

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

Week 2 – 'No More': *The Collar*

The Collar is a poem of disappointment, which resonates with the questions we sometimes ask about Christian faith and life: 'Why am I doing this?', 'What is the point?', 'Why do I bother?'

These aren't new questions, and they seem to have been part of the experience of George Herbert. *The Collar* gives eloquent voice to them.

The context of this poem is quite important, I think, so in this session there will be some history and biography. Much is contested about Herbert's life. There's little evidence for much of it, so there are ways of putting his life together that are different from mine. A biographical approach that seeks to allocate specific times and places to the poems is difficult because we simply don't know much about when these poems were written. We have only two manuscripts, one from 1626 and the other shortly after his death in 1633. So usually all we can say is if a particular poem is before or after 1626. *The Collar* is from after 1626 – and as you'll see, I think 1626 was part of a 'lost' period of indecision and lack of direction for Herbert that may have prompted the poem, but we can't be any more precise than that and this judgement may be wrong. Wordsworth famously defined poetry as 'emotion recollected in tranquillity', and so any poem tends to be a reflection on an incident or mood that can take place many years after it actually happened. In *The Collar* I see reflection on a rocky period of life, and whenever the poem was written, there is a span of years in Herbert's life which probably gave rise to feelings like those which are expressed in this poem.

George Herbert lived from 1593 to 1633. He was born on the very borders of Wales and England when Shakespeare was about 30 years old, and just getting into his stride as a playwright. Herbert was 10 when Elizabeth I died. He lived into the early years of Charles I's reign, and the first signs of trouble that would lead less than 10 years later to the English Civil War. Though we know him as a poet and priest, in fact he was only a priest for the last couple of years of his life, and published no poems in English while he was alive (he did publish some Latin verse). Herbert had many ups and downs in his life and struggled with the direction of that life. This is reflected, I think, in *The Collar*.

The title, *The Collar*, is a good place to start. At this time very few poets consistently gave their poems titles, but all of Herbert's collected poems have them. They are usually significant pointers to elements in the poems themselves. So what does *The Collar* mean? There are at least three possibilities, and none are exclusive. Probably all three apply.

First, a collar like the one a dog wears – a restraint to compel obedience, and Queen Elizabeth boasted that she put collars on her nobles. (Some commentators assume that this may be about resisting a call to ordination, and the 'collar' refers to a clerical one. But these did not come into use until the 19th century, so cannot be part of the meaning of this title.)

Second, as spelling had not been standardised, it could equally refer to 'choler' or anger. According to his elder brother Edward, though George Herbert made such an impression with his 'holy and exemplary' life at Bemerton that he was regarded as a 'little less than Sainted' in the area around Salisbury, he also 'was not exempt from passion and Choler, being infirmities to which all our Race [i.e. the Welsh] is subject'. In other words, he was perhaps prone to the odd tantrum.

Third, the word spoken with what today we think of as an American accent or intonation, which may have been closer to 17th century spoken English than today's received pronunciation, might sound like 'The Caller', referring to the 'one calling' at the end of poem.

So the title sets up a puzzle. Which meaning of these three is the primary one?

This is an angry poem, and Herbert's poems are not all serene – in fact he said they were the result of his 'spiritual conflicts.' They are like the Psalms in being absolutely honest in their relationship with God.

The theme of this poem is doing things differently. It expresses the moment when regrets step in – why didn't I do that differently, make a different choice, go in a different direction? Why have I followed God's way and not just done what I want? Wouldn't I have been happier? It's a poem about rebellion and claiming freedom.

George Herbert's Era

Some wider background to the poem and to Herbert's life and times is helpful at this point. His was recognisably the 'modern' world, as opposed to the medieval (a term coined in 1604 but not in widespread use). This world was the inheritor of the Renaissance – also not a word used then, and it can imply a break with the medieval past that contemporaries wouldn't have recognised. But it does help us, with hindsight to see that many things changed in the late 15th and 16th centuries. By Herbert's time in the early 17th century the trickle of change had gathered into a flood.

