

University Sermon, 1st November, 2020

given by

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'Daylight sanity and vigour': George Herbert, Poetry and Truth Decay

Just a little while ago I was asked to speak to an on-line conference of nearly a thousand preachers. I was given the title: 'How to preach when you have nothing to say'. I can only imagine that the organisers thought I was a particularly good example of someone in this situation. As I stand here this morning, this, for me, is a worrying thought and one which, I feel sure, you are now probably sharing. So, I advise we all take comfort in the words of Quentin Crisp that 'if at first you don't succeed, failure may be your style'.

This is a day set aside in gratitude for the generous minds and hearts that this University has both inspired and benefitted from. One of these is George Herbert, a Fellow of Trinity College who served as University Orator from 1620 to 1628. He is best known today as a poet, although his poems, after his death, were nearly prevented from publication by the Vice-Chancellor, until he was convinced they wouldn't cause religious or political controversy. What followed, though, was a very broad appreciation of his work. Charles I read Herbert in prison and Oliver Cromwell's chaplain recommended him to friends. The Puritan Richard Baxter in 1681 wrote of him that 'Heart-work and Heaven-work make up his Books'¹ and the Romantic Coleridge in 1826 told a friend that Herbert helped him with his 'tendency to self-contempt'².

There are many reasons for his lasting and diverse appeal – his honesty about there being no settled sense of himself being complete or unbreakable; a transparency about what he calls 'the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul'³; an openness about the constant adolescence of that soul with its agitated mind and its thoughts that are, he says, 'a case of knives'⁴; as well as his need to answer back, tempted to stomp off and bang the door behind him⁵. In Herbert, the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. His ability in his poems to wittily dispel human illusions without leaving us disillusioned is a rare and much needed art. Although unafraid to point to shadows, and declare them unfair or hurtful, nevertheless, the poems in all their density of suggestion are held in the scaffolding of his Christian belief that his being is a gift and what he can give in return for it is his becoming, who he becomes - and that this is not done by clever use of his own resource but by grace, the grace that ultimately makes reality trustworthy and which he describes so often as being taken 'by the hand'⁶.

Aldous Huxley captures all this nicely when he writes of Herbert, in 1932:

'The climate of the mind is positively English in its variableness and instability. Frost, sunshine, hopeless drought and refreshing rains succeed one another with bewildering rapidity. Herbert is the poet of this inner weather'⁷.

Now, when it came to preaching, although none of his sermons survives, Herbert, in his only prose work, *The Priest in the Temple*, is to the point. The preacher must have good eye-contact with the congregation, letting them know that he can see who is listening and who isn't; and the preacher mustn't exceed an hour in length because 'he that profits not in that time, will lesse afterwards'. Sermons are dangerous things, he claims, because 'none goes out of Church as he came in, but either better, or worse'. In similar vein to his friend John Donne, who said the importance of the preacher lay not in their eloquence or wit but in their 'nearnesse'⁸, how near to their humanity the listeners felt the speaker to be, Herbert tells his fellow preachers that they should all be:

'dipping and seasoning all our words and sentences in our hearts, before they come into our mouths....so that auditors may plainly perceive that every word is heart-deep'⁹.

Herbert was one of the first poets to give his poems titles, and the title I have given to this sermon begins with a description of Herbert by the much-missed poet Seamus Heaney. He described Herbert's 'daylight sanity and vigour'¹⁰. He did this in his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford University in which he developed the idea of the work of a poem being that of 'redress', perceiving in the self or in society where there is unbalance and placing a counter-reality in the scales: 'a reality', he says, 'which may be only imagined but which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual and can therefore hold its own and balance out against the historical situation'¹¹. He continues, 'this redressing effect of poetry comes from its being a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances.'¹² This is Heaney pursuing thoughts he had voiced a few years earlier that poetry is the 'revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself'¹³. It will, of course, often do this by adding a complication where the general lure is towards simplification, honest complexity over an easy but deceptive clarity.

Heaney goes on to praise Herbert for poems that elegantly embody this vocation of redress. He is a poet whose consciousness can be alive to two different and contradictory dimensions of reality, finding a way to navigate between them. His poetic sixth sense, pulley-like sympathies, multiple tonalities and his scales to assess the inner and outer landscapes, though often a bit volatile, all propel him to seek integrity in complexity and an understanding of the mystery who is God - whilst finding himself at the same time equally baffled, and yet in awe, of the mystery of himself and the potential of love. As the poet Wallace Stevens once said¹⁴, we should like poetry the way children like the snow, that is him, I think, noting the warm-chill of poetry's distilled air, a language form that can help re-imagine our landscape, seeing the wonder of our own breath again, exciting us into adventure with others.

