

## **God and Some Fellows of Trinity: George Herbert.**

Evensong, 15<sup>th</sup> November 2009, Trinity College Chapel.

1<sup>st</sup> lesson: 1 Chronicles 29: 10-15

2<sup>nd</sup> reading: George Herbert 'Heaven' from *The Temple* (1633).

George Herbert, the subject through which we meditate upon the holy Word this evening, is now remembered better for his relationship to God than for his actions as a Trinity Fellow. You will then forgive me for prefacing what I have to say with a brief reminder of Herbert's Trinity career. Herbert was admitted to Trinity as an undergraduate in 1609, a month after his sixteenth birthday. An apt student, he received his B.A. in 1613, ranking 2<sup>nd</sup> of the 193 undergraduates in his year. Elected a minor Fellow in 1614, Herbert spent the next decade at Trinity, for the last four of which he was University Orator. He left Cambridge in 1624, aged thirty, and died nine years later. On his death he was incumbent of the parish of Fugglestone-with-Bemerton, in the diocese of Salisbury, a position he held for three years. In his lifetime he was remembered (by Francis Bacon) for his Latin verse, written mostly in response to controversy, as one in whom 'Divinitie, and Poesie met' and for his civic prose achievements, also in Latin, as an 'esteemed Master of the Roman eloquence'.

Both at Cambridge and later, Herbert wrote devotional poems in English. Few, if any, of his contemporaries will have read them; at any rate there is no evidence of their circulation. He might have sent a couple of sonnets to his mother, and we know of one other exchange of poems with a contemporary.

But in the year that he died, 1633, Herbert is said to have sent a 'little book' of poems to his devout friend Nicholas Ferrar. Ferrar named the collection *The Temple*, wrote a

short introduction for it, and had it published in Cambridge. By 1709 it had gone through thirteen editions. Although Herbert's posthumous reputation as a man of God was initially partisan, being the work of supporters of the pre-Civil War Church of England, his appeal transcended the terms of his publicity. Charles I read Herbert in imprisonment; Oliver Cromwell's chaplain, Peter Sterry, read him also. Today his work – formally very inventive, quick-witted, complex and graceful – is studied extensively in the academy. It is also still largely read devotionally both across the Christian denominations and in that nebulous category 'spiritual literature'.

Herbert was deft with words; but his preoccupation was with the 'word of Life', a favourite phrase of his: 'that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled' as it is put in the first of the pastoral letters of John [1 Jo. 1:1]. This is to say that his devotional focus was centred around the Scriptures, the person of Christ and the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Much of the academic work which considers his achievement hinges on the tricky relationship between his own deftness and the requirement to be one (as St Paul puts it) 'holding forth the word of life; that I may rejoice in the day of Christ, that I have not run in vain, nor laboured in vain' [Phil. 2:16].

And Herbert did find this tricky. Were his poems, once written, acts of vanity (in both senses) or works of devotion, and how appropriate was his skill with words for the latter task? For Herbert, as for a number of his contemporaries (not to say his predecessors) eloquence and faith were strained cousins disputing over a tangled inheritance. Language itself both expressed and fragmented the divine; the Word

which was Christ's body might or might not inhere materially in the Sacrament but (in a world where books and bodies were more intimately aligned than they are today) certainly would in the Scriptures. There anyone might have 'heard' or 'looked upon' them; there any hands, and some voices, might handle the speech of God.

Thus Herbert would find it unthinkable that any poem of his could displace the reading from the New Testament in an act of public worship. (He might even find it more alien than the implicit position of some kinds of academic study— that of imagining the Bible as a source book with which he, the poet and central focus, had a weird and annoying preoccupation.) So I have something of a duty to explain, even to justify, where I chose to place the poem of Herbert's which you heard a few minutes ago. Why privilege the bits, fragments and hints of God's word which Herbert embedded within his work, over the Word of life itself?

I don't know if I can – and put like that of course I can't. But the purpose of Herbert's poem 'Heaven' is to demonstrate the embeddedness of God's voice in the experience of living, and to point to Scripture as its primary mode of utterance. It's not something alien or other. It speaks to here and to now. You'd think a poem with a name like that would be about, you know, that place up there with the angels. It's not. It considers the hereafter, all right, and what's beyond mortal experience, and it tells you that news of it is right in front of your nose, held in your hands, sitting on the shelves in front of you in the stalls in a rather fetching blue and gold dustjacket.

