

'Quick-Eyed Love' – Journeying through Lent 2024 with George Herbert

Week 1 – 'Love bade me welcome'

George Herbert was an early 17th century poet and, towards the end of his life, priest. He was a 'Country Parson' as the Rector of Bemerton near Salisbury for the last 3 years of his life. He died in 1633.

This series will take six poems – one for each week during Lent – looking at the faith aspect of the poems, with an extra one to complete the series for Easter Day itself. Herbert was one of the first poets to explore interior life. His poems were not published in his lifetime – they seem to have been private spiritual exercises for himself – but he sent a book of them to his friend Nicholas Ferrar as he lay dying, saying that they painted

a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul, before I could subject mine to the will of Jesus my Master' and asked that if Ferrar could 'think it may turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul, let it be made public; if not...burn it.

So in this Lent series I think that we are using the poems as he intended.

There is one poem a week (on the leaflet). You'll get most out of the series if you read that week's poem it before or after the session, but do read it several times! The poems bear repetition, and perhaps memorising, especially the one we are looking at tonight, *Love (III)* (maybe as a Lenten task?).

Prologue – 'The Most Beautiful Poem in the World'

George Herbert is associated with Bemerton in Wiltshire, just outside Salisbury. But I don't want to begin there.

Instead let's go in the imagination to Solesmes Abbey in Normandy and an ancient stone church, where the general congregation sit in darkness at the back, looking at light at the east end. The monks sing Gregorian chant. It's Holy Week, mid-April 1938.

Beyond the Abbey the international situation is fraught. Germany has just annexed Austria, Europe is edging towards war, and the world waits anxiously in fear of a second global conflict just twenty years after the end of the last one.

A slight young woman from Paris named Simone is there. She dresses simply and is careless of her appearance. Her dark hair is wavy and rather unruly. She wears large round spectacles because of her short-sight, and she often seems clumsy, uncoordinated and rather fragile to others. At 29 years old she has already excelled academically. She's tried teaching philosophy in secondary schools, and she has seen at first hand the Nazi regime in Germany. She has been quick to recognise its evil character. In a short life she has already accumulated a wealth of experience.

Simone's family is of Jewish heritage, but they have repudiated that identity in the anti-Semitic culture of France. Simone's upbringing has been atheistic.

Gifted mathematician and linguist, she has read ancient Greek fluently since she was 12 and immersed herself in Classical literature and philosophy. Yet she has always been in the shadow her even more gifted older brother, and from an early age her sense of inferiority has often led her into depression. She has a deep empathy with the sufferings of others: as a little girl during the First

World War refused to eat sugar, as she knew that the soldiers on the front line were going without. All her life she has eaten little, and for ten years now she has suffered from crippling migraine headaches.

Frantic and restless activity – both physical and intellectual – has led her to the edge of exhaustion, and she has had to take frequent sick leave from her teaching. Here at the Abbey in Solesmes she finds some calm as she sits in the church. Her splitting headaches make every sound like a hammer blow to her, but she manages somehow to set aside her pain and let the chant and the words of the liturgy wash over her. Above all, this Holy Week, she reflects on the Passion of Jesus, and its extraordinary blend of suffering and love.

Though her family are atheists, Simone is attracted to Christianity – why else would she spend Holy Week in a monastery? – and she lives her life by Christian principles. Social justice is the passion that has driven her on, and this aspect of the Christian tradition she finds deeply resonant. Yet God has always seemed to be an insoluble philosophical problem to her: ‘the data could not be obtained’ she says. Twice in the last two years she has had a sense of encountering ‘something stronger than I was’, and on the second occasion, as she visited Assisi, she found herself unexpectedly kneeling. But she does not pray. To do so would mean addressing the God in whom she cannot believe and does not think she can know. Simone remains, fiercely and passionately, an outsider.

At the Abbey she has met a young Englishman named John Vernon. He introduces her to the work of the English Metaphysical Poets of the 17th Century – John Donne, Henry Vaughan and George Herbert amongst them. When she leaves the Abbey, on the Tuesday of Easter Week, it is the poems that go with her as she returns to ordinary life and her attic flat in Paris, beneath the looming clouds of approaching war.

