

## Wednesday Reflection: Hedgehogs

Over the past few weeks, I have offered short Gospel reflections on animals that visit the manse garden: blackbirds, doves and field mice. Today, let us pause for a moment to ponder that prickliest of creatures, the hedgehog. Small, spiny mammals, hedgehogs evolved 15 million years ago, which means they are considerably older than human beings. In literature, one of the most famous hedgehogs is Beatrix Potter's Mrs Tiggy-Winkle, the industrious washerwoman. The character was inspired by Potter's own pet hedgehog. Likewise, Lewis Carroll included hedgehogs in his 1865 novel, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. In his poem, *Afterwards*, the novelist and poet Thomas Hardy wrote of the hedgehog in 'some nocturnal blackness, mothy and warm, furtively [travelling] over the lawn'. Under the cover of darkness, I watch the hedgehog sniff its way slowly across the garden, round the small apple tree and back under the fence into the woods.

The humble hedgehog was of interest to the ancients: Aristotle, Pliny and Plutarch. Ancient



Egyptians revered the hedgehog; this in part is because it was associated with death and rebirth. When food was scarce, hedgehogs retreated into their dark, underground dens for extended periods but re-emerged into the light when food was abundant. As a symbol of rebirth, amulets were worn in the shape of a hedgehog and perfumes were stored in ornate hedgehog fired-clay pots. Among the many artefacts found in the tombs of the ancient Egyptians are small sculptures of hedgehogs. In Slavic folklore, the

harsh exterior of the hedgehog is in contrast with the wisdom, kindness and courage within.

In the Christian tradition, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Franciscan friar, St Anthony of Padua, compared sinners to hedgehogs. While known for his immense love and devotion to the poor and sick, the saint used the symbol of the hedgehog to depict the obstinate sinner. Covered with the prickles of sin, Anthony said that you try to convince sinners of their sin then, like a hedgehog, they curl up, hide and excuse all fault. The head and mouth of the hedgehog are set low down, a symbol of the low thoughts and words of a sinner. According to legend, when Anthony died, children cried in the streets. I wonder if, as a child walking barefoot, he accidentally stood on a hedgehog?

Each year in our nativity plays, the stable is filled with animals of all sorts: sheep, oxen, donkeys, goats and, in some cases, llamas. I wonder if there are any paintings of the crucifixion in which a hedgehog is featured at the foot of the Cross; a symbol of death and rebirth? In his First Letter to the Corinthians, St Paul wrote of the resurrection of the dead. The apostle said that we are 'sown in weakness but raised in power'; sown 'a natural body but raised a spiritual body'. Elsewhere, Jesus said that in heaven people neither marry nor are given in marriage; we are angels of God. A 'spiritual body', 'angels of God': these are descriptions used in the ancient world. Today we may speak of the soul or consciousness. For me, God is the Soul or Consciousness of the universe, the imperceptible Presence, whose love holds us. Physical death is a doorway, an opening for rebirth, new life; as now, we will be embraced in the arms of our Eternal Lover.