**God Waiting for Us**

Last December I was much helped by reading Richard Harries’ book entitled ‘Wounded I Sing’. In this book he reflects on poems by George Herbert, the 17th century priest/poet – one for each day of Advent

Herbert’s poems often describe his own spiritual journey and struggles, in ways that can also speak to us, in the ups and downs of our own lives with God. One of the many poems that spoke to me is called ‘Christmas’. Before I quote some lines from this poem, I’ll give some background. Herbert starts by describing a situation where he has been riding a horse vigorously all day, for pleasure – probably as part of the Christmas hunt (given his aristocratic background, he would be familiar with this). But the hounds have lost the scent and they have all gone ‘quite astray’, as he puts it. So Herbert ends up at an inn, where he finds himself ‘tired, body and mind’ - clearly restless and unsatisfied, after what he calls ‘all [these] pleasures’.

In his commentary on this poem, Richard Harries helps us to see how Herbert is using this event as a kind of parable of his inner life, in which he is often distracted by relatively superficial things, and wandering off, ‘going astray’, away from his essential focus on God. He recognises how his mind and his daily life can become cluttered and ‘tired’ by all sorts of elements that don’t satisfy his hungry soul – like riding furiously on his horse in a rather desultory way when the hunt fizzles out. It’s not that Herbert has wandered off into scandalous loose living, like the Prodigal Son in Jesus’ parable! But he still senses that the pleasurable pursuits of fashionable gatherings can draw him away from his inner peace and his centre in God. So for us as well, we ourselves may find that all kinds of restless and distracting concerns take too much of our attention, and weary our soul because they draw us away from our rootedness in God.

Herbert is not a puritan who disapproves of anything remotely pleasurable, delicious or fun. On the contrary, he delights in things like beautiful music, the natural world and relaxing with friends, just as Jesus himself loved parties and sharing meals with all kinds of people. Herbert’s point here is about **priorities**, and being alert to those moments when certain activities or mindsets are in danger of drowning out the voice of God, who waits for us to return to him in the inner room of our soul (cf. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:6).

But then in the poem there’s a wonderful surprise. In his imaginative narrative, after Herbert has arrived rather disgruntled at the inn, he finds God sitting there, quietly and kindly **waiting** for him, ready to give his troubled soul ‘most sweet relief’ (as Herbert calls it). As Richard Harries observes (p. 127): this is a lovely picture of a God who does not force himself on us, but who waits patiently until we find our need of him.

So here are the first few lines of this poem, where Herbert uses the word’ expecting’; to denote ‘waiting’:

After all pleasures, as I rid one day,

 My horse and I, both tired, body and mind,

 With full cry of affections, quite astray,

I took up the next inn I could find.

There when I came, whom found I but my dear,

 My dearest Lord, expecting till the grief

 Of pleasures brought me to Him, ready there

To be all passengers’ most sweet relief?

**A prayer to lead us into silence**

Beloved God, thank you that even when our minds and hearts are wandering in restlessness, distraction or unease, you are always there, waiting patiently to love us once more into your peaceful presence.

**A prayer to end the silence**

Ours is not the work of seeking You here or there where we think You might be,

but of opening the heart’s door,

and when we do this You cannot resist coming in,

since our opening and Your entering are one:

You knock and wait, and when we open

we find that You were there all along

and will not leave us.

*Meister Eckhart’s Book of the Soul* Mark Burrows & John Sweeney p. 3