Despite the Munich Agreement in late September, hailed as establishing ‘Peace for our time’, it quickly becomes clear that nothing will now stand in the way of Hitler’s increasing ambitions, and in early November *Kristallnacht* in Germany makes the danger to Jews very plain, even if, like Simone and her family, they have cut all cultural or religious connection with their heritage. The shadow of anti-Semitism is looming over Europe once more. Perhaps it is no wonder that Simone’s headaches plague her incessantly.

To quell the agony Simone tries to memorise some of the poems, remembering how extreme concentration can give some respite from the pain. The pain is physical and almost unbearable, even in her sleep. One poem in particular helps: ‘I make myself say it over, concentrating all my attention upon it and clinging with all my soul to the tenderness it enshrines.’ And one day, as she recites this poem in English, suddenly, she says ‘Christ came down and took possession of me.’

Later she would write that this ‘possession’ by Christ was ‘a presence more personal, more certain, and more real than that of a human being; it was inaccessible both to sense and to imagination, and it resembled the love that irradiates the tenderest smile of somebody one loves.’ In her relentless intellectual pursuit of philosophy, ‘I had never foreseen the possibility of...a real contact, person to person, here below, between a human being and God’ she said; ‘I had vaguely heard tell of things of this kind, but I had never believed in them.’ But now, ‘in the midst of my suffering’ came ‘the presence of a love, like that which one can read in the smile of a beloved face.’

Simone said later that she had never ‘sought for God’ – God had come to her unbidden; she was seeking relief from pain, not the presence of Christ. Yet the experience was not isolated, and she herself had no doubt that in further encounters over the succeeding years she was in direct personal contact with God, and in a deeper and deeper way. Remaining the fierce and passionate outsider

she resisted baptism because, she said, she loved so much that was outside the Church (though not, in her view, outside God).

War came in late summer 1939. As France collapsed in 1940 she and her family fled Paris for Marseille, and eventually Simone made her way to London. There she worked for the Free French. Her desperate desire to return to France and participate in the Resistance was rejected on the grounds that she would be a danger to herself and others, and instead she was asked to produce philosophical foundations for a new, post-war, constitution. Diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1943, she was eventually moved to a Sanatorium outside Ashford in Kent, where she died at the end of August. She was buried in the local cemetery, in the Catholic section, with a simple gravestone that gave just the dates of her birth and death and her name: Simone Weil.

Some years later, after her writings had been published, a second stone was added, which included the epitaph: 'Her writings have established her as one of the foremost modern philosophers.'

It was, as you will have guessed if you didn't already know, George Herbert's poem *Love (III)* that prompted Simone's sense that 'Christ came down and took possession of me', which mediated 'the presence of a love, like that which one can read in the smile of a beloved face'. She called it simply '*le plus beau poème du monde*' – the most beautiful poem in the world.

Love (III) is deceptive in its simplicity and oblique in its approach. It is not superficially Christian at all, and might apply to a situation of human love and welcome, which may be why it appealed to Simone. Yet it opened a way for Christ to come to her – she was quite clear that this was the dynamic at work, not the other way round, and that the initiative was a divine rather than human one. Love that bade her welcome, and she responded.

Just as Simone Weil's experience of the love of God took place in the midst of personal pain and a situation of great uncertainty and fear, so Herbert's relationship with God outlined in his poems had a background of political confusion and religious conflict, and indifferent personal health. The nature and character of God was contested in Herbert's time, and there was much fear and anguish as a result. Yet his poems, while many of them deal with questions and 'affliction', consistently portray a God who is Love, who is 'quick-ey'd' in noticing need, and who 'smilingly' replies to our complaints. These are poems of playful, joyous wit and deep if lightly worn learning. They are the fruit of years of reflection and refining, though they appear spontaneous. Above all, they show a close relationship with God, characterised by the lived experience of grace, mercy and joy.