Hans Holbein's 1533 painting called 'The Ambassadors' is often used as a way in to grasping some of the key changes that had happened in the 16th century. Two French ambassadors to the court of Henr VIII stand with a number of representative objects between them. (The painting is in the National Gallery – see <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hans-holbein-the-younger-the-ambassadors>).

The objects on two shelves between the ambassadors are as follows: On the upper shelf: a celestial globe, representing the development of astronomical understanding in this era, in particular Copernicus and in Herbert's time Galileo); scientific instruments, which assisted in exploring the natural world ever more deeply; and everything is placed on a Turkish rug, which points to the increasingly international reach of trade, and dialogue with other civilisations. On the lower shelf: two books, the fruit of the printing press which had enabled mass communication as never before; musical instruments; and a terrestrial globe with navigational instruments, reminders that this was a time when 'Europe' (marked clearly on the globe) was first given an identity and became properly aware of other cultures, particularly in the so-called 'discovery' of the 'New World'.

These objects together sum up a creative and exciting era. But it was also one that could be frightening and induce a sense of cultural vertigo. The picture reflects that side of things too: amongst the musical instruments the lute string is broken, a symbol of discord; the hymn book is Lutheran, signifying reform and a divided church which raised as many questions as it answered, and allowed what many saw as a dangerous freedom of expression; the arithmetic book is a merchant's - besides great culture and ideas, this was an era when capitalism was born, and getting and spending and having enough money was an ever-present issue for people; the two globes represent, terrestrially, the possibility of different cultures which might have very different views and ways of living that challenged the wisdom of Europeans, and celestially, the opening up of the canopy of the heavens and the first conceptions of space, prompting for some a terror of the limitless emptiness of the skies. The ambassadors themselves were involved in the king of France's attempt to keep Henry VIII in communion with Rome avert the Reformation that would split Europe (Henry had just secretly married Anne Boleyn, so they were too late), so this painting also references the court and

the compromises involved in politics. They had also come to arrange a treaty to combat the power of the Habsburgs who now ruled Germany, Austria, the Netherlands and Spain – the first act of a geopolitical struggle that would itself decisively affect George Herbert's own life and times.

There are also two other objects to notice in the picture. First, at the extreme top left side of the picture behind the curtain is a partly obscured crucifix, though it is very hard to see in reproductions and is in fact often cropped out of the frame altogether (it is visible and can be enlarged on the National gallery web-page). The crucifix is enigmatic. It provides a Christian context, but only partially so. It begs the question as to how present the Christian faith is? Or is it being gradually obscured as a new emphasis on science and reason take its place? Second is the extraordinary, warped skull image that lies across the centre of the bottom of the painting. This is an *anamorphic* image, one where the perspective has been manipulated so that it can only be seen properly from the side, at an acute angle it appears: This is, in Jerry Brotton's words, 'a *vanitas* image, a chilling reminder that in the midst of all this wealth, power, and learning, death comes to us all.' It also shows the new freedom of the artist, because it appears not to have been commissioned by the patron who commissioned the painting. Holbein was one of the first artists to have an individual reputation. So the skull also reminds us of the new importance of the individual and their freedom of choice.

George Herbert couldn't have known this painting. It went back to France with the ambassadors and only re-emerged when the National Gallery bought it in 1890. But it makes a good background to the world he inhabited, which almost a century after Holbein's painting remained exciting and scary, offering new freedoms yet being also riven with anxiety. So much was new in a world that valued the ancient, and this could lead to a sense of insecurity, fragility and uncertainty. It is no accident that René Descartes, the French philosopher who was George Herbert's contemporary, set out in 1637 on a quest to determine what he could be certain of, and concluded that it was simply that he existed: *cogito ergo sum* ('I think, therefore I am').

The Poem

So to *The Collar*, with these issues in the background.

The Collar

I struck the board, and cried, "No more;
I will abroad!
What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
My lines and life are free, free as the road,
Loose as the wind, as large as store.
Shall I be still in suit?
Have I no harvest but a thorn
To let me blood, and not restore
What I have lost with cordial fruit?
Sure there was wine
Before my sighs did dry it; there was corn
Before my tears did drown it.
Is the year only lost to me?
Have I no bays to crown it,
No flowers, no garlands gay? All blasted?
All wasted?
Not so, my heart; but there is fruit,
And thou hast hands.

