

The Heart in Pilgrimage*

George Herbert – living a full life

*The title of the article is taken from George Herbert's poem 'Prayer'

David Parish suggests that the life of George Herbert gives an inspiring answer to how we might feel happier at work, a state of mind now recognised as producing higher productivity, low staff turnover and greater profitability. Herbert's combination of traditional Christian virtues with practical down-to-earth Christianity is an example of how it can be done.

What does it mean to live well? It's a question frequently discussed in business publications like the *Harvard Business Review*, and some companies employ 'Happiness Directors' to assist their enquiry. To evaluate what makes staff feel happier, Google have developed an algorithm based on a range of data, from the length of lunch queue times to patterns of maternity leave. Through thousands of interviews and data sets Gallup have created a research methodology to study how companies can best engage with their employees. Called 'The Engaged Workplace' it is now being made

available to companies and organisations.

For the individual there are always existential questions: how do I get the most out of the life I have? How do I best use the gifts and abilities I have? And faced with an increasingly flexible and challenging workplace; how do I put those gifts to best use in my work?

George Herbert, Welshman, poet, writer and pastor, may have some of the answers.

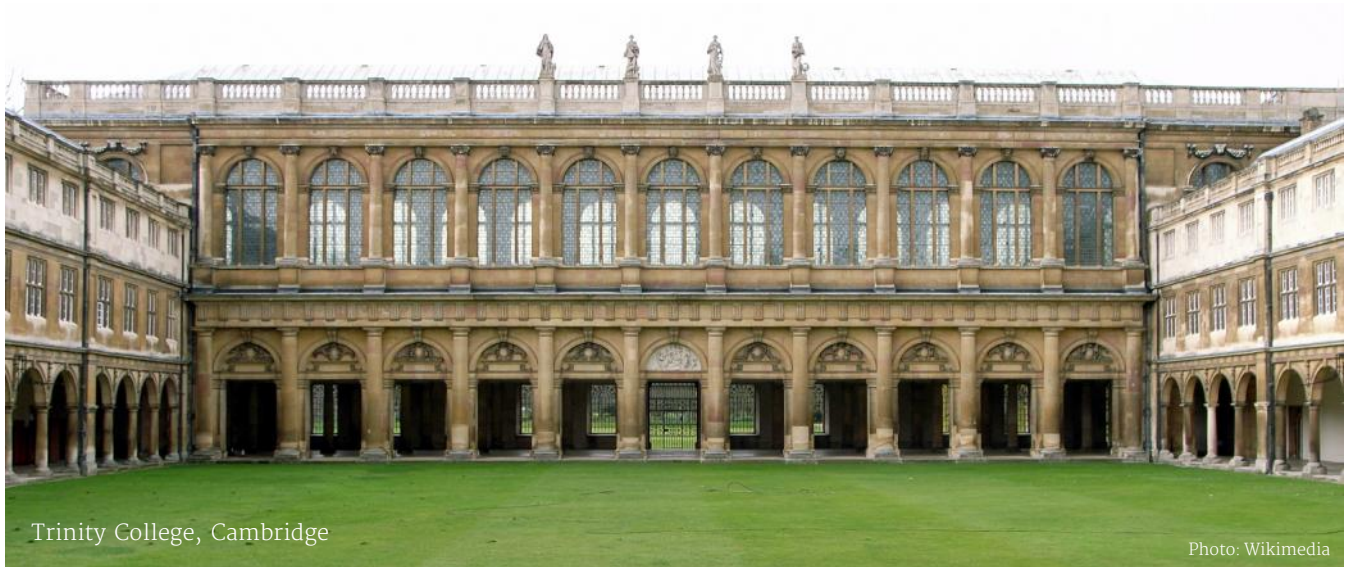
I first came across the poetry of George Herbert in an English class at school and was struck by the way it

was beautifully crafted and possessed a deep practicality of thought and application. Recently I read a new and revised edition of his poems which included his prose work, *The Country Parson*. Herbert wrote the book as a practical guide to being a better pastor. Reading *The Country Parson*, along with a biography of Herbert, I found a person who had worked through what it means to live well.

