

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

### Week 4 – 'The Famous Stone': The Elixir

George Herbert's poem *The Elixir* is most widely known as the hymn 'Teach me my God and King', though the hymn text does not include the second verse of the poem. John Wesley first converted it to a hymn in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and altered the words and the sense so that it read:

Teach me, my God and King,  
In all things Thee to see;  
And what I do in anything,  
To do it as for Thee!

To scorn the senses' sway,  
While still to Thee I tend;  
In all I do be Thou the way;  
In all be Thou the end.

All may of Thee partake;  
Nothing so small can be,  
But draws, when acted for Thy sake,  
Greatness and worth from Thee.

If done beneath Thy laws,  
E'en servile labors shine;  
Hallowed is toil, if this the cause;  
The meanest work divine.

This is the form in which it is usually sung in the USA, and to the tune 'Emmaus'. In England it only really entered the Anglican repertoire as a hymn when Ralph Vaughan Williams paired it with the tune 'Sandys', originally a carol from 1833, and published it in *The English Hymnal* in 1906. Since then it has become a favourite and remains regularly sung in many parish churches. John Wesley's sense that it is about the dignity of work is probably what most singers think is its meaning. Herbert's intention was probably a little different.

We don't know if George Herbert wrote *The Elixir* to be set to music. We know that he and his brother Edward were accomplished lute players, who grew up with music at home (as we saw last week). At Westminster school George would have participated in the regular worship of the Abbey with the other boys and he probably sang in the chapel choir at Trinity, Cambridge. But music in the immediate post-Reformation Church of England was contentious and suspected of diluting pure worship, putting it beyond the reach of ordinary people. The elaborate and flourishing musical culture of the late medieval church had largely been wiped out by the reforms of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The *Book of Common Prayer* made almost no provision for sung worship – the only concession was the point in Morning and Evening Prayer where 'In quires and places where they sing, here followeth the anthem.' In parish churches there might be a psalm translated into (usually rather indifferent) rhyming couplets at the beginning and ending of a service and sung unaccompanied to a simple tune. More sophisticated choral music only survived in the cathedrals and Oxbridge college chapels. Musical worship was more likely to have a domestic setting, as it did in Magdalen Herbert's household, where psalms were sung every Sunday evening. Once settled at Bemerton, Herbert regularly walked into Salisbury for Evensong at the Cathedral, and to participate in a music-making group. On the Sunday before he died, his biographer Isaak Walton tells us, he rallied and called for 'one of his instruments' (implying that he had several to hand) and spent the evening singing. One of his contemporaries, Charles Cotton, described him as a 'soul composed of harmonies.'

Yet no tunes or contemporary settings survive for any of Herbert's poems, though *The Elixir* would be a good candidate to be sung, with its regular metre and simple form compared to many of his more complex verses. It's worth pausing to consider how differently we receive a song from a poem. What happens to a poem when it is set to music, and does it help or hinder us in praying?

What of *The Elixir* itself as a poem? Perhaps the first thing to notice is that, where *Love III* was about an encounter with God, *The Collar* about an argument with God (both being what I described as 'mini-dramas;'), and *Prayer* was a description of a prayer ascending toward heaven, this poem is actually a prayer, a plea to God to 'teach me...' Its main theme is about seeing and doing, perception and action.

Before diving into the poem's text, the title catches the attention. As so often with Herbert's poems, its title frames it. *The Elixir* at once this directs us into the 17<sup>th</sup> century context, where there was an extensive search for the 'elixir of life.' This was really a hunt for the fundamental physical principle of existence – the 'Theory of Everything' of its time. This search was the talk of the Common Rooms of Cambridge, and of the intellectuals who crowded round the king at the royal court in Herbert's day. It was part of the art of alchemy – the transmutation or transformation of life. Changing base metals to gold, as alchemy is popularly perceived today, was only a small part of it. The search for the principle of life itself was a search for longer life and immortality – an aspiration which is part of our own culture, too, so it is perhaps well not to be too scornful, even if the search in the 17<sup>th</sup> century attracted more than its fair share of charlatans and mountebanks to engage in it (or at least claim that they did).

Though we tend to think of alchemy as magic and medieval, it was woven into early modern thinking, an important part of the early development of modern science (which had yet to be given that name). Alchemy particularly included practical experimentation, which was crucial to the progress of scientific knowledge, in a way that 'natural philosophy', concerned with theory rather than practice, often did not. Isaac Newton (born in 1642) spent two decades of his life in advanced alchemical studies alongside his better known explorations of physics, and alchemy would be an important influence on the development of medicine too (local 'chemists' today, still the popular term for pharmacists, derive their name from the 'alchemists' of the past).

