

# THE POETRY OF GEORGE HERBERT

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I have loved the poetry of George Herbert for 50 years, and three times followed in his footsteps. I was vicar of the church (Great St Mary's) which he would have so often attended when he was the young, witty Orator at the University of Cambridge. And we used regularly to visit his friend Nicholas Ferrar's chapel at Little Gidding and hold parish quiet days there. From there I went to Westminster Abbey, where I was Chairman of Governors of his old school and lived in the medieval Deanery where, as a schoolboy, Herbert no doubt came to visit his beloved Dean, Lancelot Andrewes; and every morning I walked beneath his memorial window in the nave of the Abbey, which shows him standing in the porch of this church. And finally, I retired to Salisbury, and most mornings now walk to the Trinity Chapel beneath his memorial window in the Cathedral; and sometimes go and admire his chalice in the Chapter House. So standing in his church tonight feels very special.

I guess that most of you were present when Ronald Blythe spoke here in June, and even if you weren't, that you know as much about Herbert's life as I do. So I propose to omit the biographical details and let him speak for himself. I shall read a selection of his poems, in two chunks, with some short comments, and with music in between. It's now thought that he wrote all the most significant of his poems before 1630, when he was ordained priest in Salisbury Cathedral and moved to Bemerton. The most fully autobiographical of his poems, *Affliction*, reflects his fellow-ship at Trinity College, Cambridge, his years as Public Orator there, his increasing popularity at Court, his brief time as M.P. for Monmouth, and his change of direction.

When first Thou didst entice to Thee my heart  
I thought the service brave:  
So many joys I writ down for my part,  
Besides what I might have  
Out of my stock of natural delights,  
Augmented with Thy gracious benefits.

At first all goes well.

At first Thou gavest me milk and sweetnesses:  
I had my wish and way:  
My days were strewed with flowers and happiness:  
There was no month but May.  
But with my years sorrow did twist and grow,  
And made a party unawares for woe

So in the next verse he writes of 'the death of friends', and indeed his three most powerful patrons (including the King) died in 1625/6, thus (according to Isaac Walton) 'ending all Mr. Herbert's court-hopes'; then he goes on to write of his illnesses.

When I got health, Thou took'st away my life –  
And more; for my friends die:  
My mirth and edge was lost: a blunted knife  
Was of more use than I.  
Thus, thin and lean, without a fence or friend,  
I was blown through with ev'ry storm and wind.

Yet, lest perchance I should too happy be  
In my unhappiness,  
Turning my purge to food, Thou throwest me  
Into more sicknesses.  
Thus doth Thy power cross-bias me, not making  
Thine own gift good, yet me from my ways taking.

In *The Country Parson* he writes of how ‘affliction softens and works the stubborn heart of man’, and he looks on his suffering as God’s sensitive wooing of the human soul which leads to his ministry at Bemerton. Though, as the final verse shows, he could still have moments of rebellion against his new master.

Now I am here, what Thou wilt do with me  
None of my books will show:  
I read, and sigh, and wish I were a tree –  
For sure, then, I should grow  
To fruit or shade; at least, some bird would trust  
Her household to me, and I should be just.

Yet, though Thou troublest me, I must be meek;  
In weakness must be stout:  
Well, I will change the service, and go seek  
Some other master out.  
Ah, my dear God! Though I am clean forgot  
Let me not love Thee, if I love Thee not.

Herbert in fact wrote four poems with the title *Affliction*. *Affliction IV*, which also echoes his struggle to accept the reality of God’s love, contains the striking lines: ‘My thoughts are all a case of knives,/Wounding my heart,/With scattered smart’. I find an interesting echo in a line from Philip Larkin’s poem *Deceptions*: ‘Your mind lay open like a drawer of knives’. Walton reports that Herbert would often say he had ‘a Wit like a penknife in too narrow a sheath, too sharp for his body’.

For GH the heart of the Christian gospel lay in the cross of Jesus, which for him was the supreme expression, not of God’s wrath, but of God’s love. Here is his poem *The Agony*, with its definition of those ‘two vast, spacious things’, sin and love; and its clear reference to the eucharist.

Philosophers have measured mountains,  
Fathomed the depths of seas, of states, and kings,  
Walked with a staff to heav’n, and tracèd fountains:  
But there are two vast, spacious things,  
The which to measure it doth more behove;  
Yet few there are that sound them, - Sin and Love.

