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As a keen gardener I like the metaphor of Jesus as a master gardener pruning his followers for further growth. I became a Vicar in multi-racial, multi-faith, Southall in 2001, having trained at Wycliffe Hall, Oxford (BTh) and serving a curacy in Cricklewood. Prior to ordination I worked in India for 18 months with the Oasis Trust. I find that I am increasingly interested in spiritual formation. This led me to complete an MA in Christian Spirituality at Heythrop College in 2009. My own journey has been one in which God has challenged me to give up dreams of 'success' in favour of fruitfulness. I love the creativity and entrepreneurial spirit that ministry at St George's allows. Married to Anita since 1995 (a secondary science teacher) we enjoy cycling in the sunshine as long as the destination includes sitting in a coffee shop.

## To what extent can 'The Country Parson' by George Herbert be read as a spiritual text of relevance to the spirituality of Anglican priesthood today?

Christopher Ramsay June 2008

### Abstract:

It is evident that although George Herbert's context was a different social and political world to today, some of his practise and theology still has meaning and can bring challenge to its reader, especially the practitioners of Anglican ministry. Herbert's comprehensive spirituality embracing all of life, his view of scripture married with his practise of prayer and liturgy, and his emphasis on discovering a vocation for all, speak to the priest today. It is this which makes it a text of enduring spiritual value. Perhaps Herbert's rhetorical skills to impinge on the reader and move them to a response is still as effective today as it was designed to be on his first audience. Yet the priest today will also want to recognise the limitations Herbert's personal aristocratic background, and his acceptance of the social status quo before embracing Herbert's spirituality in its entirety.

## Introduction

Inadequacy to the task is the immediate response of a priest of the 21<sup>st</sup> century reading Herbert's reflections on ministry of nearly 400 years ago. Yet Herbert confesses in his introduction that he has set the mark to aim at high, 'since he that shoots higher than threatens the moon, then he that aims at a tree' (Herbert: The Author to the Reader). His resolve to set down the form and character of a 'true' pastor asks the reader whether this is still of relevance to priesthood today.

Herbert's 'Country Parson' has received less academic attention than his poetry in 'The Temple'. The former has often been used as a mine of background information to illuminate the theology and spirituality of his poetry, which is regarded as of enduring quality (even the Independent newspaper published Herbert's poetry in its series of Great British Poets in 2008). Yet Herbert wrote both at roughly the same time ('The Country Parson' is prefaced 1632, but was probably mostly written prior to His appointment at Bemerton in 1630). Although their genre is different, both wrestle with the role and nature of his calling as a priest. Cannot both be regarded as "classic" spiritual texts?

In order to answer this question it is necessary to place it as a text within an historical context, alongside the personal history of the author. Having done this it will be possible to begin to examine its spirituality and to assess what this has to say to Anglican priesthood today. We must firstly however define what "spirituality" is for the purposes of this essay. Contemporary spirituality is broad and open to many interpretations. Generally it is considered to be to do with life-integration or self-transcendence in relation to the ultimate or absolute values that the individual holds. In looking at Herbert and Anglican priesthood however the definition needs to be specifically Christian. Sheldrake comes to the conclusion at the end of his chapter on the subject (1991: 40-61) that spirituality is 'concerned with the conjunction of theology, prayer and practical Christianity' (1991: 60). This is experienced firstly through relationship with God, in Jesus, through his Holy Spirit's active presence and secondly in relationship with his people.

### A spiritual text?

On the most straightforward level 'The Country Parson' is a spiritual text because it both discusses the prayer life of a parson (e.g. VI, this essay will use Herbert's own chapter divisions as references), and refers to the scriptures as a source text for its theology (e.g. IV).

Wendy Wright suggests that on a first reading a spiritual classic will be encountered with a first naïveté. Fresh wonder and a hunger for wisdom she writes, leads the reader to hear the heartbeat of text's author. Certainly 'The Country Parson' can be read in this way. His emphasis on the life of the parson as an example for others (III) and his role as a teacher of others in the ways of Christ (XXXI) can be argued as having enduring voice for the priest today. This accords with David Tracy's belief that a "classic" spiritual text has 'excess of meaning'. He writes 'every classic lives as a classic only if it finds readers willing to be provoked by its claim to attention' (Tracey: 102). Sheldrake adds that a classic not only teaches its reader but also moves them to a response (Sheldrake 1991: 164). For the Christian this suggests the work of the Holy Spirit who leads us into truth, fusing the horizon of the writer with ours and taking us back to the third horizon of scripture. Ultimately this is what makes a Christian text "spiritual"; namely, does it facilitate the present work of the Spirit of Christ? As Tracy puts it, it is about timeliness rather than timelessness. Such an understanding of a spiritual text makes its reading an encounter, an event or happening. The reader may thus encounter the 'aha' of a revelation, or possibly the 'oh my goodness' of reading Herbert's high ideals for the parson's life.

