

CELEBRATING GEORGE HERBERT

A sermon by The Right Reverend Dr Christopher Herbert.

St Andrew's Church, Lower Bemerton - 28th February 2016

One of my favourite pieces of 20th century sculpture is to be found in Tate Britain. It's Jacob Epstein's *Jacob and the Angel*. It's carved from a massive block of alabaster weighing about two and a half tons. It dwarfs the onlooker. The Angel and Jacob are locked into a kind of holy and exhausted embrace in which the angel, with straining muscles seems to be hauling Jacob upright, heaving against the absolute force of gravity. Jacob meanwhile, rests limply in the angel's arms; his hands dangling loosely by his sides. Jacob is defeated but at the same time wounded and healed.

That great sculpture was created between 1940 and 1941 when the Second World War was pulverising everything in sight. Epstein himself was very depressed and wrote: "I imagine a waste world: argosies from the air have bombed the humans out of existence and perished themselves, so that no human being is left alive"

Perhaps the sculpture is about that. Or it might be about Epstein's own sense of failure...he was, after all, named Jacob...but I prefer to see in it Epstein's own immense struggle with the intractability of material.

In his autobiography he wrote: "At the stone-yard I see a tremendous block of marble about to be sliced up and used for interior decoration. When I see these great monoliths lying ready for the butcher's hands, as it were, I instantly have sentimental feelings of pity that the fate of a noble block...should be so ignominious. Knowing that this stone could contain a wonderful statue moves me to purchase it and rescue it, even though at the moment I have no definite idea for it. Never mind---that will come"

Sadly and absurdly, the great sculpture of the Angel and Jacob did not find a buyer, except for a man who purchased it to be put on display at a funfair freak show held on Blackpool Prom. It was placed in a basement in what was called "The Anatomical Room" where it stood next to some Indian shrunken heads and the embalmed bodies of Siamese twins.

I say all of this about this phenomenal piece of sculpture: the key word to describe it is poise. Will the angel be able to hold Jacob upright or will Jacob's resigned weight drag the angel to the ground? The kind of delicate poise achieved by Epstein against all the odds seems to me, in figurative art, what distinguishes greatness from mediocrity. Think of another example: Rogier van der Weyden's Prado Deposition where the forces of gravity and grace, of heaven and earth, of time and eternity are held in an exquisite and uncertain balance: will Christ's body, being lifted off the Cross by Joseph of Arimathea come crashing down, or will Joseph and Nicodemus, straining all their anguished muscles, be able to hold its weight?

All I am pointing out is that all great artists struggle with the intractability of material, but when they succeed in overcoming it, or perhaps, going with it, the result is breath-taking.

I am aware that George Herbert too struggled with the intractability of things, though in his case the things with which he so deftly struggled, were words.

Here he is, writing about the discipline of writing a hymn :

A True Hymn

MY Joy, my Life, my Crown !
 My heart was meaning all the day,
 Somewhat it fain would say,
 And still it runneth muttering up and down
 With only this, My Joy, my Life, my Crown !

Yet slight not those few words ;
 If truly said, they may take part
 Among the best in art :
 The fineness which a hymn or psalm affords
 Is, when the soul unto the lines accord.

He who craves all the mind,
 And all the soul, and strength, and time,
 If the words only rhyme,
 Justly complains that somewhat is behind
 To make His verse, or write a hymn in kind.

Whereas if the heart be moved,
 Although the verse be somewhat scant,
 God doth supply the want ;
 As when the heart says, sighing to be approved,
 "O, could I love !" and stops, God writeth, "Loved."

It's clear in that first verse that he has got a phrase on his mind. It's going round and round in his head and he doesn't know what comes next...it's an experience with which all poets can sympathise.

*MY Joy, my Life, my Crown !
 My heart was meaning all the day,
 Somewhat it fain would say,
 And still it runneth muttering up and down
 With only this, My Joy, my Life, my Crown !*

He is feeling exasperated, frustrated but then sees a way through... he recognises that even the simplest of phrases can become transformed when the soul of the writer accords with what the phrase is actually saying. In other words, he is reflecting upon the very act of writing...

*Yet slight not those few words ;
 If truly said, they may take part
 Among the best in art :
 The fineness which a hymn or psalm affords
 Is, when the soul unto the lines accord.*

He reflects further and plays around with the schema : ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind and with all thy strength’...except that for the word ‘Heart’ he substitutes the word ‘time’. It’s a witty conceit and, as your website suggests, a jolt...

*He who craves all the mind,
And all the soul, and strength, and time,
If the words only rhyme,
Justly complains that somewhat is behind
To make His verse, or write a hymn in kind.*

He knows what he wants to write, but in spite of disciplined attention and years of struggle, the right word still cannot be found...

But then the final breakthrough...in the last verse he realises that the ultimate purpose of a hymn is to praise God and like an epiphany sees that God is not moved by pretty scansion and metre, but by utter sincerity of heart...

*Whereas if the heart be moved,
Although the verse be somewhat scant,
God doth supply the want ;
As when the heart says, sighing to be approved,
“O, could I love !” and stops, God writeth, “Loved.”*

Though I have to confess, to a slight feeling of bathos in the very last sentence. Somehow it is too abrupt and smacks of the child’s essay which ends “And then I woke up...”

Enough of the intractability of words...now try another intractable, that of music. At which point I wondered about giving you a copy of Psalm 84 in metrical form, published in 1621 and asking you to sing it. Its first verse goes like this:

*How lovely is thy dwelling-place,
O Lord of hosts, to me!
The tabernacles of thy grace
how pleasant, Lord, they be!*

and should be sung to “While Shepherds watched...” It was this kind of hymn which would have been sung here in Bemerton when George Herbert was the Rector.

For a man who loved music and music-making one hopes that the singing of the congregation would not have grated too much upon his musician’s ear...

This is not the time for more poetic analysis, but when you get home, re-read “Easter” with its rich symbolism drawn from the world of music, in which Christ’s body stretched on the wood of the Cross is compared with the strings stretched tight on the lute...

*Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part
With all thy art.
The cross taught all wood to resound his name,
Who bore the same.
His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key
Is best to celebrate this most high day*

It's wonderful... and a reminder that music takes us beyond words, up towards heaven itself...

Now, step back for a moment and recognise how this sermon has been constructed... We have moved from the intractability of Epstein's struggle with stone, through George Herbert's struggle with words, and in the last few sentences we have moved into another key...towards what Herbert would recognise as the pleasing, ravishing and mystical power of music which draws us towards the very Throne of God...

And now, let me conclude with a kind of question: suppose this.... Suppose that in the eyes of God the sculptor, God the poet, God the musician, we are the intractable material. He sets about working on us, chisels away at us, shapes and re-shapes us, but he does so in a unique way, not by unkind force but in humility and grace. He takes who we are and through the love of Christ enables us to become, gradually, gradually, who we are uniquely fitted to be...and if, as this happens, we find ourselves singing gentle Alleluias, we should not be surprised. We are people for whom heaven waits... where the saints, including George Herbert, rejoice in the boundless love and mercy of God and create music of such harmony that we on earth are caught up in it...