

'Quick-Eyed Love' – Journeying through Lent 2024 with George Herbert

Week 3 – 'The Soul's Blood': Prayer (I)

There are not many poems with which I can vividly remember my first encounter, but *Prayer (I)* is one of the few. In an English class during my last term at school, a teacher threw me this poem which I had never seen before and asked (or rather ordered!) me to read it out loud. As I read I searched for a verb to complete the sentence as it stretched and stretched away. It never came. The poem is simply image upon image, piled up in an astonishing way, with no connecting verb. It is a brilliantly inventive piece, with (depending how you count them) twenty-six images in its fourteen lines.

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.

Though this poem is not as well-known as *Love (III)*, for those who know it, it's often their favourite amongst Herbert's work. After reading it, it's best to pause for a while to take in the cascade of images and perhaps to reflect on which is the image offered that you most like? (I usually encourage people not to say 'something understood', and to look further! As a follow-up it can be good also to note down which images you least like or are most puzzled by.)

This is a poem whose subject – prayer – is clear. But what is it saying *about* prayer? The missing verb most obviously should be 'is' and there have been some very clunky attempts to supply it and turn the whole poem into a hymn. Perhaps this poem is trying to define prayer? What prayer might be was an important question in George Herbert's time. The Elizabethan *Book of Homilies*, a set of sermons prescribed for reading in parish churches and still frequently in use after Queen Elizabeth's death, contains three sermons on prayer. The second says, 'let us consider what prayer is. St Augustine [of Hippo] calleth it 'a lifting up of the mind to God, that is to say, an humble and lowly pouring of the heart to God.' It continues, 'true prayer doth consist, not so much in the outward sound and voice of words, as in the inward groaning and crying of the heart to God.' *Prayer (I)* seems to take Augustine's definition as it's starting point. So, unlike the two poems we've looked at so far, *Love (III)* and *The Collar*, it has a different dynamic. Those poems were both really about God taking the initiative with us, but this poem is about the human address to God.

The opening line may point to that. Several commentators point out that while the conventional meaning of 'banquet' is of a great feast, that may not be what Herbert meant here. In fact in his day

a feast was called just that – a feast. The word banquet, though increasingly coming to be synonymous with a full-scale feast, was also applied to something light that was served between meals or courses, usually sweetmeats or the like. We might think of its equivalent today as something that cleanses the palate – fruit or sorbet to follow the main courses, perhaps. So if the Church's prayer is a banquet, then it is the refreshing but slighter human interlude between courses in God's great feast. This makes sense in terms of the liturgical shape of the worship that Herbert thought of as 'God's Banquet': the Communion according to the Book of Common Prayer. There the prayer of the 'church militant here on earth', the intercessions, prayers and supplications of the people, is between the two 'feasts' of the Word and the Sacrament, in both of which it is God who takes the initiative and speaks to us and feeds us.

As with so many of George Herbert's poems, I have a feeling that he was perhaps content to leave the meaning ambiguous. The 'banquet' might be the interlude or it might be the main event, and it is qualified immediately by the further phrase 'Angels age' (there is no apostrophe in 'Angels' in the manuscripts or the earliest printed versions), which is a reminder that when the Church's prayer is offered it is never done alone but always in company with 'angels and archangels and all the company of heaven.' Either way, it does seem clear that the poem is about human initiative, although this initiative for Herbert is always in response to God who makes the first move. So where *Love (III)* and *The Collar* were about God speaking to us, this one is about us speaking to God. If the first two poems have an 'up to down'/descending dynamic, this one has a 'down to up'/ascending one.

This is not a poem about which words or forms to use in prayer, or how or when to pray. It is about 'a lifting up of the mind to God, that is to say, an humble and lowly pouring of the heart to God.' It doesn't define prayer as much as describe it, tracing the way human prayer ascends to heaven. The controlling idea, alluded to rather than stated, seems to be that of the 'four and twenty Elders' before the Lamb of God in the Book of Revelation, 'having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odours (*or, incense*) which are the prayers of the saints.' (Revelation 5.8.) As the smoke of incense travels upwards, so do the prayers of the people.