Simone Weil and George Herbert both died in their 30s, sufferers from tuberculosis, but more importantly they shared the experience and the conviction of meeting the presence of God. I hope that as we read some of George Herbert's poems together this Lent you may also feel something of that same experience and conviction.

The Poem

Love (III)

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 lack'd anything.
'A guest,' I answer'd, '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 marr'd 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.

Before going on, take a few moments to consider how you feel about this poem. Don't analyse it – just try to identify your emotional response.

This is a poem of encounter. It is precisely choreographed; so much so that it is worth paying close attention to the body-language both described and implied in the poem. Herbert's poems are often mini-dramas. Visualising how the poems might be embodied and acted out can often be a key to a deeper understanding of them.

What he describes is not a grand encounter. It is low-key and its beginning would have been repeated often in Herbert's peripatetic life as he wandered, with no fixed home until he settled at Bemerton at the age of 37, from house to house amongst his friends, relatives and wider acquaintances.

As the poem opens, there, on the doorstep, stands his host, smiling, welcoming him in.

Herbert imagines that the hospitable host is in fact 'Love'. It's a fascinating choice, for, apart from the Guest using the name 'Lord' later in the poem, nothing else marks out Love as either male or female. It would be easy to make too much of this, perhaps, but Herbert's early experiences of being welcomed and of homecoming would have been from his mother, the remarkable and wildly hospitable Magdalen Herbert, later Danvers, one of the most extraordinary women of the 17th, or indeed any, century (more about her in later weeks, I hope). The use of 'Love' for God here evokes all our best experiences of unconditional, welcoming love. In the dramatic setting of this poem I often find myself visualising Love as feminine, and you may like to do so too.

So, the door is open, there are outstretched arms reaching out to us....Here is home.

Except that Herbert turns away. His 'soul' draws back, 'guilty of dust and sin.'

This is a scene which Herbert had probably literally been part of many times: covered in dust and dirt from the road, perhaps nervous of how he has behaved to his host in the past (maybe especially so if we imagine his mother welcoming him on the doorstep!).

But Herbert transposes the everyday domestic encounter into a moment of human-divine confrontation. Dust, he knew from the book of Genesis, was what he came from and to which he would return.¹ Dust stands for decay and mortality; as he wrote elsewhere in the evocative image of an hour-glass with sand (dust) running through it,

‘flesh is but the glass, which holds the dust
That measures all our time, which shall
Be crumbled into dust.’²

In his encounter with Love, Herbert is suddenly only too aware that he is ‘of the earth, earthy’ as St Paul said,³ and not fit to enter this heavenly house on whose threshold he stands.

He mentions sin, but this is not perhaps a matter of his own personal inadequacy or sinfulness. It is the whole human condition which makes Herbert unfit to accept the welcome of Love, who is God, and makes him turn sadly away.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a great but hauntingly troubled poet, said in 1826 that Herbert’s poems helped him combat his ‘tendency to self-contempt’, and *Love (III)* may still speak to that sense of lack of self-esteem and unworthiness which is just as prevalent still as it was in Herbert’s time. *Love (III)* is a poem of encounter, welcome and acceptance, but as in many of Herbert’s poems it does not offer simple resolutions. ‘Self-contempt’ is pervasive and does not easily yield to welcome and acceptance, but reasserts itself again and again, in battle after battle. Though Thomas Cranmer’s *Book of Common Prayer*, which Herbert loved, has good theological reasons to emphasise that worshippers are ‘miserable offenders’ in whom there is ‘no health’, its language can sometimes make self-contempt worse. The more extreme theologies of Herbert’s puritan contemporaries doubled down on the utter sinfulness and worm-like nature of humanity, creating extreme anxiety and fear of the awful judgement of God amongst many. Today the reasons for anxiety and fear are different but the emotions are similar, and can be just as hard to move.

As Herbert turns away to go, Love sees him growing ‘slack’ from his entrance across the threshold.

