

Homily, St. Andrew's
Sunday, October 4, 2014
John 21:15-17

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be ever more acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Today marks a shift in our fall journey through Anglican tradition. Up until now we have been considering the turbulent 16th century and some of the key people involved with major changes in the English Church. We have talked of kings and queens, Archbishops and theologians... influential people who moved in the upper echelons of English society. Today is very different. Today we honour and celebrate George Herbert, a simple priest and pastor, who may have begun with a life of privilege but who chose a quiet life of service to God. We only know his name because upon his death, a close friend published Herbert's expression of his heart of faith in poetry and shared it with the world. And so today we shift from head to heart. Today is a day to turn our attention to spirituality, to the inner life of faith, as particularly developed and expressed in our Anglican Church.

George Herbert was born in 1593 to an aristocratic Welsh family. He studied at some prestigious schools and had a short career in political life before becoming ordained in the church. Combining the political and religious sides of life and the discernment of which is the right venue for a person of deep faith to live out their calling is a repeating pattern in the Anglican tradition. We'll see it again in a few weeks, though with an opposite outcome, when we honour William Wilberforce. The pattern points to an important aspect of Anglican spirituality that helps define who we are... that is a focus "on the reformation of society through the agency of the Church." (9) In other words, the Church isn't considered an end in itself, but rather a vehicle through which social reform can be achieved. This was Herbert's heart - to live the Christian life in such a way that English society was being reformed, improved.

As his schooling was completed, Herbert seems to have struggled with his call to ordination and chose instead to sit as a member of Parliament. It didn't last long, however, as he became so disillusioned that within a year, in 1624, he sought ordination. Herbert's desire to serve God was consistent but the struggle of how to do so most effectively came to an end as he chose to serve within the church. He spent 5 years as a deacon before being priested and taking up a post as a country parson in the rural parish of Bemerton. There he served for only 3 years before he died of tuberculosis on March 1, 1633, just a month shy of his 40th birthday.

The legacy George Herbert left with his work is, however, immense. He wrote an essay titled "The Country Parson" that has become a classic of Anglican spirituality and a collection of poems titled "The Temple." This book of poems is organized into 3 sections: The Church Porch, The Church, and finally The Church Militant. The first and last sections are each long, individual poems while the middle section, "The Church" includes many, perhaps hundreds, of individual poems covering all aspects of human existence in relationship with God and as expressed through the community and worship of the Church.

The first poem in "The Church" is titled "The Altar." We will hear it today as our prayer over the gifts when we turn to the Eucharist and it is printed in your bulletin, if you'd like to take a look at it now... [pause] This poem sets the tone for Herbert's focus on the centrality of communal worship, felt and experienced intensely by an individual worshipper as key to relationship with God. Herbert draws an analogy in the poem between the altar, as a piece of sacred, stone furniture in the church and the

human heart. But Herbert begins with brokenness... "A broken altar, Lord, thy servant rears; Made of a heart, and cemented with tears..." That Herbert doesn't shy away from brokenness... I assume that means his own brokenness, his own broken heart perhaps... this is something I find both comforting and encouraging. It is a good starting place.

And it matters that right off the top of his extended poetic description of "The Church," brokenness and the altar - a central symbol of the church - are connected with the human heart. These three are the locales of intimacy and of sacredness. If Herbert expresses the heart of Anglican spirituality, then perfection is no requirement for membership in this community of faith. All that is required is to approach the throne of God - the altar of God, made from human hands through the power of God - hard heart and all. The poem ends with a most beautiful reversal: "Oh let thy blessed sacrifice be mine; and sanctify this altar to be thine." We usually think of the sacrifice we remember at the Eucharist as being that of Jesus on the cross but if the sacrifice is "mine," I wonder what Herbert means? Maybe it's the sacrifice of a hard, yet broken, heart? Likewise, the prayer to "sanctify this altar" refers to a piece of church furniture... but it also refers to the heart that is the subject of most of the poem. It is a most beautiful and evocative expression of the intimate connectedness of the communal worship of the church with a personal relationship with God for each individual. And more than that, this is true even if the personal relationship with God is one of struggle and conflict, for it can and should nevertheless be lived out "within the context of the life and prayer of the Church as a whole." (xiii)

Several of Herbert's poems have been set to music, a few of which have become well known hymns. Today we are singing several and I encourage you really pay attention to what you're singing and let the heart behind the words sink in even further. The full poem from which the hymn "Teach Me, My God and King" is also printed in the bulletin as our prayer after communion. I think it works as a prayer to send us from the altar to the world because of the everyday spirituality that it expresses: "Teach me, my God and King; in all things thee to see; and what I do in anything; to do it as for thee..." This is the spirit with which we want to leave worship... taking the love and grace we experience, particularly at the altar, into the entirety of our lives for the benefit of the world. Herbert might have found his place, his arena for service to God in the church, but his work there was to encourage and inspire worshippers to take the sacredness with them to their everyday lives. In his poem turned hymn "The Elixir," he expresses that desire, that spirit, so evocatively: "A servant with this clause; Makes drudgery divine; Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws; Makes that and th' action fine."

There is much talk of spirituality these days. The phrase and attitude that perhaps sums it up is: "I'm spiritual but not religious." We've all heard it at one time or another, along with the underlying assumption that those of us who *are* religious are somehow not spiritual or that our spirituality is somehow tainted. I have a church friend who once said, in her great frustration about the phenomenon, that she wanted to get a t-shirt that said "I'm religious but not spiritual." There are people, I suppose, who do actually fit that description but I have never thought it was true of the vast majority of those who practice their spirituality in a community and as part of a long tradition - which is another way of describing those who are religious. The critique that in the practice of our religion, we have, from time to time, lost touch with our hearts and our personal experience of God in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, is one we need to pay attention to. But we don't have to travel far from our tradition to consider and re-consider how we carry what we do here in this sanctuary into the rest of our lives. Saints of our Church like George Herbert, who would never consider himself as such, if his poetry is any indication, can help us find our way with his expression of an ancient message for future generations.

The poem that closes out the collection known as "The Church" is a poem about love. Far more than a romantic poem, however, in this poem, Love is the key character and conversation partner with

the primary speaker. Let's hear it one more time as that conversation and then take a few moments to let the hope and grace of it sink into our bones...

[Read "Love (III)"]

The expression, the message, of Love in this poem is timeless. The broken altar offered completely to God that began the collection has transformed into a heavenly banquet, though uncertainty... doubt... remains on the part of the honoured guest. Love, however, transcends the doubt and affirms the worthiness of the guest, as true love always does: "You shall be she," Love says, for I created you and have deemed you worthy to be here. The host of this Eucharistic banquet is one that judges to be sure, but one that judges through eyes of a Love that wants only to know and to be known. It is this Love that invites us week by week to share in the banquet and then to allow the Love we experience here to inform our whole lives and to draw in those whose souls have drawn so far back that they haven't yet made it to the altar.

This Anglican spirituality that George Herbert expresses is thoroughly incarnational and sacramental. All of life is the realm of God with the prayer and worship of the Church providing meaning and definition to that life. With Herbert, may we too seek the reformation of our society as we delve more deeply into our own hearts and the heart of God.