Herbert was born in Monmouth in 1593 to a well-off family. His father was a Member of Parliament and related to the Earls of Pembroke. His father died when he was three and the family moved to London, where



The Engaged Workplace: graphic from the Customer Experience Community website



Trinity College, Cambridge

Photo: Wikimedia

his mother became a patron of the poet John Donne. From Westminster School he went up to Trinity College Cambridge, graduating with a Master's degree in 1616. At Trinity he felt the call to ordination as a priest in the Church of England. One of his letters, written to his stepfather, explains he was short of money to buy the books needed for his Divinity course: 'What tradesman sets up without his tools?'¹.

From the age of 17 he was already beginning to write poetry and sent some of the poems to his mother. He was concerned that God should be honoured in poetry that spoke to the heart and that such writing should not be solely devoted to 'Venus'.

*Why are not Sonnets made of thee?
And layes upon thy altar burnt?*²

At Cambridge Herbert was recognised for his learning and talent. He became a fellow of his College and successfully applied for the prestigious post of University Orator, which involved speaking publicly on behalf of the university. He was described by his contemporaries as having 'a civil and sharp wit and a natural elegance'.³

This role brought him into contact with King James and his court. The King urged him to consider a political career and gave him an honorary post *Sine Cura*. A true sinecure! The King liked to hunt at Royston near

Cambridge and was a frequent visitor to the university, where he enjoyed the company of scholars. A Greek scholar himself, James wrote a treatise on monarchy, *Basilikon Doron* (The Kingly Gift) as guidance to his first son Henry. If Charles 1st, the younger son who did survive, had acted upon this treatise, history may well have been different! James presented a copy to the university library; Herbert wrote the letter of thanks.

These meetings with James raised Herbert's interest in a political or diplomatic career. His elder brother Edward was Ambassador to France, while Sir Robert Newton, his predecessor as Orator, had become Secretary of State. This career clearly attracted George as he was fluent in French, Italian and Spanish. The same ready wit and lively mind that John Donne had so admired in a sonnet addressed to George's mother, Donne's patron, was clearly inherited by her son.⁴

George was invited by the King to take part in a conference at Hampton Court on the role of bishops in the Scottish Church. His opponent was Andrew Melvin, a Scot 'unruly and with furious zeal'. George's calm logic won the day and Melvin ended up imprisoned for three years in the Tower of London.

A political career as a Member of Parliament might have taken off but

for the death of James 1st and of a number of other political patrons like the Duke of Richmond. He wondered if life as an MP was really his destiny.

George's writing at the time reflected his conflicted state of mind:

*Now I am here
what thou wilt do with me
None of my books will show I read
and sigh and wish I were a tree
For sure I would grow to fruit and shade
and at least some bird would trust
Her household with me
and I would be just⁵*

As he reflected on his future, the call to ordination in the church of England became stronger. Although appointed to the living of Leighton Bromswold in 1626, it was not until shortly before his 36th birthday in 1629 that he was ordained and moved to Bemerton, four miles from Salisbury. Bemerton was close to Wilton House, the seat of his relative the Earl of Pembroke.

At Bemerton Herbert was an industrious parish priest: he wrote poetry, preached from time to time in Salisbury Cathedral, led a music group and managed the lands that came with the living of the church.

Izaak Walton, his biographer, was a fishing companion of Herbert's, and attested to his skills in every area of



Izaak Walton, best known for his book on angling *The Compleat Angler*, was also George Herbert's friend, fishing companion and biographer. A painting of Herbert by William Dyce shows him in his parsonage garden with his bible and at the end of the garden runs the River Nadder, one of Hampshire's best trout streams. Propped against a tree by the bank is his fishing rod and his lute stands against a bench.

life. He describes him as 'a man of almost incredible virtue', which – though Walton tended to over-praise his subjects – does seem to be reflected in how he conducted his life.

In this period a parish in rural areas often came with a large farm. These glebe lands were a useful additional source of income in a time before clergy stipends were set by the diocese as happens today. Herbert was critical of other clergy who managed their farms badly, as this was a poor example to other farmers. The good landowner 'should see to the improvement of his grounds, by drowning or draining or stocking, or fencing and ordering his land to the best advantage of both himself and his neighbours'.⁶

He urged parents to ensure that their children were given a good education. Merchants and landowners should send their sons to Europe, and, 'observing the Artifices, and Manufactures there, transplant them hither, to our Countrey's advantage'.

