



George Herbert

1593-1633

Sunday 27th February is the day set aside in the Church of England Calendar for remembering George Herbert, poet, scholar and priest. He was Rector of Bemerton near Salisbury from 1630 until the end of his life. During this very short time, he wrote some of the best religious poetry in the English language. Seemingly destined for a career at the royal court, after a glittering time at Cambridge University, Herbert's health was poor, and he gave up this life for that of a country parish priest.

The Pulley

When God at first made man,
Having a glass of blessings standing by;
Let us (said he) pour on him all we can:
Let the world's riches, which dispersed lie,
Contract into a span.

So strength first made a way;
The beauty flow'd, then wisdom, honour, pleasure:
When almost all was out, God made a stay,
Perceiving that alone of all his treasure
Rest in the bottom lay.

For if I should (said he)
Bestow this jewel also on my creature,
He would adore my gifts instead of me,
And rest in Nature, not the God of Nature:
So both should losers be.

Yet let him keep the rest,
But keep them with repining restlessness:
Let him be rich and weary, that at least,
If goodness lead him not, yet weariness
May toss him to my breast.

The Pulley is a very contemporary poem as it addresses the current climate of seeing satisfaction in nature, rather than “the God of nature” – a temptation which the poem resists very effectively. I particularly like the idea of “rest” being denied humanity, “Let him be rich and weary”. This inability to find rest is a true feature of humanity and Herbert sees the hand of God in this, for it is only through God that we find true rest and peace.

Virtue

Sweet day, so cool, so calm, so bright
The bridal of the earth and sky:
The dew shall weep thy fall tonight,
For thou must die.

Sweet rose, whose hue, angry and brave,
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eyes:
Thy root is ever in its grave,
And thou must die.

Sweet spring, full of sweet days and roses,
A box where sweets compacted lie:
My music shows ye have your closes,
And all must die.

Only a sweet and virtuous soul,
Like seasoned timber, never gives;
But though the whole world turn to coal,
Then chiefly lives.

Virtue speaks eloquently about the transient nature of our world, the natural world, in all its beauty, and our human lives, which are so fragile and fleeting. It is virtue which is truly beautiful, all the rest being skin-deep and passing.

In the Calendar, even the lesser festivals, of which George Herbert is one, are provided with Collects. In his case, the writer has included in the Collect memorable lines and echoes from the poems, such as “king of Glory, king of peace” and “his God and King,” and “the temple”.



Bemerton Rectory and Church

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;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

I still deeply cherish the work of George Herbert, and find in it more and more surprises and delights whenever I re-visit his poems. If you see a copy of his work in a book shop, buy it and try him out for yourself. After the initial difficulties with 17th century English, the poems flow and grow on you for ever!

Neil Richardson