It is probably important to notice that this is the *Church's* prayer and therefore corporate rather than individual. In the long poem *The Church Porch* which opens the collection of *The Temple*, Herbert writes, 'pray with the most: for where most pray is heaven'¹, and first regular experiences of prayer, as for many of us, were corporate rather than individual. He grew up in the large and sometimes chaotic household of his mother, Magdalen Herbert, an extraordinary woman of beauty, intelligence and wit, more than the equal of many of the finest male minds of the time, including the poet and later Dean of St Paul's Cathedral, John Donne. After her death in 1627 Donne preached a memorial sermon for her in Chelsea's Old Church where she was buried. Within the sermon there is a wonderful passage where, alongside Donne's discussion of death and mortality, wreathed in biblical references, suddenly he speaks of her practice of corporate prayer and the real woman's voice leaps across the centuries to us:

as she came to this place, *God's house of Prayer*, duly, not only every *Sabbath*, when it is the house of other exercises, as well as of *Prayer*, but even in those *week-days*, when it was only a house of *Prayer*, as often as these doors were opened for a *holy Convocation*, And, as she ever hastened her *family*, and her *company* hither, with that cheerful provocation, *For God's sake let's go, For God's sake let's be there at the Confession*. So, herself, with her whole family...did every *Sabbath*, shut up the day, at night, with a general, with a cheerful *singing*

¹ *The Church Porch* 67 (line 402).

of Psalms, This Act of cheerfulness, was still the last Act of that family, united in itself, and with God.

Anyone who has tried to drag a gaggle of children to church will sympathise! Spurred on by Magdalen, George would have been at Church-prayers from a very young age, not only on Sundays but weekdays too, an experience only deepened in later boyhood as a boarder at Westminster School where the boys attended the daily offices in the Abbey. The Church was not only present in great buildings but also within the home too, as Donne made clear. George and his eldest brother Edward were both noted musicians as no doubt were their other siblings. So the household - children, servants and all - would pray together on Sunday evenings 'with a cheerful *singing of Psalms*' as Donne put it.

Family, Church and School prayers would have been the bedrock of George Herbert's spiritual experience, and perhaps what prompted him to the earliest of his poems that we have. Though not included by him in *The Temple*, his collection of mature poems, two 'New Year' poems come from Izaak Walton's *The Life of Mr George Herbert*, sent to his mother in early 1610 from Cambridge where he had recently become an undergraduate. They are rather bumptious teenage poems in sonnet form (as is *Prayer (I)*) and committed him to writing poetry on religious themes. They were also rather outspokenly condemning of poetry concerned with human as opposed to divine love. In the first Herbert asked God, 'Doth poetry/Wear Venus' livery?.../Will not a verse run smooth that bears thy name?'² In the previous year Shakespeare's Sonnets, a supreme cycle of one hundred and fifty love poems, had been published, the dedicatee being 'Mr WH', who is most likely to have been William Herbert, the Earl of Pembroke and senior member of the wider Herbert clan. Some scholars speculate that the young George Herbert's two sonnets might have been a reaction to this event.

Sonnets had hit the English royal court a hundred years before, and in Don Patterson's words, 'swept through its strangle little microculture like a designer drug.' The craze was abating by Herbert's time and he didn't write many sonnets (only twelve of the 165 poems in *The Temple* are in this form), generally seeming to have preferred freer forms (as *The Collar* shows). Sonnets are, nonetheless, a very useful form of poem to learn how to write, with strict rules imposing discipline on thought and word choices within the short compass of fourteen lines, and it's probably no accident that Herbert's two earliest preserved poems were sonnets. *Prayer (I)* is in the earliest of the two manuscripts of Herbert's poems that we have, and this dates it as having been written before 1626, making it the poem of a younger man. His poems appear to have been written as private prayers, and by a lay man rather than the priest he later became. It's written in the classic sonnet form, three four-line verses and a concluding couplet, as is clear from the way it was first printed (later editions often print it as a single block of fourteen lines but this doesn't help in the reading of it).

