

*If the work is burned, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.*

In the name of the Father...

“Love bade me welcome, but my soul drew back / Guilty of dust and sin.” So begins George Herbert’s famous poem ‘Love (III)’. It’s a poem that, if you have been a churchgoer for a while then you will have heard many, many times before already. It is one of those handful of poems that all Christians seem to know and which turn up with such monotonous regularity that we begin to grow a bit weary of them. And yet the advantage of their being such poems, poems we have heard over and over again throughout the course of our lives, is that they come to serve as a kind of weathervane of our changing theological instincts and sensitivities.

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.

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.

I suppose I must have been a teenager when I first heard or read Love (III) and back then my emotional landscape was painted in such primary colours that I was incapable of detecting the real human turmoil in this or in any of Herbert's poems. It all seemed a bit saccharine to me. And though in my bolshie student days I began to appreciate something of the literary qualities of Herbert's work, if this poem was of any theological interest to me it will only have been as fodder for the same old boring arguments about how far the mercy of God can be thought to extend. To the unbaptised? To people of other religions? To all people regardless of their sexuality? And yet to focus our attention on the mercy of God in the poem is to fail to locate the real drama in it because, as Herbert makes quite clear, there is nothing in the least dramatic about the mercy of God, it is absolutely consistent, absolutely reliable, absolutely unconditional.

It is only now in my incipient middle age that I have begun at last to locate the real human drama in Love (III), the very real sense of peril in it, and it is not at all a comforting discovery. It is not that I have found any cause to doubt the limitless mercy of God, either in the poem or in life, that is not the source of the concern. It is that I have begun to see, and perhaps more importantly to *feel*, just how perilously close the soul comes to saying ‘no’ to Love’s offer.

What has changed? Well, one thing that is certainly true is that in my earlier encounters with this poem I never really asked myself about the context in which the exchange between Love and the soul takes place. Whereas it seems clear to me now that what we are witnessing is the moment at the end of the soul’s earthly life when it comes face to face with the Love from which it has its being. And precisely because it is that Love the soul is confronted with, and with this Love there can be no deception or falsehood, it is also the moment when the soul comes face to face with the truth of its own life. And it is horrified at what it sees. Stripped of all its comforting self-delusions and fantasies, what the soul is forced to confront, for the first time, is the extraordinary waste and folly of its life, the sheer weight of petty, self-centred frivolity on which it has spent so much of its life worrying over, preoccupied by, ensnared in. And the crushing humiliation of this insight is very nearly too much for it to bear.

And yet if we are to understand what Herbert is trying to show us in Love (III), it is crucial that we recognise *why* it is that this insight is nearly too much for the soul, that for all its protestations of unworthiness, it is not remorse that makes the soul “grow slack” at Love’s offer, but pride. What the soul is saying with its long recitation of its sins is “No, I cannot accept to be loved as this person that Love reveals me to be,

this person who has wasted their life on so much stupidity and foolishness. I can only allow myself to be loved if I deserve it, if I have earned it, if love is the reward for the noble and meritorious life I have lived.” And that, of course, is precisely how it cannot be.

What Herbert’s poem reveals to us, in other words, is a thought that, in our great complacency, almost never occurs to us, namely how woefully underprepared we are to receive the mercy of God. So preoccupied are we with arguing over the extent of God’s mercy that we almost never think to question our own capacity to *receive* that mercy. Of course, we tell ourselves, if we are offered infinite love and mercy we will accept it. What Herbert shows us is how perilously naïve that assumption really is.

But the truth is we shouldn’t really need Herbert’s help in the first place when a moment’s reflection will show us how short-sighted this assumption really is. Consider, for instance, how difficult most of us find it to accept the help of others even in our everyday lives, not because we don’t believe in the genuineness of the offer, but because of the notion of ourselves it seems to imply, of someone who isn’t up to the job, who is weak, who can’t do it by themselves. Now magnify this a hundredfold so that the conception of ourselves at stake is the worthiness of our entire life, and you begin to get some notion of the peril we face in facing the mercy of God.

