

GEORGE HERBERT

THE LESSON: A LIFE'S WITNESS IN POETRY

“Blessed are the peacemakers.”
(Matthew 5:9)

Three different monarchs ruled England during the life of George Herbert: Elizabeth I, James I, and Charles I. It was a time of comparative stability, though tensions between Catholic and Protestant factions remained strong. Elizabeth I had established a “middle road” in the English Church, one which unified worship, but allowed for varying opinions on secondary theological matters. Thus, the Book of Common Prayer was updated, and Cranmer’s 42 Articles of Religion became the 39 Articles that we still have today. Many of those who had fled England under the persecutions of Mary I now returned. Then in 1603, James VI of Scotland became King James I of England, uniting Scotland, Ireland and England under one rule. During his reign the colonization of America began, literary culture flourished, and the Authorized King James Version of the Bible was written. James I’s son, Charles I, came to the throne in 1625, and his reign was more acrimonious, though things did not reach a crisis during George Herbert’s lifetime.

“As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”
(Joshua 24:15)

George was born in Wales in 1593 into a noble family. He was a gifted poet, and as a young man was elected to the position of orator at Trinity College in Cambridge. Even in those early days he believed it was more worthwhile to write about the love of God than about human romance. To the surprise of many of his friends, George chose to leave his post as orator and the many opportunities that were open to him, in order to become an ordained priest, marry, and take up ministry at an obscure country parish.

George would only be rector of his little rural parish for three years before succumbing to an early death, but during that time he preached, extended pastoral care to the poor and sick of his community, rebuilt the church (using his own money), and wrote a guide for parish ministry in the country. He and his wife Jane also took in three orphaned nieces. George would become known as “Holy Mr. Herbert”. During these years, he also became good friends with Nicholas Ferrar, who had founded a small informal Anglican religious community two miles away at Little Gidding.

“To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.”
(Psalm 25:1)

George died of tuberculosis at the age of 39. But on his deathbed, he reached out to his friend Nicholas and entrusted to him a collection of poetry, asking him to determine whether it should be burned – or published. George described this work as “a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed between God and my soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus, my Master, in whose service I have now found perfect freedom”. The poems were published in the same year that George died.

George’s poetry was technically brilliant, but its value goes beyond that. His life and poetry set an example of devotion, order and harmony in an age of controversy and division. In his poetry, George invites readers into his own experience of faith, sharing with them his struggles and his insights. One example of his work is the beautiful poem “Love (III)”, which speaks of the divine invitation extended to us all.

Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back
 Guilty of dust and sin.
 But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lacked any thing.

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A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

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

(SOURCE ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: BRITANNICA.COM, "GEORGE HERBERT" AND "NICHOLAS FERRAR" | JUSTO GONZÁLEZ, "THE STORY OF CHRISTIANITY, VOLUME 2" | GEORGE HERBERT, "LETTER TO NICHOLAS FERRAR" | GEORGE HERBERT, "THE TEMPLE" | POETRYFOUNDATION.ORG, "GEORGE HERBERT" | WIKIPEDIA.ORG, "CHARLES I OF ENGLAND", "ELIZABETH I OF ENGLAND", "NICHOLAS FERRAR", "GEORGE HERBERT" AND "JAMES VI AND I".)

AT-HOME CHALLENGE

Each morning and evening, follow your own rule of prayer.

(IF YOU DON'T HAVE ONE, TRY SAYING THE MORNING AND EVENING PRAYERS FROM THE "FORMS OF PRAYER TO BE USED IN FAMILIES", WHICH BEGINS ON PAGE 728 OF THE BCP. IF YOU DON'T HAVE A COPY, YOU CAN LOOK IT UP HERE: [HTTP://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER.](http://PRAYERBOOK.CA/RESOURCES/BCPONLINE/FAMILY-PRAYER))

Review today's lesson. Choose a line of scripture or a phrase from the story of George that you find edifying, inspiring or instructive:

Throughout this week, spend some time prayerfully reflecting on the phrase you've chosen. Decide on one concrete action you can take this week based on your reflections, and come back next week prepared to share a bit about your reflections and the action you took.

- AND/OR -

Take some time to pray through the following prayer.

O God, who by thy Holy Spirit hast given unto one man a word of wisdom, and to another a word of knowledge, and to another the gift of tongues: We praise thy Name for the gifts of grace manifested in thy servant George, and we pray that thy Church may never be destitute of the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (SUPPLEMENTARY COLLECT OF A DOCTOR OF THE CHURCH, POET, OR SCHOLAR, P. 317)