

Night Prayer

5th Sunday of Easter
2nd May 2021



In the Garden: Agony

Introduction

We are coming towards the end of the Easter season, and before we move on through Pentecost into the summer months, I would like us to visit an Easter poem by George Herbert. However, we shall start with reminding ourselves of the Gospel reading this morning which was the well-known passage from John where Jesus says: I am the true vine. This metaphor was hardly new: it often appears in the Old Testament, but applied to the nation of Israel as a whole, and often in the context of God saying: 'I planted you in expectation of good fruit, but frankly you have been a disappointment.' In having Jesus say that he is the true vine John is showing us that Jesus is succeeding in being what God wants from his people.

Opening Prayer

The vine emerges from the earth,
nourished
and nourishing.

Rises without visible connection;
roots hidden,
promise unknown.

Strong to withstand storms,
fragile when plucked too soon.

So it is that we grow...
nourished by invisible connections to the living God,
called to nourish that which is seen and that which is yet buried within.

This is love

This is love.
Not that you spoke words of comfort,
walked with the unclean and unloved,
shared wisdom, bread and wine,
brought healing into lives
and challenged the status quo.

This is love.
That you spoke the word of God,
walked a painful road to the Cross,
shared living water, bread of life,
brought Salvation to the world
and died for the sake of all.

This is love.
It is a seed
sown in the ground,
which germinates,
blossoms,
and spreads its sweet perfume.

(written by John Birch, and posted on Faith and Worship.)

Opening Music

This is the well-known Easter hymn ‘When I survey the wondrous cross’, sung here by the St Michael’s singers. Words are on the screen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2MF9tVfTMXs&t=28s>

Reading

“The Agony” by George Herbert

Philosophers have measured mountains,
Fathomed the depths of seas, of states and kings;
Walked with a staff to heav’n, and traced fountains:
But there are two vast, spacious things,
The which to measure it doth more behave;
Yet few there are that sound them—Sin and Love.

Who would know Sin, let him repair
Unto Mount Olivet; there shall he see
A Man so wrung with pains, that all His hair,
His skin, His garments bloody be.
Sin is that press and vice, which forceth pain
To hunt his cruel food through ev’ry vein.

Who knows not Love, let him assay
And taste that juice which, on the cross, a pike
Did set again abroad; then let him say
If ever he did taste the like,
Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,
Which my God feels as blood, but I as wine.

In the first stanza of ‘The Agony,’ Herbert comments on our constant search for knowledge. We have developed tools to ‘measure,’ ‘fathom,’ and ‘trace’—to explore the heights and depths of our physical environments, the ins and outs of the world’s political systems. There’s nothing wrong with this in itself, but, Herbert says, we ought not to neglect the ‘two vast, spacious things’ that are most worthy of exploration: sin and love. These truths, unlike

others, are understood not by amassing and analysing data but by simply looking with our eyes and in our minds.

To know sin, Herbert says, look to Gethsemane: see Christ crushed.

To know love, look to the cross: see Christ pierced. See, and *taste*. The Lord is good.

Christ is literally at the centre of the poem, in lines 9 and 10: 'A Man so wrung with pains, that all His hair, / His skin, His garments bloody be.' In Gethsemane he feels the immense pressure of sin—it grips him like a vice, squeezes the blood out of him like a winepress.

In the winepress metaphor Herbert draws on a longstanding tradition that interprets specific Old Testament passages in the light of Christ. For example: 'I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with me.' (Isaiah 63:3a). In that context the grape-crusher is Yahweh and the grapes the enemies of Israel, but the church fathers believed this verse foretold that Christ himself would be "crushed for our iniquities" (Isaiah 53:5) on the cross—pressed into wine for our sakes.

By acknowledging God's wrath as redirected from sinful man onto the sinless Christ, these theologians changed the symbol of the winepress from God's dispensation of divine retribution to one of sacrifice and redemption, whereby divine love is *expressed*, in every sense of the word, and even enemies are invited to come and drink.

In the third stanza of the poem, Christ becomes a cask of wine who, when tapped ('set abroad') by the Roman spear, issues forth a fine vintage for the refreshment of all. The closing couplet is one of Herbert's most beautiful: 'Love is that liquor sweet and most divine, / Which my God feels as blood, but I as wine.' What Christ experienced as bitter suffering, we experience as sweetness.

I would like to pursue the metaphor of Jesus as the winepress. It stems (sorry about the pun) from Christ as the true vine. Vines bear grapes and they have to be pressed to produce wine. But we know well by now that metaphors have plenty of limitations.