To stop at this point however would be to lose the depths of what Herbert offers and also to be subject to a crude interpretation of the relevance of the text today. A literalistic reading of Herbert would mean all priests planting herb gardens to administer medicinal help to their parishioners (XXIII). This is obviously a historical role of the parson that Herbert is espousing that is of limited relevance to the western medical context today. Having said that however, it shows us the comprehensiveness of Herbert's spirituality. The priest today could also endeavour to care for the whole person, body, mind and spirit. Thus it is evident that critical interpretation is required to recognise the social, historical, and theological context of both the writer and reader. Let us therefore turn our attention to the context of 'The Country Parson'.

### Historical context:

Herbert was trained in rhetoric and in fact was the university lecturer in the subject at Cambridge. John Wall points out that the aim of rhetorical discourse was to 'impinge on the world of the reader' (29). Reading 'The Country Parson' in this light accords with the notion that rather than being an expression of actual practice, this is a work written to spur both himself and perhaps others on. His attitude to the pastor preaching, exemplifies the rhetorical approach, 'when he preaches he procures attention by all possible art' (VII). Herbert's spirituality is not a private concern but one to be shown publicly.

Herbert had plenty of time to reflect on what he thought pastoral ministry would be because although being ordained deacon in 1624 he was not priested until 1630 when he took up the living at Bemerton. It is unknown to what extent

the delay was to do with his personal searching and discerning of his calling, or more practical reason to do with his mother, his marriage and most likely ill-health. 'The Country Parson' was probably started during this time. His own journey though not specifically referred to, is evident for example in his references to promotion as a temptation (IX). Herbert had entered parliament in 1624 only to leave after one season. There is debate about whether he left disillusioned with the power of Parliament to express God's will for society, or whether he was slowly relinquishing his own ambitions for university and political life in favour of a calling to parish ministry. 'The Country Parson' was written in the years after this major turning point and can therefore be seen partly as an auto-biographical out-working of his own journey and the direction of his calling. His friend Nicholas Ferrar who published his work posthumously held Herbert's humility in high regard, he like Hebert, had given up political office to set up the Little Gidding community which established a strict routine of daily offices. One needs to tread with caution however, lest a first naïveté blinds one to historical realities. Firstly there was in the writing of both Ferrar and Walton's life of Herbert a certain amount of hagiography, understandable given Herbert's early death. Secondly 'The Country Parson' is a considered work of self-presentation.

### **A comprehensive spirituality:**

Douglas Swartz argues that rather than a retreat into a spiritual sanctuary of the country parish, Herbert's work engages directly with the politics of the day and is in fact an elaboration of sovereign rule (elaboration being defined as the refining of a powerful idea to perpetuate a world view through the production of knowledge, cultural activity, and the management of detail 191). Swartz writes "The Country Parson", not only does not provide evidence of a retreat from politics, but also sets forth a program for the extension of the government of the state church of early Stuart England over a wide range of details in a country parish' (190). This is consistent with a view of some scholars summarised by Wall (20-22) that Hebert's entry into parliament was not in conflict with his ordination that year but one possible outworking of it. Anglicanism was not only the state church but synonymous with the state and therefore serving God in Parliament was the same as serving him in a parish. This is a spirituality which embraces political life. Given the ongoing debate about the establishment of the Church of England Herbert remains a call to the priest today not to retreat from political engagement into a narrow "spiritual" ghetto.