In the opening verse, two of the images reverse the natural order of things, as the breath God breathed into Adam is breathed out again back up to God, and 'The Christian plummet', a lead weight on a line, is cast up from earth to heaven. George Herbert's youngest brother Thomas was a sea-captain, and would have used such a plummet to sound out the depth of ocean beneath his ship, fathoming the distance. Here the plummet goes the other way, up from earth to heaven, spanning and measuring the distance between them. It evokes the image of the sailor looking up at the sky from the midst of the sea, a hopeful explorer perhaps.

Between these two images is 'The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage', the first of which is quite hard to disentangle. Perhaps it means that in prayer the soul is expanded and made clearer, as happens with the paraphrase of a piece of prose or poetry. Some commentators mention that

² 'New Year Sonnets' (I) lines 3, 11.

'paraphrase' is also a musical term for the development of a melody beyond its original form into a more complex one, so this might mean that the soul expands and grows through prayer. Perhaps also there is a sense that prayer explicates and reveals the soul too, opening it out in all its vulnerability. Perhaps, perhaps...maybe this is simply meant to be a phrase to muse and meditate on and the meaning is in the journey rather than any definition. Which thought might be well expressed in the next phrase of the 'heart in pilgrimage.'

The second verse of the sonnet changes the mood quickly. Herbert moves on from prayer in general to intercessory prayer, which bombards God like a siege-engine or cannon, hurling itself at the gate of a castle, a tower that sinners can climb to get into a fortress, or perhaps come closer to make heaven hear. In his poem *Artillery* Herbert uses the same image, both of human prayer but also of God's response too. He concludes that 'we are shooters both, and thou dost deign/To enter combat with us and contest/With thine own clay.'³ Prayer as this kind of 'combat' is something most people know something about, and formed an element of *The Collar*, as it does often of the Psalms. It is the urgent demand that God fulfil his promises and bring peace in places of conflict, for example, or heal a sick child who is in pain. John Donne in another sermon says this:

Earnest prayer hath the nature of importunity; we press, we importune God in prayer; yet that puts not God to a morosity, to a frowardness; God flings not away from that; God suffers that importunity, and more. Prayer hath the nature of impudency; we threaten God in prayer; as Gregory Nazianzen adventures to express it; he says, his sister, in the vehemence of her prayer, would threaten God...She came, says he, to a religious impudency with God, and to threaten him, that she would never depart from his altar, till she had her petition granted; and God suffers this impudency, and more. Prayer hath the nature of violence; in the public prayers of the congregation, we besiege God, says Tertullian; and we take God prisoner, and bring God to our conditions; and God is glad to be straitened by us in that siege.

These thoughts are clearly picking up on Jesus' parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18.1-8), and 'Reversed thunder', another 'upside-down' image, echoes them. This kind of prayer is like thunder which we hear from heaven being turned back and reversed until God hears us; and even, in a startling twist, prayer can be the spear that wounds Jesus on the cross in a direct allusion to John's Gospel (John 19.34).

It is this last image of the spear which makes me think that Herbert was not at ease with this kind of thundering prayer, which was prevalent in his own day especially amongst the more Puritan part of the Church. Powerful, ranting, violent and demanding prayer is hard to reconcile with the George Herbert portrayed in the descriptions we have of him. There is ambivalence, I think, in these lines of the sonnet, perhaps hinted at in 'sinners' tower' which inevitably also evokes thoughts of the Tower of Babel, which attempted to reach up to heaven and instead brought down judgement (Genesis 11.4). Yes, there is a place for demanding prayer, but the implication of the 'Christ-side-piercing spear' is that our prayers can be misguided and even injure or cause pain to God. Unlike most of his contemporaries, in a violent age, Herbert seems to have struggled, in a way that echoes some of our contemporary concerns, with the question of God's anger. In his poem *Discipline* he first appeals 'Throw away thy rod/Throw away thy wrath:/Oh my God,/Take the gentle path', and concludes, 'Thou art God:/throw away thy wrath.' In effect it is an appeal that says, 'God, you're better than this'. 'Love will do the deed' says Herbert, rather than anger, violence or wrath.⁴ We are also,

³ *Artillery* lines 25-27.