Recover all thy sigh-blown age
On double pleasures: leave thy cold dispute
Of what is fit and not. Forsake thy cage,
 Thy rope of sands,
Which petty thoughts have made, and made to thee
Good cable, to enforce and draw,
 And be thy law,
While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.
 Away! take heed;
 I will abroad.
Call in thy death's-head there; tie up thy fears;
 He that forbears
 To suit and serve his need
 Deserves his load."
But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
 At every word,
Methought I heard one calling, *Child!*
 And I replied *My Lord.*

Before going on, take a few moments to consider how you feel about this poem. Don't analyse it – just try to identify your emotional response.

George Herbert's earlier Life

George Herbert was a precocious scholar. He won a scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge, at 16 (a standard age in those days). Cambridge became his life for many years, and he stayed on as a fellow at Trinity and rose eventually to become the University Orator in 1620. This was a significant role, both nationally and internationally, which he had pursued for some time, and had led past holders to high office at court. It was, potentially, a stepping stone to greater things. He described it in a letter as

the finest place in the University...for the Orator writes all the University Letters, makes all the Orations [speeches], be it to King, Prince, or whatever comes to the University...he takes place next to the Doctors, is at all their Assemblies and Meetings and sits above the Proctors, is Regent or Non-regent at his pleasure, and such like Gaynesses which will please a young man well.

A condition of his college fellowship was that he should be ordained after 7 years, which would have been in 1623, but the King, James I, was often at Royston in Northants not so far from Cambridge, where he kept a house and would hunt frequently. Herbert seems to have been drawn into the orbit of the court after coming to the King's attention following an outrageously flattering speech. So his ordination was delayed. Might Herbert follow other orators into court service? The rewards were great, but so were the opportunities, perhaps, to become a Christian statesman.

James I's reputation amongst historians has recently been undergoing a bit of a revision. When James came to the English throne in 1603 he offered a fresh start in a Europe which had become bitterly divided on political and religious grounds. The Habsburg domination that we saw in *The Ambassadors* had become entrenched and had led England into war with Spain for decades. Queen Elizabeth had had James's mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, executed in what was really a judicial murder in 1587, but 16 years later James did not seek revenge on the English courtiers who had

been party to it. This was in its own way a remarkable, and a notably Christian response. James saw himself as *Rex Pacificus* – the peaceful king – and the motto he chose was ‘Blessed are the peacemakers’. Peace was his policy both at home and abroad. His first act was to declare peace rather than war on Spain, ending decades of low level conflict that sometimes flared into battle. At the same time James encouraged expansion west across the Atlantic, to develop Godly colonies, especially Virginia where the wider Herbert family had significant investments in the company that ran it. These colonies were seen as offering new opportunities for Christian ways of living.

James’s rough Scots ways and accent, his frequent tendency to drink too much, and his enjoyment of the company of handsome young men all conspired to make English courtiers look down on him. But he was successful in keeping peace in England in a way his son Charles I later failed to do and he managed to do the same in Scotland despite being absent from the kingdom once he had moved to London. James was perhaps the most intelligent monarch ever to rule England, widely learned, a prolific author of many books which he wrote himself. He was more theologically literate than most of his bishops. The Authorised Version, or King James Bible is perhaps his greatest legacy – an immense undertaking of scholarship and organisation achieved in a comparatively short time.

Drawn into the orbit of the King, George Herbert seems to have bought strongly into the peace policy. It was under threat in 1620, when Herbert’s main connection with the court seems to have begun. What became known as the Thirty Years war had broken out in 1618, and James was under pressure to provide money and troops to fight on the continent in defence of the Protestant cause, especially as its figurehead was his son-in-law. Popular opinion swung strongly in favour of war, but James resisted. Many young men from England and Scotland crossed the Channel to fight in the Netherlands on the Protestant side, including two of Herbert’s own brothers.