The problem with the winepress metaphor becomes evident when you start to depict it. Look at the painting here – from the *Bible moralisée de Philippe le Hardi*, late fifteenth century. Christ is being squeezed in the winepress, with God the Father applying the pressure, (reflecting verses like Isaiah 53:10 'It was the will of the Lord to crush him.')

His blood flows from the wound in his side to be collected below. Such pictures were used for devotional purposes and would be considered too gruesome today, but in the fifteenth and sixteenth century were very popular especially in France and Germany, where the church was heavily involved in the development of the wine industry.





In this depiction (late C15 from Germany – actually the outer doors of a closed triptych), Christ is shown in the winepress trough being pressed by the weight of the cross itself -the burden of human sin.

Rather surprisingly the winepress is one of the few devotional images that survived through the Reformation and examples can be found in both Catholic and Protestant regions, however in both the practice seems to have died out by 1600.

So the winepress makes the causal link between the saving power of the blood of Christ and its re-formation or re-presentation as communion wine.

The question is how much did people consider depictions such as these to be a true historical representation of events, or did they readily understand it was just an image to show how much Christ suffered. These pictures certainly make an impact, but perhaps raise more questions than they answer. When we administer the chalice at communion (as no doubt we shall be able to do again) the words used are 'The blood of Christ'. The Middle Ages had far less concerns about depicting human suffering or the bloodiness of the crucifixion. Do we present too much of a sanitised version of the Gospel today?

We pray

How deeply you have loved us, Jesus;
how willingly you stepped into our experience,
how completely you empathised with all that we endure.
Teach us to love as you have loved us.

How sacrificially you have loved us, Jesus;
how completely you gave yourself for us,
how courageously you suffered for our sakes.
Teach us to love as you have loved us.

How restoratively you have loved us, Jesus;
how generously you share your life,
how extravagantly you make yourself available to us.
Teach us to love as you have loved us.

We praise you for your love
which is given so freely and so unconditionally.
And we thank you for believing
that we could learn to offer such love
to each other.
Amen.

(written by John van de Laar, and posted on the Sacredise website.)

Affirmation

Alas we have seen the Son of the living God stretched out on a cross.
The human frame plunged into blood, a crown of thorns placed about His head.
Blood flowing freely from His side.
This cross is like the parting of the day from the night
Yet through it, all may now proclaim.

Christ has died
Christ has risen
Christ will come again.

Intercessions

(These were provided by Sarah and used at this morning's service.)

In the depths of my being
I become quiet and still
I wait for you my God
Source of my salvation

Jim Cotter

Silence

Lord in your mercy
Hear our Prayer

Lord, make us your church into the people you want us to be and forgive us where we fall short. Teach us to be generous in judgement, bold in commitment and sensitive in listening. Where we find no love, let us bring love and make us more like you.

Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer

Angela Ashwin

We pray for the Queen at this time and for all members of the Royal Family. Comfort them in their bereavement and help them to overcome any disagreements and disappointments with wisdom and generosity.

Lord in your mercy

Hear our prayer

We pray for all the world leaders, who are dealing with the pandemic and the problems of global warming. Help them to be wise and creative and not allow ambition and suspicion to cloud their judgement and get in the way of working together. We pray especially for the people in India where Covid is out of control. We pray that our country will be generous to less affluent countries where people are hungry and that we do not cut aid given to refugees.

Lord in your mercy
Hear our prayer

Creator God, you know what we need without our words. Hear our prayers and hear also our silence. Give us strength and grant us those things we cannot or dare not voice. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, your Son our Lord.

Oxford Women's Liturgy

Merciful Father, accept these prayers for the sake of your Son our saviour Jesus Christ
Amen

Commission and Blessing

Go now, and love one another,
because love is from God.
Proclaim God's salvation to every generation.
Remain in Jesus Christ,
and like branches of a vine, draw your life from him.

And may God the vine grower tend you and make you fruitful;
May Christ Jesus abide in you and give you life;
And may the Holy Spirit cast out all fear and fill you with God's love.

We go in peace to love and serve the Lord,
...In the name of Christ. Amen.

(Nathan Nettleton LaughingBird.net)

Closing Music

We close with another great Easter hymn: This joyful Eastertide, sung here by the Gesualdo Six. Words are below.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxGwrNGyyWg>

1 This joyful Eastertide
away with sin and sorrow!
My love, the crucified,

hath sprung to life this morrow.

Refrain:

*Had Christ, who once was slain,
ne'er burst his three-day prison,
our faith had been in vain.
But now hath Christ arisen,
arisen, arisen, arisen.*

2 My flesh in hope shall rest
and for a season slumber
till trumpets east to west
shall wake the dead in number. [Refrain]

3 Death's flood hath lost its chill
since Jesus crossed the river.
Lover of souls, from ill
my passing soul deliver. [Refrain]