⁴ *Discipline* lines 1-4, 31-2, 18.

perhaps, reminded that he was a political campaigner for peace, and of his outspoken and heart-felt description of the horrors of war which we looked at last week.

And yet it is out of the wound caused by the 'Christ-side-piercing spear' that, the Evangelist John tells us, 'forthwith came out blood and water'. These liquids are signs of the two sacraments of baptism and communion which were recognised by Protestant churches; they also accompany childbirth, so perhaps a sign that even out of misguided and painful prayer God brings new things to birth.

Then the poem starts to move out into a wider focus. Prayer that is 'a lifting up of the mind to God' changes the pray-er's perspective. The ordinary, 'six-days' world is transposed by the 'hour' of prayer. 'Lifting up...the mind to God' inevitably makes us begin, however imperfectly, to see the world as God sees it. The 'hour' in question might be on a weekday or it may mean Sunday worship: either way, prayer 'transposes' the world into a new key, gives it a new meaning and helps us to gain new purpose.

'Transposing' is, of course, a musical term, and now we seem to be beyond the ordinary earth, steadily ascending, having left the cacophony of argumentative prayer behind. The sounds turn from the cannons and thunder of human worship to music: 'A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear'. This for Herbert would be the 'music of the spheres', the harmony of the planets, silent to humans, but whirring through space. Centuries later Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Nazi Germany would use the same idea to express beautifully his sense that the love of God is like *Cantus Firmus* or bassline at the heart of the tune of creation. All things can hear this tune – if only their hearing were acute enough – and fear it too, for it is majestic and awe-inspiring as the universe. The music of the spheres tells us that now we are approaching the heavenly realm where God dwells, portrayed in Revelation chapters 4 and 5.

Sonnets usually have a 'turn', a shift in tone or subject, between lines 8 and 9. In *Prayer (I)* the turn is seen by a move from concrete images to abstract ones: 'Softness and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss.' These are suddenly not really metaphors any more, but descriptions of how it feels when we somehow touch the hem of heaven in prayer. This line crystallises the sense that we might experience in a 'thin place', where it feels as if heaven and earth touch, described by T.S.Eliot as 'Where prayer has been valid.'⁵ This is a place of 'Exalted manna, gladness of the best', the food which came down from heaven in the wilderness for the children of Israel (Exodus 16) now exalted – returned to its heavenly origin - and where the 'best', perhaps the heavenly host and the elders of Revelation 5, serve God with 'gladness', as in Psalm 100, used as a canticle at Morning Prayer in the *Book of Common Prayer*: 'O be joyful in the Lord, all ye lands, serve the Lord with gladness, and come before his presence with a song.' The saints in the throne room of heaven, according to Revelation are 'clothed in white rayment' (Revelation 4.4), but this is heaven in its 'ordinary' clothes, even though the human beings there are 'well-dressed.' Beyond, the stars stretch out in the Milky Way, often seen as the pavement to heaven, and the bird of paradise was understood to have no legs, so it was always in flight and never needed to come to earth.

Finally, the closing couplet takes us back to the start of the poem, and a congregation at prayer on earth, so far from the throne room of heaven. Yet their prayers are heard. Church bells in the form we are familiar with them in England were largely an early Seventeenth-century development. Wheels added to bells so that they could be rung in 'changes' brought about a new form of bell-ringing, and the earliest company of bell-ringers formally established was at Lincoln Cathedral in

⁵ Little Gidding § 1.