Hebert begins his work with the statement that 'A pastor is the deputy of Christ, for the reducing of man to the obedience of God' (I). Swartz interprets this as 'the absolute control through the priest and his mastery of religious discourse of parishioners' spiritual, moral, political and material lives' (191). Certainly when listed together, Herbert's descriptions of watching, observing, overseeing, looking out for the sins and foibles of his parishioners, suggests defined social structure and control. He writes of the parson's children that first they should be Christian and then 'common wealth's men' (X). Every Christian has a duty of public service (XXXII). Another example if this is his attitude to the poor (XII). Herbert's distinction between the deserving poor of the parish and those who are idle is simply an outworking of the Poor Law of 1604. The parson's benevolent charity actually creates personal dependence on him even though his benevolence is financed by the rate-paying parish. Herbert's comprehensive spirituality perhaps masks the fact that he is uncritical of the social structures of his day. A priest today would want to ask why the poor are suffering, as well as simply alleviate their poverty.

An alternative reading of the book to that of Swartz's political interpretation is proposed by Cristina Malcolmson. She writes 'Although it seems at first to be a handbook, it is rather a self-portrait which reveals Herbert's method of representing himself socially... a literary instance of achieving and fashioning of social identity necessary for a younger son of the gentry in the seventeenth century' (246). The identity of the Anglican priest is also being redrawn today. Although the church continues to commission him or her with the cure of all the souls in the parish, sheer numbers and the nature of the job make this an unrealised ideal. The clergy have some residual respect in society, in times of crisis for example, but largely they are now on the margins of public and political life.

Although some have suggested it was a normal route for middle children of the aristocracy to enter the clergy, in fact only four near relations of peers entered orders between 1600 and 1660 (C. Hill quoted by Malcolmson: 247). What Herbert is trying to do in his work therefore is 'to reformulate the terms of social identity as exempt from his participation in the church.' (247). The full title of his work 'The Country Parson: his Character and Rule of Holy Life' gives a clue to the genre of the work and questions a simplistic reading of it as a spiritual text. "'Character" was a literary genre which claimed to teach its audience how to "read" men in society and how to "interpret" their actions as signs of inner dispositions' (247). The use of language is important here, in Herbert day 'character' meant inscription or likeness rather than moral makeup. 'To have holy character was not to be spiritually minded but to make that spiritual mindedness public' (248). Here however Malcolmson misunderstands Christian spirituality, for at the heart of the gospel narrative is the fact that Christ demonstrated his love for us through his actions. Herbert's spirituality is one which seeks consistency between his inner spiritual life and it's outward expression and in this sense his character is not a literary genre but a biblical spirituality. This is in contrast to the gentility of the day, which was increasingly becoming a form of outward performance, because birth was no longer always the determinate of gentility as social mobility increased (250). Herbert was trying to construct a priestly identity on the basis of an outward manifestation of an inner life with God rather than on role alone, as his social peers were doing. This can help the Anglican priest today wrestling with his or her role in society today because it is a reminder that role needs to be an outworking of a relationship with God.

Although Herbert's redefinition of his social status and the role of a priest in society in the light of his own aristocratic background and his theology of calling is specific to his age; the role of the priest is still a current debate in the Anglican Church today. There are many trends towards the professionalisation of the priesthood, certainly in terms of expectations of skills and managerial competence. Most clergy feel guilt about not visiting enough (and certainly not every afternoon wandering around the parish as Herbert recommends), and burdened by the volume of work expected of them. George Herbert expected the priest to be physician, judiciary and spiritual leader. Such comprehensiveness is not necessary today, yet on a spiritual level God is concerned with every aspect of people's lives and therefore there still remains no ground on which the priest does not have a representative role to play, incarnating God to the people by his or her presence. John Pritchard the current Bishop of Oxford argues that in a society of increasing specialisation the priest has a unique role is specialising in being generalist. 'The priest pops up everywhere because nothing is outside God's interest' (54), their role being to hold disparate things together. This is not so different from Herbert's comprehensive spirituality.

While it is important to recognise the political and social influences on Herbert and his background it can on the other hand be argued that Swartz and Malcolmson as social scientists both fail to take sufficient account of Herbert's theology married with his practice and prayer, that is to say, his spirituality.

### **Protestant or Catholic?**

There is debate as to whether Herbert was more catholic or protestant in his theology and practice but what is sure is that his attitude to scripture reflected the 'reformed' Church of England. He writes 'But the chief and top of his knowledge consists in the book of books, the storehouse and magazine of life and comfort, the Holy Scriptures.' (IV). In a few places he makes explicit reference to scripture but in many more his words echo scripture without direct reference. For example when he refers to the parsons lifestyle in chapter III his call to the parson to take account of his parishioners' lifestyle when considering his own standard of living reminds us of St Paul becoming all things to all men to win a few and also not claiming his rights as an apostle (1 Corinthians 9). Equally when he talks of country people esteeming their words, i.e. being honest, he infers Jesus plea that your yes be yes and your no be no (Matthew 5:37).