Though alchemy was a search for the principle of life, creating gold held a special place within that search as the most precious substance on earth. Europe had been transformed in the late 15<sup>th</sup> and early 16<sup>th</sup> centuries by the 'discovery' of the 'New World' of the Americas by Spanish explorers and conquerors. What the Spanish really discovered there was gold. The supply of it enabled Spain to become suddenly a superpower, dominating Europe. One of the attractions of the New World was that there was gold to be mined. Explorers looked for deposits, but they also thought that the Americas might hold the secret to creating or growing gold: perhaps it might grow beneath the ground, organically. This was not so fantastic as we might imagine: after all, following underground veins of ore could easily look as if they were trees growing within instead of from the earth.

War with Spain after 1587 had given licence to English sailors to capture Spanish ships and take their gold. But peace in 1604 stopped this. The search was on for other sources of gold, and the English looked for their own supplies. One way of doing so was no longer to capture Spanish gold, but to establish colonies instead, which might contain within them the secrets of gold production. The Virginia Company was established in 1606 to develop land which had been abortively settled before. Herbert's family and that of his stepfather, John Danvers, were closely involved. An expedition set out to create the new settlement of Jamestown in 1607, led by the very experienced Christopher Newport (he had the same surname as Magdalen Herbert's family: as far as I can establish he was no

relation, but there may have been a connection). Once in Virginia, the colonists collected soil samples and carefully examined them in apparatus brought from England for the purpose. Eventually crystals were produced. The colonists were in no doubt that they had found the source they were looking for: plain earth which, treated by the right process, could become gold. They had achieved the alchemist's dream. Newport sailed back to England with two young crocodiles and a wild boar on board his ship to present to the king, and also a barrel of Virginia earth to be tested in London at Goldsmith's Hall. But once home the experiment did not yield the expected results: 'all turned to vapour' they said. There was no transformation here, after all. The crystals of gold turned out to be a mirage.

The settlement out in Virginia almost died as a result of the search for gold, as the men neglected crops while hunting for it. The native Americans could not understand the colonists' obsession with it. The problems of the colony with shortage of labour led to the beginning of the Atlantic slave trade in 1619. Out of the obsessive search for the elixir that would provide gold, the 'philosopher's stone' that would turn into the precious substance, came the destruction of indigenous culture and the development of the slave trade. It was a terrible unintended legacy.

This all lies in the background to *The Elixir*.

The poem is one that Herbert clearly felt was important. He worked on it a lot, and unusually we can see something of the revision process. The first version, in the manuscript of 1626, has been revised in Herbert's own handwriting, and the final version in the manuscript he passed to Nicholas Ferrar as he lay dying in 1633 has further changes. That final version is as follows:

***The Elixir***

Teach me, my God and King,  
In all things Thee to see,  
And what I do in anything  
To do it as for Thee.

Not rudely, as a beast,  
To run into an action;  
But still to make Thee prepossest,  
And give it his perfection.

A man that looks on glass,  
On it may stay his eye;  
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,  
And then the heav'n espy.

All may of Thee partake:  
Nothing can be so mean,  
Which with his tincture—"for Thy sake"—  
Will not grow bright and clean.

A servant with this clause  
Makes drudgery divine:  
Who sweeps a room as for Thy laws,  
Makes that and th' action fine.

This is the famous stone

That turneth all to gold;  
For that which God doth touch and own  
Cannot for less be told.

Herbert's opening prayer is 'In all things *thee* to see/And what I *do* in anything/To *do* it as for *Thee*.' He is seeking to find *God* in all things – in other words, not the magical principle of the elixir of life in all things, as commonly understood. If he can see God in this way, then his actions will be right ones, for God, not just his own interests.

That's contrasted, in the second verse which is not part of the hymn, with beasts who 'run into an action' –that is, simply obey their natural instincts without reference to God. Herbert may be picking up on Cranmer's language in the Morning Prayer collect about not falling into sin or 'running into danger'. The natural state of beast or human is *not* to see God in everything but simply to act instinctively (as in the Prayer Book's characterisation of human nature in the Marriage service, where he describes 'man' as subject to 'carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding').

Instead, Herbert prays '*still* to make thee prepossest' – still meaning 'always' but also of course meaning the opposite of running blindly, that is to say, to pause or be stilled. He doesn't run, he stills himself. Donne has a line: 'doubt wisely, in strange way/ To stand inquiring right is not to stray;/ To sleep or run wrong is.'<sup>1</sup> which perhaps also captures Herbert's sense of pausing here. '[T]o make thee prepossest' seems to mean giving to God the prior possession of all his actions, perhaps by handing any action over to God before he does it. As the poem goes on it becomes clear that the process of making God 'prepossest' of an action is to use the 'clause', "'For thy sake'". Most commentators on the poem think that 'his' in the next line means 'its' – that is, the action will gain *its* perfection (in other words become God's) by the prior handing over of it to God.

This second verse reads rather awkwardly, and it is perhaps not surprising that it has been cut out of the hymn version of the poem. Yet without it the poem is perhaps a bit saccharine; its absence makes the process of seeing God in all things sound pious and easy. Verse 2 is the authentic voice of Herbert's 'spiritual conflicts', and takes on board the struggle which Herbert himself seems to have known well, to refer things to God against our natural inclinations. It's actually this process of handing over which seems to be the 'Elixir' of the title and one sense of the 'famous stone' that transforms everything at the end of the poem.