1612, where George Herbert soon afterwards became a Prebendary, and where he may have been ordained deacon in 1624. Where I grew up in Kent, in the shadow of the North Downs, when all the village churches along the spring line at the base of the scarp-face of the hills ring their bells at the same time, the chalk Downs offer a giant sounding board, and it's not hard to imagine a faint echo of the joyful sound reaching heaven. Prayer is also 'the soul's blood', another contemporary resonance for George Herbert. William Harvey was court physician at the time when Herbert was in favour with James I, and in 1629 would publish the first explanation of the circulation of the blood and its vital function in the body. As blood is to the body, so prayer is to the soul. Last line of all, we hear of 'The land of spices.' Tales of travellers to India, the land of spices, with which trade had expanded greatly towards the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign, spoke of how the spices could be smelled as their ships approached the coast, often carried to them on the wind before the land itself would be seen. Here are the 'odours (*or, incense*) which are the prayers of the saints' (Revelation 5.8), both wafting from earth to heaven, but perhaps also from heaven to earth. Hinted at, perhaps, and not seen, but known, this sensory experience leads finally to 'something understood.' I've heard this described as the 'best ending of a poem ever', and it does have an extraordinary balance and sense of closure to it, as I remember from my very first reading out loud of the poem. It 'lands', we might say. Prayer is understood by God in our intercessions, sometimes before we can actually put it into words, or it can be a change of our own understanding as we pray. Or it may just be something ungraspable which cannot be put into words, no matter how many Herbert has just thrown at it – ungraspable as God himself is, of course. But we know what prayer is, and what the relationship behind it is, and we know too that it is real. In this sense prayer is a lot like poetry itself: very hard to define but you know when it's been going on. This poem is not a definition of prayer after all, but it is an extraordinarily effective description of it in all its indescribability.

Yet, for all that, and no matter how impressed, moved and drawn into prayer by the poem we may be, it also prompts some other more general questions.

I mentioned earlier on that it seems to be a younger man's prayer. The Twentieth-century poet and priest, R. S. Thomas reflected in his poem *Waiting* on how,

Young
I pronounced you. Older
I still do, but seldomer
now, leaning far out
over an immense depth, letting
your name go and waiting,
somewhere between faith and doubt,
for the echoes of its arrival.⁶

We know George Herbert also as a poet and priest, but he was not published in his lifetime and was not a priest till the last three years of his life. *Prayer (I)* is a rhapsodic description of prayer, but as we get older it is often R. S. Thomas's description that is closer to the truth. Herbert's poem helpfully offers no formula or single way of praying, but some later poems make it clear that he had his struggles too and that prayer did not necessarily come easily, as *The Collar* suggests.

George Herbert's early life was, some ill health aside, charmed and high-achieving, as we saw in the last session. But in 1624 there was a kind of crash and 1625-6 were lost years for him, which seem to have included extreme ill health when he came close to death. In 1627 his mother died, and the next year he relocated to Wiltshire. The air of the chalklands of Salisbury Plain seems to have agreed with his disease-ravaged lungs, and he also got married and acquired care of the three young orphaned

⁶ 'Waiting' (*Frequencies* 1978)

daughters of his dead sister. So a ready-made family suddenly appeared and in 1630 he became Rector of nearby Bemerton. In his prayers he settled into the rhythm of parish life, but the scars of the previous years remained.

Perhaps the fact that *Prayer (I)* offers many images that describe prayer or forms of prayer was helpful to him. It opens out the possibilities of many ways of praying. A later poem which is open about the struggles of prayer is *The Flower*, and it reflects a time of feeling distant from God as well as a mature recognition that desiring to 'smell the dew and rain' may be enough. Ambition seems to have burned away, and there is contentment and peace at last. Prayer 'in age' clearly includes 'versing'. It offers another perspective on prayer (I have omitted the middle verses).

The Flower

How fresh, oh Lord, how sweet and clean
Are thy returns! even as the flowers in spring;
 To which, besides their own demean,
The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.
 Grief melts away
 Like snow in May,
As if there were no such cold thing.

Who would have thought my shrivelled heart
Could have recovered greenness? It was gone
 Quite underground; as flowers depart
To see their mother-root, when they have blown,
 Where they together
 All the hard weather,
Dead to the world, keep house unknown.

[...]

And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write;
 I once more smell the dew and rain,
And relish versing. Oh, my only light,
 It cannot be
 That I am he
On whom thy tempests fell all night.

These are thy wonders, Lord of love,
To make us see we are but flowers that glide;
 Which when we once can find and prove,
Thou hast a garden for us where to bide;
 Who would be more,
 Swelling through store,
Forfeit their Paradise by their pride.

