

George Herbert country priest with a drawerful of poems

Thursday, 11 February 2010

Hymn number 587 in our hymnbook, "The God of love my shepherd is" had a narrow escape from oblivion, as did numbers 494, 497 and 583. We wouldn't have them if George Herbert had not decided shortly before his death to send his poems, the private hoard of a lifetime, to a friend, asking him for his opinion because Herbert did not trust his own... A Cambridge graduate whose brilliant university career attracted the attention of King James I, Herbert took priest's orders, serving in the parishes of Bemerton and Fugglestone. He read Morning and Evening Prayer daily in the church and regularly visited his parishioners, bringing them the sacraments when they were ill, and food and clothing when they were in want.

His poems, he told his friend, were a "picture of the many spiritual Conflicts that have past betwixt God and my Soul...." Apart from classical allusions and a few other things, almost every aspect of his poetry is traceable to the Bible, especially to the Psalms and to Jesus' parables. Like parabolic teaching, Herbert's simplicity contains more than first meets the eye or ear. It is art that covers its tracks. And echoes of the Psalms "reverberate across his poetry, to an extent unmatched by any other poet in English literature," as an editor of his works puts it.

Along with John Donne, Herbert is numbered among the major "metaphysical poets" of the 17th century. He influenced contemporaries like Richard Crashaw and Henry Vaughan, and later poets as different from each other as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Emily Dickinson and Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Here is one of his best-known poems. Rather than the Psalms or the parables, it may call to mind I John 3.20: "If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart."

Love (III)

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back

Guilty 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 any thing.

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, sayes Love, who bore the blame?

My deare, then I will serve.

You must sit down, sayes Love, and taste my meat:

So I did sit and eat.

The friend to whom the dying Herbert entrusted his poems was Nicholas Ferrar, founder of a religious community at Little Gidding. Herbert asked Ferrar to decide whether they should be published or burnt. Ferrar published them in 1633, shortly after Herbert's death at age 39, preserving for posterity the works that over the years and centuries have gained both critical esteem and great affection. Richard Crashaw wrote, "Divinest love lyes in this book."

George Williams

Sources quoted / adapted: The English Poems of George Herbert (ed. C.A. Patrides), Izaak Walton, James E. Kiefer, Herbert biography in the Encyclopaedia Britannica.