Who would know Sin, let him repair  
Unto Mount Olivet; there shall he see  
A Man so wrung with pains, that all his hair,  
His skin, his garments bloody be.  
Sin is that press and vice, which forceth pain  
To hunt his cruel food through ev’ry vein.

Who knows not Love, let him assay  
And taste that juice which on the cross a pike  
Did set again abroach; then let him say  
If ever he did taste the like.

Love is that liquor, sweet and most divine,  
Which my God feels as blood, but I as wine.

Another short poem, *Redemption*, also centres on the central Christian mystery, the cross, and this time in terms of tenancy and rent, a predicament which would be familiar enough to one of his poor parishioners, who might well seek out his landlord and beg for a cheaper lease. Herbert sees that the cross has changed the terms of the lease - the covenant - between man and God; the old rent was the laborious struggle to fulfil the Mosaic law, while the new is the free gift of grace.

Having been tenant long to a rich Lord,  
Not thriving, I resolved to be bold,  
And make a suit unto Him, to afford  
A new small-rented lease, and cancel the old.

In heaven at His manor I Him sought;  
They told me there that He was lately gone  
About some land, which He had dearly bought  
Long since on earth, to take possession.

I straight returned, and knowing His great birth,  
Sought Him accordingly in great resorts, -  
In cities, theatres, gardens, parks, and courts;  
At length I heard a ragged noise and mirth  
Of thieves and murderers; there I Him espied,  
Who straight, "Your suit is granted," said, and died.

By calling his main volume of poetry *The Church*, or *The Temple*, Herbert is emphasising not only the physical architectural space in which God is to be praised in the liturgy, but also the importance of the effect of order and beauty on the human spirit. In the poem *The Church Floor* the different stones - black, speckled, chequered or cemented - speak to him of the different qualities of patience, humility, confidence, and the love which ties the whole frame together. And in *The Windows* he sets up a contract between 'brittle, crazy' plain glass, whose light is 'waterish, bleak and thin', and stained glass. He as a preacher of God's word is like plain glass, glass that is full of imperfections and (in Herbert's day) distortions, and yet he is allowed the supreme role of being a window onto divine light, and so, by telling the divine story, becomes like stained glass. To 'anneal' is to burn colours onto glass.

Lord, how can man preach Thy eternal Word?  
He is a brittle crazy glass,  
Yet in Thy temple Thou dost him afford  
This glorious and transcendent place,  
To be a window, through Thy grace.

But when Thou dost anneal in glass Thy story,  
Making Thy life to shine within  
The holy preachers, then the light and glory  
More reverend grows, and more doth win;  
Which else shows waterish, bleak, and thin.

Doctrine and life, colours and light, in one  
When they combine and mingle, bring  
A strong regard and awe; but speech alone  
Doth vanish like a flaring thing,  
And in the ear, not conscience, ring.

Other poems express the Church's year or its liturgy, those like *Evensong*, *Lent*, *Holy Communion*, and *Mattins*, which is another poem (as so many of them are) about God's grace working in the human spirit, God wooing us by his loving action in Christ.

I cannot ope mine eyes,  
But Thou art ready there to catch  
My morning soul and sacrifice;  
That we must needs for that day make a match.

My God, what is a heart?  
Silver, or gold, or precious stone,  
Or star, or rainbow, or a part  
Of all these things, or all of them in one?

My God, what is a heart,  
That Thou shouldst it so eye, and woo,  
Pouring upon it all Thy art,  
As if that Thou hadst nothing else to do?

Indeed, man's whole estate  
Amounts (and richly) to serve Thee;  
He did not heav'n and earth create,  
Yet studies them, not Him by whom they be.

Teach me Thy love to know;  
That this new light, which now I see,  
May both the work and workman show;  
Then by a sunbeam I will climb to Thee.

Is there a lovelier verse in Herbert's poetry than that third one?

My God, what is a heart,  
That Thou shouldst it so eye, and woo,  
Pouring upon it all Thy art,  
As if that Thou hadst nothing else to do?