‘Slack’ tends to be applied by Herbert to starting something well and enthusiastically and then petering out and failing to follow it through. In one of his other poems it is an accusation that others bring against him.⁴ His biography suggests there was some truth in this. Herbert is describing someone who knows that he can easily ‘put his hand to the plough’ and then look back.⁵

Yet Love, wonderfully described as ‘quick-eyed’, is there before him.

Nothing gets past Love for Herbert.

¹ Genesis 3.19

² *Church Monuments* lines 20ff.

³ 1 Cor. 15.47

⁴ The Answer, lines 7-8, where others ‘think me eager, hot and undertaking,/But in my prosecutions slack and small’, probably written after 1625.

⁵ Luke 9.62.2

Love, in fact, knows him better than he knows himself and has anticipated his reaction and darts out of the house to continue the encounter. Outside the porch now, Love asks if he is lacking anything – has he lost something on the way, or perhaps forgotten to bring it?

Well, yes, says Herbert, in a characteristically wry, ironic and slightly sarcastic response: all that's missing is a Guest who deserves to be here. In other words, the good host cannot supply this lack. There's nothing to be done. He'd better be on his way.

Love will not take no for an answer. '*You shall be he*' says Love, but Herbert is curiously comfortable in his misery, to the extent that he won't even turn and look at Love.

So Love reaches out to him, having already welcomed him and invited, now Love takes his hand, and, not angry at his churlishness but smiling instead, reminds him '*Who made the eyes but I?*'.

Welcomed, invited, held by the hand, still Herbert protests. Yes, Love did make the eyes, but Herbert counters that he has marred or broken what he has been given. It's almost a chess-match of move and counter-move.

Instead of simply going back to sin, Herbert introduces shame, that burning sense of inadequacy which means he just wants to crawl away into a hole and curl up and hide. The proper place for him, the place he deserves, he feels, is hell. Remarkably, as many commentators on Herbert have pointed out, in a religious culture that emphasised hell and its horrors greatly, he wrote no poem relating to hell, and in fact hardly mentions it directly at all.

Love – immediately again – counter-moves, this time decisively: '*know you not...who bore the blame?*' And at last Herbert turns towards Love.

It's as if his shame and sin is released, which is of course the point. Love has borne the blame on the cross of Jesus, and that is what makes it possible for Herbert to step across the threshold and into the house.

Now we are in the hall, both the entrance and also the place where a table might be set with food for the traveller. But Herbert is not done yet. Once again, he wobbles.

In the choreography of the poem he kneels: '*then I will serve.*' This simple response alludes to the Last Supper in John's Gospel, where Jesus kneels before the disciples as a servant to wash their feet and Peter objects. Rather than Herbert serving Love, Love will serve him, and he must submit and receive the gift.

In the last movement of the poem, Love tells him that he must '*taste my meat*' – '*meat*' being food in general in 17th-century England. Love, still holding Herbert's hand, raises him from kneeling and invites him to sit. Though this is, at one level, an everyday domestic scene, Herbert is always alive to the deep resonances of the holy in the ordinary.

In Herbert's day there was much debate over the proper way of receiving bread and wine at Communion: should worshippers stand as freely forgiven children of God, or kneel as penitent and grateful sinners? Or even, perhaps, sit as was clearly expected in a number of 17th-century Church interiors that have survived, with communicants seated on benches around the table.

Love raises the Guest to sit at the feast. It is Love's initiative that qualifies the Guest to sit, despite his '*dust and sin*' – and so we arrive back at the opening of the poem, but transformed by the grace of God from ungrateful surliness to beloved belonging.

What biblical resonances does this poem have for you? I've mentioned one already – Jesus washing the disciples' feet. But can you think of others? Pause, and let your imagination work...

Herbert's poems are always steeped in biblical allusions, but there are a couple in particular which particularly stand out for me as background to this poem.