Herbert saw work as a gift from God to be done, as well as God gave the ability to do so. This practical approach to Christianity is found in stanzas from his poem 'The Elixir', still sung as a hymn:

*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:
Not rudely, as a beast,
To runne into an action;*

*But still to make thee prepossest,
And give it his perfection.
A man that looks on glasse,
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it passe,
And then the heav'n espie.
All may of thee partake:
Nothing can be so mean,
Which with his tincture (for thy sake)
Will not grow bright and clean.
A servant with this clause
Makes drudgerie divine:
Who sweeps a room, as for thy laws,
Makes that and th' action fine.
This is the famous stone
That turneth all to gold:
For that which God doth touch and own
Cannot for lesse be told.⁷*

Herbert was also willing to give up his dignity to help others. One day

while walking the four miles to Salisbury Cathedral for a service, to be followed by a music group practice, he met a poor man whose horse had fallen under its load. He immediately took off his clerical coat, helped the man reload the horse and left him with some money for food for himself and the horse.

Arriving at the Cathedral, his biographer records that: 'at his coming to his musical friends they began to wonder that Mr. George Herbert which used to be so trim and clean, came into that company so soiled and discomposed'. George replied, 'If I be bound to pray for all that be in distress, I am sure that I am bound, so far as in my power, to practice what I pray for.' 'And now let's tune our instruments'.⁸

George was a gifted musician and would be delighted to know that some of his poems have become favourite hymns, including, 'Let all the world in every corner sing'.

He was generous with his giving to those less advantaged, 'Charity is at the top of Christian virtues' and 'by thy grace I will do so, in distributing them to any of thy poor members who are in distress.'⁹

Herbert had a great gift for friendship. Nicolas Farrer, a university friend who went on to found the Christian community at

*When winds and waves rise highest
I am sure
This anchor keeps my faith
and that me secure*.¹⁰


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.

In the way he lived his life Herbert demonstrated the power of the gospel in every area. He was prepared to explore new avenues of service in a secular setting like Parliament and at the same time continue to contribute to a world of poetry and music. As priest and pastor, he served his parishioners and community in practical ways. Tragically, he died after only three years of ministry at Bemerton.

Reading through Paul's pastoral letters and the letters of James and John, I am struck by how much of their teaching is about

how to live out a life of faith, in whatever setting God has placed the believer. George Herbert exemplified that. He did so with courage and humility of purpose, and did it well. This surely is the best testimony and answer to the question, 'What does it mean to live well?' Herbert set an example not only for parsons and poets, but Christian men and women in every walk of life and type of work. 

Little Gidding near Huntingdon, remained close to him. They corresponded frequently and shared a desire for the renewal of faith in the Church of England at that time.

His friendship with John Donne was close, and when dying John sent him a seal with the imprint of a cross and anchor. Herbert wrote:
*When my dear friend could write no more
He gave this seal and so gave ore*

- 1 <http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/cambridgeauthors/herbert-letter-1/>
- 2 C. A. Patrides (Ed.), *The English Poems of George Herbert*, London, J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1974. Repr. 1991, Sonnet (I).
- 3 Izaak Walton, *The Lives of John Donne and George Herbert*, The Harvard Classics. 1909-14, para 21.
- 4 Donne wrote of Magdalen Herbert, George's mother:
'In all her words to every hearer fit,
You may at revels, or at council sit.'
Charles M. Coffin (Editor), Denis Donoghue (Introduction), *The Complete Poetry and Selected Prose by John Donne*, Modern Library, 2001, 'Elegy IX: The Autumnal'
- 5 George Herbert, *The Temple*(1633), 'The 5 Affliction Poems, Affliction(I)'
- 6 Ronald Blythe (Ed.), George Herbert, *A Priest to the Temple or The County Parson His Character and Rule of Holy Life*, Canterbury Press 2003, p.72.
- 7 George Herbert, *The Temple*(1633), 'The Elixir'.
- 8 C. A. Patrides (Ed.), *George Herbert - The Critical Heritage*, Law Book Co of Australasia; 1st edition edition (30 Sept. 1983), p.121.
- 9 Izaak Walton, *The Lives of John Donne and George Herbert*, 1675, p.272.
- 10 Mark McCloskey & Paul R. Murphy (Tr.), *The Latin poetry of George Herbert*, Ohio University Press, 1965, p.175.



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