The remainder of the poem is relatively straightforward. The 'man that looks on glass' sees only what's in front of him, the material surface of things. Looking through the glass gives the greater perspective of seeing things in a heavenly context. Though he doesn't make the connection with *The Elixir*, C.S.Lewis wrote an essay called 'Meditation in a Tool Shed'<sup>2</sup> which uses the same idea. He describes sitting in a dark shed and seeing a shaft of sunlight coming in, and how he has a choice whether to look simply at the beam of light itself or to look along it and see the world beyond. The distinction is fundamental to Western philosophy as it developed after Herbert.

There is a sort of turn at verse 4. The philosophy which Herbert has in mind is open to all, it is not the preserve of a special few adepts as alchemical knowledge was. The 'tincture' is another term for the essence which alchemists sought to isolate and distil as the substance that would transform matter into something else (it is another word for elixir), but as we saw above this essential tincture is the simple phrase 'for thy sake': it is no more complex than that. It follows then that a servant sweeping a room is as rich, if not richer, than all the alchemists in the world. God can be seen there,

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<sup>1</sup> *Satire* 3, lines 77-79.

<sup>2</sup> Originally published in *The Coventry Evening Telegraph* in July 1945, and in *God in the Dock* (1970).

in the simple and mundane, rather than in the grand world of grasping, getting and spending that Herbert had been so familiar with. Here perhaps we hear the voice of the mature Herbert, who found amongst the Wiltshire peasants of his parish a sense of reality and perhaps of the presence of God that was hard to find in grander circles (though this verse and verse 3 are the only ones unchanged in all three versions of the poem, so they long predate Herbert's ordination and pastoral role).

The final verse takes us back to alchemy, and the 'famous stone' – the prize the Virginia colonists had sought and failed to find. True gold consists in knowing we are loved and valued by God. This is real riches.

There is a little poem of Herbert's called *Avarice* which is rarely discussed, but it bears on *The Elixir* I think. It is unusual in having no obvious Christian theme to it. It is an angry poem, fierce in its denunciation of money, which is its real subject, and refers to the mining of gold. Herbert had his own struggles with money, and through most of his life was seeking financial security. *Avarice* suggests that the struggle to follow God's path in the face of some lucrative alternatives was one of Herbert's 'spiritual conflicts.'

*The Elixir* has biblical echoes within it, as we have come to expect of Herbert. Perhaps foremost is Colossians 3.17, 23-24 for the overall theme:

<sup>17</sup>And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him....<sup>23</sup>And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; <sup>24</sup>Knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ.

But possibly more marked is the allusion to the 'famous stone' at the end. '*This is the famous stone*' writes Herbert, and it's clear without him needing to spell it out that it is God in Christ that he has in mind. A few moments of reflection remind us that God is often described as the 'rock' or stone (see, Deuteronomy 32.4; Psalm 18.31; 118.22, and several references in the first part of Isaiah: 17.10; 26.4, for example). In the New Testament of course, Jesus is 'the stone that the builders rejected' that has become the cornerstone (Mark 12.10; 1 Peter 2.4-12).

Rock or stone lies underneath everything in physical terms. This poem seems to play on that idea when we reflect on it. It is about seeing God in all things, recognising his presence at the heart of everything. In *Love (III)* Herbert makes the daring decision to dispense with the word God and simply write of Love instead. Once again, Augustine is perhaps in the background here, especially his famous saying about 'Love God and do what you like', which comes from a sermon on 1 John:

Once for all, then, a short precept is given you: Love, and do what you will: whether you hold your peace, through love hold your peace; whether you cry out, through love cry out; whether you correct, through love correct; whether you spare, through love do you spare: let the root of love be within, of this root can nothing spring but what is good.

Of course, the catch in 'Love God and do what you like' is that if you truly love God it will change what you like so radically that it's no longer just your first instinct, as Herbert explores in the first to verses of *The Elixir*.

One more reference may also lie beneath this poem. St Paul's great Christological poem earlier in Colossians speaks of Jesus as 'the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature', and goes on 'he is before all things, and by him all things consist (Colossians 1.15, 17). There are various translations of the 'by him all things consist' – 'in him all things hold together' is one recent one, and one commentator suggests 'the universe owes its coherence to him'. The Greek root of the almost

untranslatable word which the AV renders 'consist' is *histemi*, from which we derive our word 'system'. Paul is speaking of Jesus as the fundamental principle of the universe, who holds all things together in being, at the heart of the complex system of the cosmos. Alchemists searched for the fundamental principle of life, the elixir, the tincture, the philosopher's stone, but for Herbert the fundamental principle had already been revealed in Jesus. Paul's language is different, but his thought is the same as the prologue to John's Gospel, with its identification of the 'Word', the *logos* that also is the origin of life.

*The Elixir* draws these links together and encourages us to see God in all things, at the heart of all things, with love as the fundamental principle of the universe. And, having seen it, to act upon it.

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