James’s favourite, and effectively chief minister, Buckingham increasingly favoured war. He drew Charles, the Prince of Wales, under his influence. In 1623 they nevertheless set off on a madcap adventure to Madrid to woo the Infanta, the daughter of the Spanish king who was proposing a dynastic marriage that would promote peace (and perhaps require some restoration of the Roman Catholic Church in England). Under aliases they rode to Dover to take ship for France, being spotted when Charles’s false beard fell off at an inn on the way. In Madrid the king had changed his mind about the marriage, and they were forced to view the Infanta by peering over her garden wall. They remained in Madrid as effective prisoners for months, having failed completely in their objective. But, when at last they escaped and made for home, to their surprise as they got off the boat, they found bonfires and celebrations across the kingdoms welcoming them back. There was now no prospect of peace with Spain and the pro-war party was clearly in the ascendant. Quite unexpectedly they were heroes.

One voice in particular, though, stood out against the rush to war. At Cambridge, while the town feted the Prince’s accidental triumph, at the University the Orator, Mr Herbert, pulled no punches in his speech of welcome to the Prince (in Latin, of course). He praised the potential of the Spanish marriage for peace and commended Charles for pursuing it. Then he spoke passionately in favour of peace:

In peace, sons bury their fathers – in war, fathers their sons; in peace, the sick are made whole – in war even the whole perish; in peace there is safety in the fields – in war not even within walls; in peace, the song of birds awakens us – in war, trumpets and drums; peace has opened a new world [America] – war destroys the old....Know you not, I pray, the miseries of war?

Even if these words were spoken on behalf of the university, they seem personal. George had in fact lost his two soldier brothers already in the war. One, Richard, had died only a few months before.

Soon after this speech, a parliament was called at Westminster and Herbert became an MP. The 1624 Parliament was dominated by two things: the move to war and the future of the Virginia Company. Herbert resisted the first and strongly supported the second. He failed in both. The King caved into the call to war, leaving over 20 years' pursuit of peace in ruins. Parliament voted to pay for and send troops to fight on the continent (though in fact the intervention never actually happened); and the Virginia company was wound up amid unfounded accusations of financial malpractice.

Most politicians, then and now, would have trimmed and adapted to the new reality. Not Herbert. This is why I think he had perhaps been pursuing a dream of Christian statesmanship and serving God amidst the mess and compromise of political and court life. But it was not to be. He left the Parliament at the end of the session and at last sought ordination as a deacon. We don't know precisely when that happened, but it was most likely at Advent 1624.

As a deacon Herbert could no longer serve in Parliament, so this was an end to his 'court hopes', but nor could he have an effective ecclesiastical career until he was also ordained priest. Yet for the best part of five years he simply wandered from place to place, something apparently of a lost soul. His mother died in 1627, and at some points in these years he seems to have been very ill with what was probably the tuberculosis that would eventually lead to his death in 1633. Only in 1629, when he married, and 1630 when he both moved to Bemerton as Rector and was finally priested, did he re-enter the mainstream of life.

This period of George Herbert's life offers, I think, some context to this poem. It seems to me to express the pent-up emotion of those lost years. Had his life been 'all blasted, all wasted'? He described his poems, remember, as showing his 'spiritual conflicts'. In this one it's not only that he could have been free, but that his faith – doing the right thing, being a good boy - has fed anxiety in him. There *was* wine before his sighs dried it. So – let's abandon ourselves to 'double pleasures' without fear of death ('call in thy death's head there') – the full gamut of temptations. I want to be free, he seems to say, not subject to anyone else's rules, anyone's servant, including God's.

But as I raved and grew more fierce and wild
At every word,
Methought I heard one calling, *Child!*
And I replied *My Lord.*

God's voice calls him back. But where had God been in all those events of the early 1620s? That may also have been the question.

What biblical resonances does this poem have for you? In particular you might like to pay attention to some of the images mentioned in The Collar that also appear in the Bible. There are no right or wrong answers, and don't worry if something comes to mind that doesn't quite seem to fit with the overall theme of the poem. See what comes up! Pause, and let your imagination work...

Biblical/Theological Reflections

Some obvious connections are with books of Jonah and Job and the Psalms, as well as some of the prophets. All of these show arguments with God. In fact when you begin to think about it, there are a lot of Old Testament books which offer some full and frank exchanges of views! Herbert's poem incorporates some of this kind of interaction.