It would however be wrong to divorce Herbert's protestant emphasis on scripture from his more catholic emphasis on the role of liturgy. Sheldrake argues that scripture and liturgy are inseparable in Herbert (2000: 28). In chapter VI 'The Parson Praying' it is clear that Herbert is referring to the Anglican practice of the daily offices from the Book of Common Prayer, and he writes that even more than a sermon, which is forgotten, the example of how a parson prays moves the congregation to devotion. Here also Herbert shows no partiality to the social upper class and expects them to arrive on time for prayer (which implicitly echoes scripture namely the book James with its clear instructions about a lack of partiality to the rich). With regard to his family (X), the emphasis on teaching the parson's children religion, and prayer is a reminder of 1 Timothy 3:4. Although he mentions private prayer in this chapter it is clear elsewhere that he presumes that public prayer is the spiritual foundation block before any private prayer (XXXI). This is reflected in his poem Perirrhaneion II 'Though private prayer be a brave design, yet public hath more promise, more love'.

The Country Parson's prayer life centred on the daily offices echoes down the centuries of the Anglican Church. Many clergy although they still take an oath to practise such a pattern of prayer, find it hard to implement this in the pattern of ministry in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Nonetheless it remains at the core of Anglican priestly formation and many clergy are returning to its riches. Interestingly as evangelicalism has gained strength within the Church of England over the last 40 years it has also become broader in its practice and prayer. Perhaps the creative tension that Herbert's spirituality expressed is still part of the Anglican genius.

A further emphasis of Herbert with regard to more "catholic" practice is that of legibility. This he shared with Cranmer and those of the reformation who followed, that symbols and practice should not obscure the gospel. In other words the use of ceremony, vestments, the church edifice etc. was acceptable, provided that it was clear what was being done and the theology it was representing. 'The country parson is a lover of old customs, if they be good and harmless...There is much preaching in this friendliness' (XXXV). Today when institutional religion is increasingly rejected and un-experienced by the majority it is all the more important that liturgical practice is legible. Herbert reminds us that traditional practices need not be thrown out but at the same time it should be made plain why they are done. Hodgkin's suggests that Herbert exercised Adiaphorist Protestantism 'that is his judgements of "indifferent things" (from the Greek adiaphora) depend entirely on what clearly edifies his flock.' (222).

Here Herbert follows the middle way of Anglicanism and this is perhaps why some have believed him high church and others have claimed him as a reformation protestant, depending on the reader. This is an important point when reading the Country Parson as a text for today. Critical contextualising is needed not only of Herbert himself but also the reader. Gene Veith summarises this tendency "'High Church" vs., "Low church", "Anglo-Catholics" vs. "puritans"- have tended to read back, without qualification into Herbert's own day" (35).

Herbert's attitude to the physical building (XIII) is evidence of his middle way. He has high expectation of order and good repair (this is made known by Walton, and his account of Herbert's efforts with Nicholas Ferrar to rebuild Leighton church. Walton casts them as Laudian heroes despite their clearly puritan theology with regard to Rome, who Herbert assigns as the Babylon of the bible). Yet Herbert calls these external matters 'indifferent', 'desiring to keep the middle way between superstition and slovenliness' (XIII). He quotes 1 Corinthians 14 and suggests that the holiness is not found in the outward structure but that they only acquire sanctity by declaring God's holiness in his word and people. He is keen to see adornment of the building only in the form of scripture which can teach the onlooker (and likewise in his home). In an age today when the priest along with churchwardens continues to carry responsibility for the maintenance of historic buildings, Herbert's balancing of care of the material with care for the life of the Spirit in His people, offers a spirituality of relevance to today.

Christopher Hodgkin's writes 'Herbert as both pastor and poet is committed to edifying the congregation and the reader within the structures of the British church, so he praises them as necessary, fit and beautiful. Yet his overall thrust is internal, toward building the altar and temple in the heart.' (229). Even his poem 'The Altar' is not a recommendation of a Laudian communion table turned 'altar wise', but rather a metaphor for the heart; internal religion rather than external. Hodgkin's also demonstrates how Herbert poems about Christian festivals consistently redefine them as spiritual events rather than traditions per se (236). Herbert's spirituality consistently reminds the priest today to root his or her outward practice in inward relationship with God.