Then there are the poems that speak of his priesthood, such as *Aaron*. The book of Exodus describes the details of Aaron's ornate priestly robes. Herbert reinterprets them in spiritual terms, thus distinguishing between an external holiness (symbolised by Aaron's robes) and the true holiness of head and heart of one who has put on Christ. There is a clear reference too to the priest vesting for the liturgy, which for Herbert is simply an analogy for how all Christians must put on Christ.

Holiness on the head,  
Light and perfections on the breast,  
Harmonious bells below raising the dead  
To lead them unto life and rest.  
Thus are true Aarons drest.  
Profaneness in my head,  
Defects and darkness in my breast,  
A noise of passions ringing me for dead  
Unto a place where is no rest:  
Poor priest! thus am I drest.

Only another head  
I have, another heart and breast,  
Another music, making live, not dead,  
Without whom I could have no rest:  
In Him I am well drest.

Christ is my only head,  
My alone only heart and breast,  
My only music, striking me e'en dead;  
That to the old man I may rest,  
And be in Him new drest.

So holy in my Head,  
Perfect and light in my dear Breast,  
My doctrine tuned by Christ (who is not dead,  
But lives in me while I do rest),  
Come, people; Aaron's drest.

One of his most familiar poems is *The Pulley*, in which he invents a parable in which God pours a glass of blessings over new-created man, only stopping himself in time when he sees that one last blessing, the blessing of rest, remains. This he withholds, lest we forget God in a state of self-sufficient bliss. The concept is of a pulley with two buckets, the full one descending and hoisting the empty bucket in the air: so we are weighed down by the full bucket of our blessings, while the empty bucket of restlessness, ever dancing in the air, 'tosses' us to God's breast.

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 dispersèd lie,  
Contract into a span."

So Strength first made a way;  
Then Beauty flowed, 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."

In the poem *Jordan II* George Herbert looks back to his earlier style when, like some of his contemporary metaphysical poets who write of profane love, he sought out what he calls 'quaint words and trim invention', verse 'curling with metaphors'. Now he is concerned to write only of divine love, and in as simple a fashion as he knows how.

When first my lines of heavenly joys made mention,  
Such was their lustre, they did so excel,  
That I sought out quaint words and trim invention;  
My thoughts began to burnish, sprout, and swell,  
Curling with metaphors a plain intention,  
Decking the sense, as if it were to sell.

Thousands of notions in my brain did run,  
Offring their service, if I were not sped:  
I often blotted what I had begun; -  
This was not quick enough, and that was dead.  
Nothing could seem too rich to clothe the sun,  
Much less those joys which trample on his head.

As flames do work and wind when they ascend,  
So did I weave myself into the sense.  
But while I bustled, I might hear a friend  
Whisper, "How wide is all this long pretence!  
There is in love a sweetness ready penned:  
Copy out only that, and save expense."

In a moment we'll listen to some music for viols by Herbert's contemporary, John Dowland. Herbert played the lute and the viol, and set many of his poems to music and accompanied them on the lute. But first, here's the extraordinary sonnet called *Prayer I*. A sonnet with no main verb, but with a succession of metaphors tumbling over one another, suggesting that ultimately prayer cannot be described, only occasionally experienced, for in it we are touching ultimate Mystery. Yet, at the same time, here is God encountered within the ordinary and everyday. So the phrase 'Heaven in ordinary' suggests not only the bread and wine of the eucharist, 'the church's banquet', but also God descending to our 'ordinary' level, a meaning strengthened by the 17th century use of the word 'ordinary' for a fixed-price meal in a tavern.

PRAYER, the Church's banquet, angels' age,  
God's breath in man returning to his birth,  
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,  
The Christian plummet, sounding heaven and earth;  
Engine against the Almighty, sinner's tower,  
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,  
The six-days'-world transposing in an hour,  
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;  
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,  
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,  
Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,  
The Milky Way, the bird of Paradise;  
Church bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,  
The land of spices, something understood.

Ronald Blythe read some of Herbert's Outlandish Proverbs. Proverbs fascinated the 17th century and Herbert collected over 1000 of them. Here are ten of them.

- Building and marrying of children are great wasters.
- Marry your son when you will, your daughter when you can.
- Better a snotty child than his nose wiped off.
- When children stand quiet, they have done some ill.
- Every path hath a puddle.