Here is Heaney's conclusion:

'The confirmations bestowed by proportion and pace and measure are undeniably essential to his achievement, and there is a fundamental strength about the way his winding forms and woven metaphors match the toils of consciousness; but it is when the spirit is called extravagantly beyond the course that the usual life plots for it, when outcry or rhapsody is wrung from it as it flies in upon some unexpected image of its own solitude and distinctness, it is then that Herbert's work exemplifies the redress of poetry at its most exquisite'¹⁵.

So, to return to Herbert's image of our words needing to be 'heart-deep' and to the poetic vocation of 'redress' in self and society: these seem more than important at the moment. We meet on the edge of an American election, on the edge of a national COVID driven lockdown, on the edge of Brexit and a changing global, polarised political climate. We are living with a sense of dismantling in the air – from liberal democracy to the environment itself, from life as we knew it and lived it to basic human encounter and relationship. At such a time we need rich, awakened and trustworthy language to connect for the common good, a compass to navigate us through the land of loss and fear. And yet, language itself appears now, in the hands of some, to be equally dismantled - by a grave and dangerous abuse.

There is what has been called Truth Decay¹⁶ and the haunting question as to whether as a society we are losing interest in the truth of words, whether the idea of there being objective truth is now less important to us than opinions, crisis chatter or infotainment? Is to be interesting more important than being right? Is there a declining value of accuracy, as society's reserve currency? Is what matters not veracity but impact? Is dishonesty therefore not held to account as it once was? Is lying just a laugh that amuses by messing up our systems of value?

Now, it is tempting to blame some political and state leaders, if this is our situation. Some of them tend to campaign in graffiti and then govern in tweets. Some seem to think that what is truthful is merely what reinforces the mood of the crowd and their preference for alternative facts. History, thankfully, is peppered with those who warn us about such political manipulation. Alexander Hamilton, for instance, one of America's Founding Fathers, argued for a system of constitutional checks and balances to guard against the possibility, and I now quote him, 'of a man unprincipled in private life' and 'bold in his temper' one day arising who might 'mount the hobby horse of popularity' and 'flatter and fall in with all the non sense of the zealots of the day' in order to embarrass the government and 'throw things into confusion that he may ride the storm and direct the whirlwind'¹⁷. Wow. Imagine that ever happening. Perhaps that's why it was always important to believe that the first President, George Washington, said 'I cannot tell a lie'.

As you know those such as George Orwell and Hannah Arendt warned from experience that abusive power ultimately takes hold by slow injections of falsity that people begin to repeat. And so for all practical purposes, Orwell concludes, the lie will have become truth. It spreads and leads to a general distrust of experts, the belief that, say, science, if inconvenient somehow, is a conspiracy, and historical studies that don't back up your arguments can be revised. Journalism begins to reflect a selfie stick culture, seemingly holding things at an objective distance but actually only reflecting yourself and tribe. Religion, too, can hide its darker abuses with pious jargon and dead cliches repeated by some authority to pay deference to. We turn to social media and find that Facebook is where we lie to our friends and Twitter where we tell secrets to strangers. If there is anything to what I say, this is a dangerous place to find ourselves. Not least because power belongs to the loudest controller of the chaos and leaves us in a state where if you not at their table you are probably on their menu.

Pilate famously asked Jesus: 'what is truth?'¹⁸, but he doesn't hang around to find out the answer. After all, the crowd is putting on the pressure outside. One of the reasons I'm proud to be part of this University is that it is here to ask the same question: 'what is truth?' but

then, quite the opposite, to stick around, together, in a 'fellowship' even, to pursue the answers. A college is one of the antidotes to any fashion of falsity, a group of people committed to the pursuit of truth, in dialogue and cooperation, each ready to be corrected when necessary, passionate about accuracy but warning against quick clarity and the seduction of easy answers, fearless in seeing past and present and researching into the as yet unknown. Though very proud of our past, this tradition of truth-search we inherit makes us ultimately a place that seeks to be loyal to the future. A good education generates information but also enables formation, it helps the CV virtues of achievement, break through and contribution but knows also that we should focus on the eulogy virtues too¹⁹, what we want said at our funeral: were we kind, generous, a good parent or friend? Did we ask Job's question in life: where shall wisdom be found? What language will we need to begin to recognise an answer?