Herbert's spirituality, the conjunction of his theology, prayer and practice, is evidently both Protestant and Catholic. As Christian spirituality today increasingly crosses denominational barriers, Herbert's creative tension between the bible and liturgy remains a model to emulate. In the confines of this essay it is impossible to do justice to all the theological themes of Herbert's writing which contribute to his spirituality, such as God in the ordinary, the intimacy and majesty of God, or his sense of place, but it is possible to pick out one further theme as an example, the theme of vocation.

### **Vocation:**

In Herbert's well-known poem 'The Elixir' he exposes his theology of vocation:

Teach me, my God and King,  
In all things thee to see,  
And what I do in any thing,  
To do it as for thee:....

A servant with this clause  
Makes drudgery divine  
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,  
Makes that and th' action fine.

Again we can find a scriptural allusion, this time to Colossians 3:23-25. The reformation rediscovery of the "priesthood of all believers" is clearly part of Herbert's theology. Herbert had personally wrestled with his own calling and place in society and in 'The Country Parson' as in his poems he unpacks this for all people. The medieval church had stratified holiness making a vocation to the religious life or priesthood a higher calling than "worldly callings". The reformation overturned this. So-called secular vocations were now of equal status with the spiritual, getting married, working in agriculture or in Parliament were all of equal worth to the priesthood and religious orders. Service of God no longer required retreat from the world but involvement in it.

'every gift or ability is a talent to be accounted or, and to be improved to our master's advantage...all are either to have a calling, or to prepare for it...Wherefore all are to either presently to enter into a calling, if they be fit for it, and it for them, or else to examine with care, and advice, what they are fittest for' (XXXII).

One might think that nearly 500 years after the reformation the recognition of a vocation for all would be firmly established. Yet Herbert's call is still prophetic today. A recent survey discovered that only 50% of Christians have ever heard a sermon about work, and only 25% have been taught a biblical theology of work (Greene: 5). Certainly there is often a secular spiritual divide in the lives of many Christians. Even today when people talk of 'having a call' they imply ordained ministry. Working "full time for God" is seen as working for a church or a mission organisation. Herbert's 'Country Parson' still speaks loudly today of the need to teach and proclaim God's call in all walks of life. The priest today however might want to question Herbert's acquiescence to the status quo within society. A spirituality which almost glorifies drudgery, can disempower the poor from seeking justice. Herbert maybe reflecting a Pauline theology of slavery but in today's world while Herbert's vocation for all can transform the individual's personal experience of work and life, it must be married with a theology of the justice of God and the practical seeking of the transformation of all societal structures which dehumanise the individual.

Herbert's spirituality of a vocation for all can also seem to be in conflict with some parts of 'The Country Parson' which imply a higher or different standard for clergy. For example he writes that clergy are best off single (IX). He suggests

that clergy should go beyond the norms of fasting and follow the desert fathers in extra diligence in this area. He consistently draws attention to the need for the pastor to be exemplary in his lifestyle, his family life, and his study. Interestingly the current Anglican position on the practise of homosexuality draws a similar conclusion for clergy today, that they should have a celibate lifestyle which goes beyond the demands upon a layperson. However this could be a misreading of Herbert. Rather than setting up a different standard or vocation for clergy his emphasis is on the didactic quality of the parson's life calling others to follow his lead. So too the priest today is not called to a holier standard than the layperson, but to be a model of holiness for others to emulate.

### Conclusion:

It is evident that although George Herbert's context was a different social and political world to today, some of his practise and theology still has meaning and can bring challenge to its reader, especially the practitioners of Anglican ministry. Herbert's comprehensive spirituality embracing all of life, his view of scripture married with his practise of prayer and liturgy, and his emphasis on discovering a vocation for all, speak to the priest today. It is this which makes it a text of enduring spiritual value. Perhaps Herbert's rhetorical skills to impinge on the reader and move them to a response is still as effective today as it was designed to be on his first audience. Yet the priest today will also want to recognise the limitations Herbert's personal aristocratic background, and his acceptance of the social status quo before embracing Herbert's spirituality in its entirety.

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