- The friar preached against stealing and had a goose in his sleeve.
- It's better to be the head of a lizard than the tail of a lion.
- The blind eat many a fly.
- Praise the sea, but keep on land.
- Perverseness makes one squint-eyed.

To the end of his life Herbert knew the tension between sin and grace. His mind and heart are torn between submission and rebellion. He can be angry and 'peevisish' with God. In *The Collar* he rebels against the restraints of his life, banging on in order to deafen himself to the words which ultimately he cannot choose but hear.

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!"

In a similar poem of despair, *Dialogue*, Herbert dialogues with God and despairs of ever being worthy of salvation, ('I disclaim the whole design'); yet in the final dramatic line, in which he cuts God short, he is overcome by the proof given by Christ's Passion of God's compassion. 'Waving' means 'withholding the offer of my soul'.

Sweetest Saviour, if my soul  
Were but worth the having,  
Quickly should I then control  
Any thought of waving.  
But when all my care and pains  
Cannot give the name of gains  
To thy wretch so full of stains,  
What delight or hope remains?

What (child), is the balance thine?  
Thine the poise and measure?  
If I say, "Thou shalt be mine,"  
Finger not my treasure.  
What the gains in having thee  
Do amount to, only He  
Who for man was sold, can see,  
That transferred th' accounts to me.

But as I can see no merit,  
Leading to this favour,  
So the way to fit me for it  
Is beyond my savour.  
As the reason, then, is thine,  
So the way is none of mine;  
I disclaim the whole design:  
Sin disclaims and I resign.

That is all, if that I could  
Get without repining;  
And my clay, my creature, would  
Follow my resigning;  
That as I did freely part  
With my glow and desert,  
Left all joys to feel all smart –  
Ah! no more: thou break'st my heart.

Herbert never disguises his feelings, not even the depths of depression he could experience, though mercifully these times are followed by a renewal of joy, times when all seems dead, followed by a sense of resurrection. Here is *The Flower*.

Flow fresh, O Lord, how sweet and clean  
Are Thy returns! e'en as the flowers in spring;  
To which, besides their own demean,  
The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.  
Grief melts away  
Like snow in May,  
As if there were no such cold thing.

Who would have thought my shrivelled heart  
Could have recovered greenness? It was gone  
Quite underground; as flowers depart  
To see their mother-root when they have blown;  
Where they together  
All the hard weather,  
Dead to the world, keep house unknown.

These are Thy wonders, Lord of power,  
Killing and quickening, bringing down to hell  
And up to heaven in an hour; -  
Making a chiming of a passing bell.  
We say amiss,  
This or that is:  
Thy Word is all, if we could spell.

O that I once past changing were,  
Fast in Thy Paradise, where no flower can wither!  
Many a spring I shoot up fair,  
Offering at heaven, growing and groaning thither;  
Nor doth my flower  
Want a spring shower,  
My sins and I joining together.

But while I grow in a straight line,  
Still upwards bent, as if heaven were mine own,  
Thy anger comes, and I decline:  
What frost to that? what pole is not the zone  
Where all things burn,  
When Thou dost turn,  
And the least frown of Thine is shown?

And now in age I bud again,  
After so many deaths I live and write;  
I once more smell the dew and rain,  
And relish versing: O my only light,  
It cannot be  
That I am he  
On whom Thy tempests fell at night.

These are Thy wonders, Lord of love,  
To make us see we are but flowers that glide;  
Which when we once can find and prove  
Thou hast a garden for us, where to bide,  
Who would be more,  
Swelling through store,  
Forfeit their Paradise by their pride?

George Herbert, with his times of illness and perhaps premonitions of an early death, was very aware of the transience of life and sometimes compares it to the blossoming and fading of a flower. As in the short poem, *Virtue*, where all is transient except the soul.

Sweet Day, so cool, so calm, so bright,  
The bridal of the earth and sky,  
The dew shall weep thy fall to-night;  
For thou must die.

Sweet Rose, whose hue, angry and brave,  
Bids the rash gazer wipe his eye,  
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.

I've spoken of Herbert's love of music, which feature in a number of his poems. In *The Thanksgiving* he writes:

My music shall find Thee, and ev'ry string  
Shall have his attribute to sing;  
That all together may accord in Thee,  
And prove one God, one harmony.