And if that doesn’t do it, then you might take a moment to consider what is really going on in the gospel we are going to hear tomorrow at the liturgy of Maundy Thursday. If Herbert is right about what is liable, at the last, to keep us from receiving the love of God then St Peter’s “You will never wash my feet” ought to be one of the

most chilling sentences in all of scripture. Jesus tells the disciples quite plainly that “unless I wash you, you have no part with me”. What he is offering them, in other words, is not a trivial act of kindness, but salvation itself. What he is saying to them is “if you want to receive what I have to give you, if you want to be saved, then this is how it has to be, you have to let me serve you, you have to let me save you.”

And I can't help but wonder whether to begin to see the real danger we are in of refusing the mercy of God, is simultaneously to see the true purpose of old age and infirmity in the economy of God. Is it possible, I wonder, to see the humiliations and depredations visited upon us by an ageing body, by declining health and dependence upon others, not merely as a cruelty, but as one of the mercies of God, as one last invitation to let go by which God seeks to prepare us for the far greater letting go that will be demanded of us when we meet Love face to face.

And this is where all of this begins to tie in to what I have been saying over the past couple of nights about the economy of salvation. Because to begin to see how woefully underprepared we are to receive the mercy of God is to begin to see what the purpose of this long and tumultuous journey, this economy of salvation, really is, that it is precisely to prepare us to receive the mercy of God.

The Church Father of the second century, St Irenaeus of Lyons, believed that although Adam and Eve were indeed created perfect, they were created in a state somewhat like that of children, they were if you like a kind of initial sketch of the humanity that would only come to its fullness in Christ. The purpose of the Fall and our exile from the Garden was that we that we might be prepared, through our long and painful wandering from the path, to receive the mercy of God, to grow up into

the adulthood that is capable of saying “yes” to Love’s offer. “Accustomed” is the word St Irenaeus uses, the purpose of the economy is that humanity might be “accustomed” to receive the mercy of God. What matters, then, is not so much the gravity of our sins, but whether we have allowed these sins to make us more or less us receptive to the mercy of God.

And if that is true then once again it seems have got everything back to front. If Herbert is right about what is liable, at the last, to keep us from receiving the love of God, then the one thing that is truly necessary in this life is not the doing of great deeds, it is not even that we should have “tried to live a good life”, the great Everyman defence stored up for the Day of Judgement. It is, in fact, nothing at all to do with mercy of God, and everything to do with us. It is that we should, by the grace of God, have found some way to face the humiliating reality of our sins, to become so accustomed to the vision of ourselves that our sins present us with that we may at the last be able to say “yes” to Love’s offer.

To put all this in a slightly different way, what Love (III) offers us is a vision of the reality that has, in fact, always underpinned the doctrine of purgatory. Purgatory not so much as a physical place but as a psychological and spiritual reality we cannot realistically hope simply to bypass if we are to receive the mercy of God. What Herbert and the doctrine of purgatory remind us is that someday we are going to have to face the reality of our sins, because someday we are going to face a Love that in its absolute purity and truth cannot but expose all the fantasies and falsehoods we have spun about ourselves, about who we are and what we deserve, and that the

forgoing of these fantasies will be the greatest and most painful trial of our entire lives.

And yet the reason the doctrine of purgatory is not merely a scare story designed to fill us all with holy dread, is because, as the Church has always maintained, there is a way we can make all this a less frightening prospect, that we can lessen the blow that Love will have to deliver to us at the last, not through the purchasing of indulgences, but simply because we can, if we choose, begin to face the reality of our sins in this life, as the saints have shown us. We can, by the grace of God, begin to let go of the fantasy version of ourselves which says that the only kind of love I can accept is the love that I have earned, that I deserve, that is no more than is owing to me.

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Amen.