Herbert plays with a common classical trope, as was the rather automatic habit of his generation - in this case the story, from Ovid, of the nymph Echo. This is a secular

frame-device, locating us in the world of mortal speech, of protean shifts and changes, and of metamorphoses. He has his 'Echo' speak a dialogue with another voice who inquires of her where joy may be found. Within the first couple of exchanges we hear the desire of the first voice, but also his doubt as to whether the responses he is receiving are or are not divine: - 'thou art mortall, all men know' he asks; and his echoing answer claims for the voice immortality. 'No'. Within another couple of lines the 'trees and leaves' of Echo's groves have been transformed to the leaves of a book. The associations of the word 'abide' – used, particularly in the Gospel of John, to signify the kind of dwelling which the fulfilled soul enjoys with God – tell us what kind of book it is for which Echo enjoins us to wait; and the 'blisse'/'yes' rhyme, with its further echo of the word 'bless' offers the scriptures as heaven's reverberation, calling back across from God to his creatures the fragmented end-sounds of his abundant life. Take those end-sounds, and you have the Divine promise the scriptures hold: '*Light. Joy. Leisure. Ever.*' They are not the whole of those things. They themselves are mortal bits, hints, broken crusts of the loaf. But they speak of something to which our souls yearn.

Think now of David, the first 'sweet singer of the Temple' (as Herbert, in the words of his first biographer Barnabas Oley, was termed the second [1652 *Remaines*]).

David's praise and thanksgiving, as rendered in the 1<sup>st</sup> book of Chronicles, acknowledges the embeddedness of God in all created stuff, acknowledges that the people's gifts only offer back fragments of the gifts first given by God's abundant being, acknowledges and laments the mortality which makes of these gifts an ephemeral blaze: 'for we are strangers before thee, and sojourners; our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding'. Or as Herbert might utter it:

‘Do not beguile my heart

Because thou art

My power and wisdom. Put me not to shame

Because I am/

Thy clay that weeps, thy dust that calls’. [‘Complaining’].

But bide. David’s words for his people will take on a new meaning, will offer up a new thank-offering, as they become words associated with the Eucharist; and the gifts themselves, offered by our God in his mortality, become a sign of what abides in immortality: ‘all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee’. If we have nothing of our own, then we have the glory of possessing the things of God enough to offer them back as gifts to him: gifts of words and things, gifts of skill and love; gifts of being and of becoming, of the songs of sorrow and the love which is as strong as death.

And so I might say that as you heard Herbert’s poem, you also heard the echo of another Davidian scriptural promise; the words of Psalm 16, the psalm appointed for the principal service for today, 15th November 2009:

‘Thou shalt show me the path of life; in thy presence is the fulness of joy; and at thy right hand there is pleasure for evermore.’ Amen.

The Reverend Dr Jessica Martin

## 1 Chronicles 29: 10-15

Wherefore David blessed the LORD before all the congregation: and David said, Blessed be thou, LORD God of Israel our father, for ever and ever. Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all. Both riches and honour come of thee, and thou reignest over all; and in thine hand is power and might; and in thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all. Now therefore, our God, we thank thee, and praise thy glorious name. But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? for all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee. For we are strangers before thee, and sojourners, as were all our fathers: our days on the earth are as a shadow, and there is none abiding.

From George Herbert, *The Temple* (1633).

### Heaven

O who will show me those delights on high?

***Echo: I.***

Thou Echo, thou art mortall, all men know.

***Echo: No.***

Wert thou not born among the trees and leaves?

***Echo: Leaves.***

And are there any leaves, that still abide?

***Echo: Bide.***

What leaves are they? impart the matter wholly.

***Echo: Holy.***

Are holy leaves the Echo then of blisse?

***Echo: Yes.***

Then tell me, what is that supreme delight?

***Echo: Light.***

Light to the minde: what shall the will enjoy?

***Echo: Joy.***

But are there cares and businesse with the pleasure?

***Echo: Leisure.***

Light, joy and leisure; but shall they persever?

***Echo: Ever.***