And in *Easter* he greets his risen Lord with the image of a lute playing. Christ's arms stretched on the cross are compared to the taut strings of the lute that are tuned to just the right pitch to make the appropriate notes. And he goes on:

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part  
With all thy art...

Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song  
Pleasant and long...

*The Temper* is also a poem which speaks of music, though chiefly it is one which celebrates his profound belief that we find God in the ordinary and the everyday, in everything and everyone, ("Teach me, my God and King, In all things Thee to see"). It's a poem that is surely inspired by Psalm 139: 'If I go up to heaven thou art thou; if I go down to hell thou art there also.'

How should I praise Thee, Lord? how should my rhymes  
Gladly engrave Thy love in steel,  
If what my soul doth feel sometimes,  
My soul might ever feel!

Although there were some forty heav'ns, or more,  
Sometimes I peer above them all;  
Sometimes I hardly reach a score;  
Sometimes to hell I fall.

O rack me not to such a vast extent;  
Those distances belong to Thee:  
The world's too little for Thy tent,  
A grave too big for me.

Wilt Thou meet arms with man, that Thou dost stretch  
A crumb of dust from heaven to hell?  
Will great God measure with a wretch?  
Shall He thy stature spell?

O let me, when Thy roof my soul hath hid,  
O let me roost and nestle there;  
Then of a sinner Thou art rid,  
And I of hope and fear.

Yet, take Thy way; for, sure, Thy way is best:  
Stretch or contract me Thy poor debtor:  
This is but tuning of my breast,  
To make the music better.

Whether I fly with angels, fall with dust,  
Thy hands made both, and I am there.  
Thy power and love, my love and trust,  
Make one place everywhere.

Those lines ‘This is but tuning of my breast, To make the music better’ remind me so much of one of John Donne’s final sonnets, when he prays:

Since I am coming to that holy room  
Where with thy quire of saints for ever more  
I shall be made thy music; as I come  
I tune the instrument here at the door,  
And what I must do then, think heretofore.

And the final couplet (‘Thy power and love, my love and trust,/Make one place everywhere’) also echoes Donne. In Donne’s *The Good Morrow* it is his lover’s love which ‘makes one little room an everywhere’.

The whole purpose of Herbert’s life at Bemerton and of his poetry was to explore the true nature of God and the journey of the soul. What makes him both so special and so human is the continuing struggle. Beethoven wrote on the manuscript of his *Missa Solemnis* ‘From the heart: may it go to the heart’, and it’s the same with Herbert. The poems move us, and speak to us so directly, because they are so honest, so vulnerable. He is appalled by his continuing sinfulness: ‘I could not use a friend as I use thee’; by his mixed motives: ‘I will complain, yet praise;/I will bewail, approve:/And all my sour-sweet days/I will lament, and love.’; and perplexed by the seeming absence of God. As in *The Denial*:

When my devotions could not pierce  
Thy silent ears,  
Then was my heart broken, as was my verse;  
My breast was full of fears  
And disorder.

My bent thoughts, like a brittle bow,  
Did fly asunder:  
Each took his way; some would to pleasures go,  
Some to the wars and thunder  
Of alarms.

As good go anywhere, they say,  
As to benumb  
Both knees and heart, in crying night and day,  
“Come, come, my God, O come!”  
But no hearing.

O that Thou shouldst give dust a tongue  
    To cry to Thee,  
And then not hear it crying! all day long  
    My heart was in my knee,  
    But no hearing.

Therefore my soul lay out of sight,  
    Untuned, unstrung:  
My feeble spirit, unable to look right,  
    Like a nipt blossom, hung  
    Discontented.

O cheer and tune my heartless breast,  
    Defer no time;  
That so Thy favours granting my request,  
    They and my mind may chime,  
    And mend my rhyme.

The cry 'Come, come, my God, O come,/But no hearing', is repeated twice because he thinks God hasn't heard, but elsewhere he writes: 'Shall he that made the ear/Not hear?', and 'Thou canst no more not hear, than thou canst die.'

George Herbert writes of the Christian paradox: not simply of sin and grace, but of the majesty as well as the intimacy of God; of his wrath tempered by his mercy and forgiveness; of his justice moderated by his love. Here then, to end, are four short poems which demonstrate how all the paradoxes are resolved in the person of Christ. First, a poem composed almost entirely of monosyllables, *Discipline*:

Throw away Thy rod,  
Throw away Thy wrath:  
    O my God,  
Take the gentle path.

