



**GRAY'S
INN**

February 14th (Quinquagesima) 2021

Commemoration of George Herbert

Love Bade Me Welcome

Proverbs 4: 1-9 & Philippians 4: 4-9

Next week the Church commemorates the priest and poet George Herbert, who died in February 1633. Herbert was born in 1593 into an affluent Welsh family. One of his teachers and mentors was Lancelot Andrewes, a member of this Inn who went on to become Bishop of Winchester and who is commemorated in the stained glass window over there. George Herbert quickly climbed the social ladder. Soon after his thirtieth birthday he had become Public Orator in the University of Cambridge and a Member of Parliament. He'd already been noticed by the King (James 1st) and was being tipped for high office. But in his mid-thirties he gave up his secular ambitions, took Holy Orders, and spent the rest of his life as Rector of the little parish of Bemerton near Salisbury. He was, it was said, known for his unflinching care for his parishioners, bringing the sacraments to them when they were ill, and providing food and clothing for those in need. Twice a day he and his family would cross the road to the parish church for the Daily Office. But his health had always been poor, and only three years after his ordination he died of consumption at the age of just 39.

Like his god-father, John Donne, George Herbert was a poet. And he's mainly remembered today for those poems which have become hymns, such as the three in our service today. He also wrote a guide to rural ministry, entitled *The Country Parson: His Character and Rule of Holy Life*, but he published nothing in his lifetime. Shortly before his death, he sent a collection of his poems to Nicholas Ferrar, the founder of a semi-monastic Anglican religious community at Little Gidding. He wondered whether they might be published, to "turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul", but otherwise, he said, let them be burnt. The title of the manuscript was "The Temple", and fortunately Ferrar recognized its true value and didn't put it in on the fire. Amongst the poems was "Love bade me welcome" – our anthem just now. His first biographer was Izaak Walton, better known for his book *The Compleat Angler*, who wrote of "such hymns and anthems as he and the angels now sing in heaven".

If you're looking for something to read during the days of Lent which begin this Wednesday, Ash Wednesday, I would thoroughly recommend "My sour-sweet days" by Mark Oakley. You may remember Mark, then at St Paul's and now Dean of St Johns, Cambridge, who led our Words & Music evening in 2017. He prints forty of Herbert's poems, each with a commentary.

The beginning of Lent is a good time to remember George Herbert. He directs us to the praise of God: "Let all the world in every corner sing, my God and King!" But he also leads us to consider what kind of God we believe in and what kind of people we are. Herbert had his own inner struggles: according to Izaak Walton when he sent his book of poems to Nicholas Ferrar he said "he shall find in it a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed between God and my soul". But he came through, or rather he found God within his struggles. So he could write in "King of glory, king of peace":

Though my sins against me cried,
thou didst clear me;
and alone, when they replied,
thou didst hear me.

For many of us, "Love bade me welcome" is his greatest poem. It's about being drawn into the love of God simply because that's the kind of God, God is. Herbert is only too aware that he doesn't deserve this. He is guilty of dust and sin, unworthy to be there, unkind, ungrateful. Surely God is joking when he asks, sweetly, whether he lacks anything. So he hangs back, prepare to make a quiet exit. He is almost embarrassed to be there. He cannot look up, he cannot look God in the eye.

But... "Love took my hand, and smiling did reply, who made the eyes but I?" (Those of us who have a compunction for puns keep finding them in Herbert: here, "eye" and "I"). Yet he's still not convinced. Yes, God is the creator, but just look at what we've done to what God made and called good. He still feel ashamed.

Herbert is making a very important point here. There is something deep within our human condition which leads us to put all our confidence and all our hope in our own agency. We can do it on our own. We are self-made men, and women. The self is king. And more widely, we can trust in the future because our kind of people are basically good and science will provide all the answers. This is bad enough in itself, because when it soon becomes obvious that it's far from the truth it leads to all kinds of concealment and game-playing. But it becomes even worse when we finally face up to the failure, and therefore the shame, when there's no-one else to blame, and yet we still believe that only we can put it right.

Herbert touches the kernel of who we are, and the centre of our Christian faith in who God is and what God has done. God does not deny the self, the person we are: Love bade me welcome. And on the Cross he bore the shame and took the blame. And it is only in relationship with him that we begin to discover our true self.

And so we are invited to enter, to sit down, and to eat. The Gospels are full of stories – events and parables – about eating together, and eating with those who are usually left outside, stories which prompt and challenge many of our social and political assumptions. And often we touch on such things in these sermons. But today, and as Lent begins, and perhaps as Covid and Lockdown make us more questioning and more sensitive to the deeper things of life, we might hear again what this poem so marvellously reveals:

Love bids us welcome, not as a sinner but as one who is saved, not as a servant but as one invited by the grace of God. And so we can join in the overflowing praise of Herbert's other hymn:

Small it is, in this poor sort, to enrol thee,
E'en eternity's too short, to extol thee.