung about the passing of his grandmother at age 83 when he was an eight year old boy. In her final months of illness and decline they spend many hours together making wind chimes. She recalls highlights of her young life on her father’s farm in Southern Canton where she fell in love with a travelling actor who taught her how to juggle, and gave her as a lasting gift a jade peony set in a wind chime. Her family is upset with her because she goes searching through neighbourhood garbage in Vancouver to retrieve items to make wind chimes. This may have been appropriate behaviour in China, but not in Canada, so with Sek Lung she goes searching surreptitiously. As she makes her grandson a legacy piece she declares that Death
is in the room, and is especially aware of this when a long lean white cat jumps into the garbage. She has the sense that the actor whom she loved has come back. A few days later she dies, and Sek Lung finds in his pocket the small, round firmness of a jade peony.

**Anticipating Departure**

A mood of mourning is a pervasive presence in this story as the old person and young person anticipate their impending separation. They soften the inevitable finality of it in both creating memories and in re-living memories, in creating beauty and in acknowledging mystery. They speak openly about what is around the corner.

**Farewell Speech**

A similar mood of mourning is a pervasive presence in the farewell discourse of Jesus in the Gospel of John from the end of chapter 13 to the end of chapter 17. This section of the Gospel is often read in the daily scripture readings in the weeks after Easter. Jesus tries to reassure his friends as he anticipates a difficult separation. He underlines the importance of love, he points to the promise of room in heaven for everyone, he underscores the extraordinary bonds of love that exist within God as Trinity and our connection to that love, he points to the joy that will transform present suffering and the promise of the Holy Spirit to guide and strengthen us.

**The Sacrament of the Sick and the Last Rites**

In the Catholic Church there are special rituals that help us to cope with serious illness and the finality of death. The Sacrament of the Sick is grounded in the work of healing that Jesus did on so many people as reported in the Gospels. He would lay hands on people and sometimes with an accompanying word bring about wonderful cures. In the Sacrament of the Sick the priest takes on the role of Jesus and anoints the forehead and the hands of the sick person with oil, praying for healing of mind, and soul and body. The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) emphasised the importance of this sacrament as the possibility of an encounter between Jesus and any seriously ill person - not necessarily someone who is close to death. The ritual of the Last Rites that includes the Sacrament of Reconciliation, Holy Communion as food for the journey (called Viaticum), and the Sacrament of the Sick as well is the manner in which the Catholic religious tradition offers spiritual help and encouragement for someone who is close to death. The witness of many people through the years is that this ritual allows a robe of peace to envelope someone who perhaps in the midst of pain and fear is facing this great and inevitable transition. Whether part of the grandchild generation or the sandwich generation it is good to know that these gifts enable us to appreciate the goodness and flow of God’s grace are available.