There are also some obvious connections with children and calling. We might think of Samuel in the temple ('speak Lord, for thy servant heareth'); of the servant girl who helps to heal Naaman the leper in 2 Kings 5 ('and his flesh came again like unto the flesh of a little child and he was clean'); and of Jairus' daughter in the Gospels ('little girl, get up'). In Mark 10 Jesus says, 'unless you become as a little child you cannot enter the Kingdom of God.' And, as with last week's poem, *Love (III)*, the story of the Prodigal Son seems also to hover in the background too.

God's relationship with George Herbert – and with us – is first of all of a parent and child, not master and servant. In the temptation stories Jesus is challenged with the words, 'If you are the Son of God' – but he is secure in being God's child and doesn't need to prove it.

And that would be a nice, neat and tidy resolution for a conventional sermon. But maybe there's more going on in *The Collar*. Let's go back briefly to *The Ambassadors* and the strange 'death's head' at its foot. To see it you have to stand to the side and look through your peripheral vision. The effect is to change your perspective completely. In a sense it brings about a complete re-evaluation of the significance of all those objects and indeed the importance of the two ambassadors themselves. It questions everything.

Some commentators suggest that something similar happens with this poem. You may have noticed that a good many of the images which are applied to the wild and carefree life which the poet apparently covets also have biblical resonances. Wine and corn, for example, seem a reminder of the bread and wine of the eucharist.

So far we have assumed that Herbert speaks all the way through until the final two lines. But 17th century punctuation was notoriously unreliable and random. There were originally no quotation marks in this poem. We don't actually know who the speaker is. And what if the comma at the end of the third to last line (At every word') is moved to the end of the previous line? Then it reads 'At every word/Methought I heard one calling'. Perhaps the caller is calling at *every word* of the preceding poem, not just the end.

We saw that corn and wine might have a double meaning, but there are double meanings everywhere once you begin to look. Perhaps there is a new voice – of God? of Christ? – at line 3? The road was originally spelt 'rode' - this might also mean the rood or cross. The wind might relate to the Holy Spirit, likened to the wind that 'bloweth where it listeth' in John 3. The thorns might connect with the crown of thorns and be ironic. Is there no harvest? Really? The sighs and tears could be Christ's. St Paul, in Romans 8, writes about how the Holy Spirit within us shares the sighs of creation? Double pleasures could be extra enjoyment or pleasures of both earth and heaven. The cage is one that God may be saying the poet has made it for himself, 'While thou didst wink and wouldst not see' reminding us of the skull in the painting again. The line questions whether Herbert has been seeing things rightly. It might feel 'All blasted, All wasted', but maybe God was actually there all the time.

While I find this secondary reading compelling and fruitful I can't really make it work perfectly! There may be at least two reasons for this. The first, rather prosaically, is that the poem might not have reached a completely final form. By not publishing and keeping a notebook of his poems Herbert enabled continuous revisions, and he may have died without reaching what he was aiming at in this 'double poem' completely. The second is a more complex thought, which is that the hints of God's presence in the images might be deliberately left a little vague and hard to pin down – as the presence of God actually is for us. T.S.Eliot catches something of this elusiveness in his *Four*

Quartets, especially at the end when he writes of what is 'Not known, because not looked for', but is 'heard, half-heard' and always just beyond our grasp.

The final line of *The Collar* calls to mind two witnesses of the resurrection who both first doubted and did not see the presence of Jesus: Mary Magdalen by the tomb in the garden, and Thomas in the Upper Room. Knowing that we are loved by God is the basis of real freedom, freedom to be ourselves as God's child. In later life, at Bemerton, George Herbert would always speak of 'Jesus – my master'.

An ancient prayer which forms the Second Collect (for Peace) at Morning Prayer in the *Book of Common Prayer* (BCP) uses the phrase 'whose service is perfect freedom...' It's another quotation linked with Augustine of Hippo, George Herbert's favourite theologian, and forms the basis to this lovely prayer:

Lord, you are the light of the minds who know you,
The life of the souls who love you,
and the strength of the souls who serve you.
Help us to know you that we may truly love you,
so to love you that we may fully serve you,
whose service is perfect freedom.
Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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