

Praise, Prayer, Love
Reflecting on three of George Herbert's Poems
Tuesday 27 February 2024

SILENT REFLECTIONS

Who was George Herbert?

He was a Priest and Poet, born in 1593 to an aristocratic Pembroke family. Herbert went up to Cambridge in 1614, becoming a Fellow of Trinity College. At aged 25 he became a Public Orator in the University and then a Member of Parliament, apparently destined for a life at court. Instead, he decided to be ordained, and after spending time with his friend Nicholas Ferrar at Little Gidding, he was made deacon in 1626. Three years later he married and was priested in 1630 and was given the cure of souls of the parish of Bemerton, near Salisbury, where he spent the remainder of his short life, dying tragically young at the age of 39. He was a faithful priest, always having the pastoral care of his people as his first priority. He managed at the same time to write prolifically, his hymns still popular throughout the English speaking world. His famous work 'The Country Parson' on the priestly life, and his poetry, especially 'The Temple', gained Herbert a leading place in English literature. He encouraged his people to attend and pray the Daily Office of the church, calling to mind the words of his hymn, 'Seven whole days, not one in seven, I will praise thee'. He died on this day in 1633 and his commemorated in the liturgical calendar as a Lesser Festival. ***[cf Celebrating the Saints; 1998, p74]***

PRAISE II

King of Glorie, King of Peace,
 I will love thee:
And that love may never cease,
 I will move thee.

Thou hast granted my request,
 Thou hast heard me:
Thou didst note my working breast,
 Thou hast spar'd me.

Wherefore with my utmost art
 I will sing thee,
And the cream of all my heart
 I will bring thee.

Though my sinnes against me cried,
 Thou didst cleare me;
And alone, when they replied,
 Thou didst heare me.

Sev'n whole dayes, not one in seven,
I will praise thee.
In my heart, though not in heaven,
I can raise thee.

Thou grew'st soft and moist with tears,
Thou relentedst:
And when Justice call'd for fears,
Thou disentedst.

Small it is, in this poore sort
To enroll thee:
Ev'n eternitie is to short
To extoll thee.

Our first Herbert poem on Praise. This is the second of three poems entitled 'Praise' each tending to give voice to celebrate God's being and the love seen in creation. The words are immediately recognisable to us from the singing of the well-known hymn: 'King of glory, King of peace' (NEH 391).

One of Herbert's popular titles for God was 'King' as the Collect for his day both begins and reminds us:

*King of glory, King of peace,
Who called your servant George Herbert
From the pursuit of worldly honours to be a priest in the temple of his God and king:
Grant us also the grace to offer ourselves with singleness of heart in humble obedience to your service;*

Things to note in this poem:

- How God is addressed (as mentioned above);
- There is a commitment of Love 'I will love thee', and 'I will move thee', or appeal to God;
- Acknowledgement that God has 'granted his request' by his 'working breast' and in response and gratitude Herbert will offer 'the cream' of his heart; that is the very best he can give;
- He is aware his frailty and sinfulness – 'his sins have cried against him';
- He commits to 'praise' every day, 'seven whole days, not one in seven';
- He can raise God, but he cannot control God;
- 'Eternity is too short'

To ponder:

What helps you to 'praise God' from this poem?
What might motivate you to praise God each day?

'True praise enlarges God.....and makes him, not us, the centre of our hearts' (Oakley)

PRAYER I

Prayer the church's banquet, angel's age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth
Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tow'r,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
The land of spices; something understood.

How difficult it is to define what we mean by prayer. There are many ways to pray; many types of prayer. How might you define it?

Here we have a short poem which is jammed full of images and metaphors, which for some readers is a frustration. Yet for others gives a rich, fresh, expansive understanding of prayer and what it can mean to pray.

If we think of prayer as private then straightaway Herbert makes it communal by using the image of a party, 'the church's banquet', where we celebrate together and share nourishment? Can there be a better image to entice us to deeper prayer?

Some metaphors/images explained:

For Herbert prayer is about the growth of his soul. He draws attention to this in saying '**the soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage**'; '**the Christian plummet**', a plummet measures the depth of the water, and *sounding* means fathoming, seeking to explore unseen realities of '*heav'n and earth*'

Why '**Engine against th'Almighty**' - an instrument as an image of warfare here in the engine, suggesting that prayer has a combative side as God tries to save us from ourselves, whereas we use it to enforce our own prejudices.

'**heaven in ordinarie**' is prayer seen as the sacrament of the present moment, and by praying we become 'well-drest' which is the better version of ourselves.

To ponder:

In the pile of images Herbert uses is there one – or more – which strikes you, inspires you?

Take that image, or a phrase from the poem with you into your prayer this evening, perhaps walk the Labyrinth with that phrase or image, or light a candle at one of the votive stands in church then sit in stillness in the presence of God

LOVE III

LOVE bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
 If I lack'd anything.

'A guest,' I answer'd, 'worthy to be here:'
 Love said, 'You shall be he.'
'I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
 I cannot look on Thee.'
Love took my hand and smiling did reply,
 'Who made the eyes but I?'

Truth, Lord; but I have marr'd them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.'
'And know you not,' says Love, 'Who bore the blame?'
 'My dear, then I will serve.'
'You must sit down,' says Love, 'and taste my meat.'
 So I did sit and eat.

We conclude with Herbert's very well known poem 'Love bade me welcome' – the last of three poems on love. There is an eagerness of love in the first four words and an immediate contrast with 'my soul drew back' in the same way that 'quick-eyed love' is sprightly in comparison to 'grow slack'.

The bible passages below underline that it is Love that bade the poet welcome. Spend some time thinking about this by looking at: Matthew 22.1-14, Psalm 23.5, and Luke 12.37

Are there times when you have not felt welcomed by God's love? If so, bring those times to mind, remembering God's deep love for you, receiving it afresh?

Finally, I want to draw attention to Herbert's use of the word 'Love' instead of God or Christ. This helps us as people of faith, to recall that this is the only metaphor for God which should be pursued relentlessly. While, of course, I would not replace God's name, God's titles, or the name of Jesus, but, as Oakley has suggested, perhaps the word Love is an encouragement to those doubters for whom the word 'God' is loaded, have shadows attached to it because it has been used abusively. For the poet Edwin Muir, brought up in a very rigorous Presbyterianism, God was 'three angry letters in a little black book'. (see Oakley p143)

To ponder:

In what ways does 'Love bade me welcome' help you to know the depth of God's love for you?
How might Herbert's poem here help you to share the good news of God's love with others, especially the doubters?

I am indebted to Mark Oakley's writing in 'My Sour-Sweet Days' for some of these insights above.