For my heart's desire  
Unto Thine is bent:  
    I aspire  
To a full consent.

Not a word or look  
I affect to own,  
    But by book,  
And Thy Book alone.

Though I fail, I weep;  
Though I halt in pace,  
    Yet I creep  
To the throne of grace.

Then let wrath remove;  
Love will do the deed;  
    For with love  
Stony hearts will bleed.

Love is swift of foot;  
Love's a man of war,  
    And can shoot,  
And can hit from far.

Who can 'scape his bow?  
That which wrought on Thee,  
    Brought Thee low,  
Needs must work on me.

Throw away Thy rod;  
Though man frailties hath,  
    Thou art God:  
Throw away Thy wrath.

Next, two tiny poems (the shortest he wrote, I think) which contain the very heart of his faith. In the first we remember that I and J were virtually interchangeable. *Jesu*:

JESU is in my heart, His sacred name  
Is deeply carved there: but the other week  
A great affliction broke the little frame,  
E'en all to pieces; which I went to seek:  
And first I found the corner where was J,  
After, where ES, and next where U was graved.  
When I had got these parcels, instantly  
I sat me down to spell them, and perceived  
That to my broken heart He was "I ease you,"  
And to my whole is JESU.

Its twin is a poem called *Love-Joy*, in which Herbert sees a bunch of grapes in a stained glass window, bringing to mind Jesus' words: 'I am the vine'. The window speaks to him of J.C., perhaps the stem of the bunch suggesting the J and the shape of the grapes suggesting the C. And the image of the grapes, with a kneeling George Herbert gazing up at them, is in his window in our cathedral.

As on a window late I cast mine eye,  
I saw a vine drop grapes with J and C  
Annealed on every bunch. One standing by  
Asked what it meant; I (who am never loth  
To spend my judgment) said, it seemed to me  
To be the body and the letters both  
Of Joy and Charity. "Sir, you have not missed,"  
The man replied; "it figures JESUS CHRIST."

R.S.Thomas was another poet/priest who knew the paradox of the conflict in his life of sin and grace, as well as the paradox of the seeming absence of God and the presence of one who woos him from within that seeming absence. He loved the poetry of George Herbert and writes of him: 'Herbert commends a way of life that is still viable. It is reason... warmed by emotion, and solidly based on order and discipline, the soul's good form. This way of life he celebrates in verse that is sometimes quaint, sometimes over-ingenious, but never trite. It escapes prettiness, and has rather, at times, the simplicity and gravity of great poetry. It is proof of the eternal beauty of holiness.'

I want to end with one of Herbert's deservedly best-known poems, and certainly my own much-quoted favourite: *Love*. When that extraordinary Jewish Frenchwoman, Simone Weil, was searching for faith, she spent Holy Week, 1938, at the monastery of Solesmes, where a young English Roman Catholic introduced her to the poems of Herbert. 'I discovered the poem called *Love*', she writes. 'I learnt it by heart. Often at the culminating point of a violent headache, I make myself say it over and over, concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines... It was during one of those recitations that... Christ himself came down and took possession of me.' The poem is of course about the eucharist and is based on Jesus' words in which he says to his friends that at the heavenly banquet in his Father's Kingdom he will come to them and serve them as he had once washed their feet at the Last Supper. It speaks of a God ('quick-ey'd love') who not only searches us out, but who turns aside all our protests of not being worthy of his love, of not being of value, and says in effect: 'Let me be the best judge of that'. A God who would have us learn that a guest's role is to be grateful, not apologetic. A God who says: 'I love you because you are you.'

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,  
    Guiltie of dust and sinne.  
But quick-ey'd Love, observing me grow slack  
    From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning  
    "If I lack'd anything."

"A guest," I answer'd, "worthy to be here."  
    Love said, "you shall be he."  
"I, the unkinde, ungratefull? Ah my deare,  
    I cannot look on thee."  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
    "Who made the eyes but I?"

"Truth Lord, but I have marr'd them: let my shame  
    Go where it doth deserve."  
"And know you not," says Love, "who bore the blame?"  
    "My deare, then I will serve."  
"You must sit down," says Love, "and taste my meat."  
    So I did sit and eat.