I'm proud too to be part of the Christian community, for all our faults, because we also celebrate the fact, along with others, that truth has other forms than facts, that sometimes truth is far too important to be literalistic about. The truth that is expressed artistically, musically (Herbert's great love), truth in narrative and myth, is the truth that is always part of the human inner life - the sense of that fragile life placed in your care, the unignorable intrusions of mystery when love or loss enter it, the intuition that somehow we need saving from ourselves by a love both beyond and within. I believe that when we walk in here or any place of worship we walk into a poem. As Herbert made his long way to Evensong in Salisbury cathedral, he knew that the Church's liturgy is a poetry in motion and we fail to understand its beauty if we miss the sensitive state of consciousness that its poetry can prompt. We are not spectators in worship. We pursue the truths that are able to translate into living, alert to the dangers of being coloured by the world's insanity, cruelty and so called common, but often crazed, sense. The poetry of liturgy and faith is a redress and a vehicle of potential for connected life, making us citizens and not just consumers. How we live the truth of our words was Herbert's quest because, as his contemporary Joseph Hall said, 'God loveth adverbs'²⁰.

Herbert embodied a Christian faith that is both a *loving search and a searching love*, an adventure into truth and mystery and intuition, and a charity that is not content with surface relationship but seeks to read between the lines, discern hurt and need, and work for a peace built on justice. He would, I think, be shocked today at how we have lost reverence for language, the sense of the sacramentality even, of words, able, as they are, to open up fresher worlds before us, and in us, voicing the deeper currents of our longings and loves. It is time to be re-dressed.

Herbert must have the final word. On a day such as this it is right, of course, to remember his prayer: 'Thou that hast given so much to me, Give one thing more, a grateful heart'²¹. But maybe his short poem *The Quidditie* is also right. A quidditie can be something that penetrates the essence of things, answering the question '*Quid Est?*' 'What is it?' And it can refer to a quibble, usually over something pedantic.

The Quidittie

My God, a verse is not a crown,
No point of honour, or gay suit,
No hawk, or banquet, or renown,
Nor a good sword, nor yet a lute:

It cannot vault, or dance, or play;
It never was in France or Spain;
Nor can it entertain the day
With my great stable or domain:

It is no office, art, or news,
Nor the Exchange, or busie Hall;
But it is that which while I use
I am with thee, and Most take all.

'If I knew where poems came from', said the poet Michael Longley, 'I'd go there'²². I think George Herbert knew and, asking us to believe again in the beauty and truest vocation of words, he bids us go with him to get a glimpse that will be its own reward: 'something understood'²³.

- ¹ Richard Baxter, *Poetical Fragments*, 1681, A7v
- ² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Letter to Lady Beaumont, 18 March 1826, in *Memorials of Coleorton*, ed. William Knight, D. Douglas, 1887, vol.II, pp.248-9.
- ³ Izaak Walton, *The Life of Mr George Herbert*, London, 1670, reprinted in *George Herbert: The Complete English Works*, ed. Ann Pasternak Slater, Everyman, 1995, p. 380
- ⁴ George Herbert, *Affliction (IV)*
- ⁵ See, for example, his poem *The Collar*
- ⁶ Most beautifully expressed in his *Love (III)*
- ⁷ Aldous Huxley, *Texts & Pretexts: An Anthology with Commentaries*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1932, p.13
- ⁸ *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds. G. Potter and E. Simpson, 10 volumes, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953-1962, III, v, p.142
- ⁹ George Herbert, *A Priest to the Temple, or, The Countrey Parson his Character, and Rule of Holy Life*, Chapter VII, 1652
- ¹⁰ Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, Faber and Faber, 1995, p.9
- ¹¹ Ibid. p.3
- ¹² Ibid. p.4
- ¹³ Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, Faber and Faber, 1984, p.41
- ¹⁴ *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. Holly Stevens, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p.349
- ¹⁵ Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry*, p.16
- ¹⁶ See, for example, *Truth Decay: An Initial Exploration of the Diminishing Role of Facts and Analysis in American Public Life*, Jennifer Kavanagh and Michael D. Rich, Rand, 2018
- ¹⁷ Alexander Hamilton, *Objections and Answers respecting the Administration of the Government*, August 18, 1792
- ¹⁸ John 18,38
- ¹⁹ For an exploration of 'resume' and 'Eulogy' virtues, see David Brooks, *The Road to Character*, Penguin, 2016
- ²⁰ Quoted in Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p.242
- ²¹ George Herbert, *Gratefulnesse*
- ²² Quoted in Kate Kellaway's review of Longley's *A Hundred Doors*, Guardian, 20 March, 2011
- ²³ These are the last words of Herbert's sonnet, *Prayer (I)*