The first is the story of the Prophet Elijah's exhausted flight to the Judean desert, in fear of his life after his triumph over the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 19:

He himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a Juniper tree: and he requested for himself that he might die, and said, 'It is enough, now O Lord, take away my life: for I am not better than my fathers.' And as he lay and slept under a Juniper tree, behold then, an Angel touched him, and said unto him. 'Arise, and eat.'⁶

Like Herbert in the poem, Elijah is overwhelmed with unworthiness. God feeds him but he is not at first restored, eventually seeking refuge in a cave where, finally, he hears the voice of God not in the wind, or earthquake or fire, but in a 'still, small voice'⁷ and is commissioned for fresh service. Read together with *Love (III)*, this passage begs the question, What happens next, after Herbert sits and eats?

The second passage for me is Jesus' story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. *Love (III)* is almost a paraphrase of the parable. It describes the conscious unworthiness and shame of the returning Son, whose prepared confession includes a plea to be taken back as a servant rather than a child.

But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said unto him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. Bu the father said to his servants, 'Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it, and let us eat and be merry. For this my son was dead, and is alive again: he was lost and is found. And they began to be merry.'⁸

What especially attracts my attention if this passage is read next to *Love (III)* is the corporate context in which the drama between father and son is played out. There is a household surrounding them, underlined by the epilogue to the tale as the elder brother expresses his anger that the father's compassion. Though the relationship between the father and the prodigal is centre-stage, the feast would not be much of a feast without a large number of others to join in, share the joy and 'be merry.'

To the 21st-century reader *Love (III)* can easily seem to be between two participants on their own, playing out an intense transactional drama between them. Yet Herbert says nothing about the absence of others, and in fact his own experience of being alone, especially at a meal, would have been extremely rare. Households, especially of the well-to-do as Herbert was, included servants and wider family (at Bemerton there were 6 servants, as well as his 3 nieces and his wife Jane), all of whom would be likely to be at the table already if the meal was ready to be tasted. Herbert had

⁶ 1 Kings 19.4-5.

⁷ 1 Kings 19.12.

⁸ Luke 15.20-24.

grown up amongst a family of ten children and his mother's capacity to offer hospitality was legendary.

Read against this background, *Love (III)* looks a little different. Perhaps this is a corporate meal to which Herbert is invited, which may even already have started. If so, then Love's invitation to sit and eat is also an invitation to participate in the household and the family, to join with the merriment, conversation and jokes as well as the food. It is not only Love who welcomes the Guest, but Love's family and household too. The corporate aspect of Christian life was deeply important to Herbert, as we shall see when we look at his poem on prayer.

There are also a couple of theological themes running through the poem which catch my eye, too.

Love is characterised as maker ('Who made the eyes...?'), redeemer ('who bore the blame?'), and source of present sustenance ('You...must taste my meat'). In other words there is a simple pattern that relates to the Trinity: the Father the Creator; the Son the Redeemer; the Holy Spirit the sustainer and provider of present experience. The single word Love describes and unites all three.

Herbert's favourite theologian was Augustine, the 4th-5th century Bishop of Hippo in North Africa and most influential of the thinkers in the early Church. Augustine famously begins his *Confessions* with a phrase about our restless hearts addressed to God: 'You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they rest in you'. George Herbert, amongst many other things one of the most accomplished Latin scholars of his day, would have known that the full phrase Augustine used can mean not just 'for yourself' but also 'to yourself' or 'towards yourself', so we might translate the phrase, 'You have made us to tend towards you and our hearts are restless till they rest in you.'

Humans tend towards God, as a tree or flower will tend towards the sun. So when we turn away, wilfully, we also find ourselves turning back, drawn towards Love. *Love (III)* dramatises that process of turning and returning, of restlessness yet seeking rest. There is no real rest outside the unconditional Love of God.

In the end *Love (III)* reminds us that this is what God is about: radical grace and love which we can do nothing to earn because it is simply there at the heart of the universe, drawing us patiently and gently towards it. But it can be a hard task to accept that, and to accept that the Love of God is unconditional, as we'll pursue further in the next session. Hearing the invitation of Love, our eagerness curdles and grows cold as we twist and turn, unable to look Love in the face. Yet the invitation stands no matter how many times we squirm away.

Sit, says Love, and eat.