

Chapter & Verse

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GEORGE HERBERT (1593 - 1633)

MUSIC AT MIDNIGHT

George Herbert was born into a wealthy family in the county of Montgomery in mid-Wales. His father died when he was just three years old and a few years later, he and his mother moved to London where she became friends with John Donne. George was sent to the famous Westminster School whose Master was the great preacher and prose stylist, Lancelot Andrewes who was one of the principal translators of the King James Bible. Andrewes' prose was much admired by T.S. Eliot and he quotes from him in his *Journey Of The Magi*.

Herbert then studied at Trinity College, Cambridge where he became a successful scholar. In 1624, under the patronage of the Earl of Pembroke, he became the MP for Montgomery. However, Herbert's career in politics was short-lived for despite his wealth and success, he had long felt a deep call to enter the priesthood. For much of his life, he had experienced an inner struggle between worldly ambition and faith. In 1629, faith was the eventual victor and he was ordained as an Anglican priest in the rural parish of Bemerton, near Salisbury. He married in the same year and he and his wife provided a home for three orphaned nieces. By all accounts, he was devoted to his parishioners, many of whom lived in grinding poverty. Herbert would often provide them with food and clothing and bring the sacraments to

them when they were ill.

Herbert had a great love of church music and musical influences can be seen in his poetry which he wrote whenever the demands of his vocation allowed him to do so. Like Thomas Hardy after him, he loved to experiment with a great variety of rhyme schemes. Herbert also loved to shape his poems to reflect the subject matter. Examples of those *pattern poems* include *The Altar* which he wrote in the shape of an altar and *Easter Wings* which has the shape of wings. Like John Donne and other so called 'metaphysical' poets (the term was originally used by John Dryden as a term of abuse) he sometimes makes use of extended metaphors or 'conceits'. However, his finest poems have a wonderful freshness and directness and to label his verses as 'metaphysical' is,

like many academic labels, unhelpful and misleading

Almost without exception his poems express religious themes. A number of his poems have been set as hymns which have been loved and sung for centuries. One of the recurring themes of Herbert's verse is a longing to find spiritual renewal in times of inner stagnation. Perhaps the most moving and beautiful example of such a poem is simply called *The Flower*.

Greater even than his love for performing music was his desire to treat everyone he met with compassion. He once said that the memory of helping a poor man with his fallen horse would supply him with a better 'music at midnight'.

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PRAYER

Prayer the church's banquet, angel's age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth
Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tow'r,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well drest,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
The land of spices; something understood.

Herbert suffered from serious ill-health all his life and he died of tuberculosis at the age of just 39. Shortly before his death he sent his collection of religious poems which he entitled *The Temple* to his friend, Nicholas Ferrar, who founded the Anglican community at Little Gidding, asking him to publish the poems if he thought they might turn to the advantage of any 'poor, dejected soul' otherwise to burn them.

On of Herbert's best loved poems is an *exalted* sonnet called *Prayer* which describes an ecstatic epiphany.



Herbert's Church - Bemerton

from **THE FLOWER**

How fresh, oh Lord, how sweet and clean
 Are thy returns! even as the flowers in spring;
 To which, besides their own demean,
 The late-past frosts tributes of pleasure bring.
 Grief melts away
 Like snow in May,
 As if there were no such cold thing.

Who would have thought my shrivelled heart
 Could have recovered greenness? It was gone
 Quite underground; as flowers depart
 To see their mother-root, when they have blown,
 Where they together
 All the hard weather,
 Dead to the world, keep house unknown.

These are thy wonders, Lord of power,
 Killing and quickening, bringing down to hell
 And up to heaven in an hour;
 Making a chiming of a passing-bell.
 We say amiss
 This or that is:
 Thy word is all, if we could spell.

Oh that I once past changing were,
 Fast in thy Paradise, where no flower can wither!
 Many a spring I shoot up fair,
 Offering at heaven, growing and groaning thither;
 Nor doth my flower
 Want a spring shower,
 My sins and I joining together.



We would like to take this opportunity to wish all our friends at Suffolk Poetry a very happy Christmas.

James and Ann

**Stripped limbs of trees are crossed against the sky;
 Snow shelves the bench we sat on in summer
 When we watched somersaulting swallows fly
 And listened to the searching bees' murmur.**

**Condensed greenhouse panes mirror ghosts of
 clouds
 Like a loch held between cupped hands of hills;
 Walls and hedges wear their white, woven
 shrouds:
 Time holds its breath and everything seems still.**

**In the midst of such stillness, Christ came,
 Hill shepherds watching motionless with awe,
 Bowed sheep transfigured beneath a Star's flame;
 The Child's breath a whispering through straw.**

**At dusk's onset when time seems suspended,
 The darkness and light of life are blended.**