

## **Alnmouth September 30th–October 4th 2013      Robert Raikes**

### **T.S.S.F Formation    George Herbert: Priest and Poet.....His influence today.**

Of George Herbert's poems: "Teach me my God and King". "Let all the world in every corner sing" "King of Glory, King of peace".....these must be some of our most well known and well loved hymns. Soon after his death his poems (over 160) were recognized as a Christian master piece. (A selection of his poems and prose in a book edited by Wendy Cope is available)

George Herbert was vicar of Bemerton near Salisbury from 1630 until his death aged 39 in 1633. His short tenure is looked back on as iconic and an example of Anglican ministry ever since. His many intellectual gifts and aristocratic background enabled him to attain a high position in society before ordination. By the time he was 23 he was elected to a major Fellowship at Cambridge. At 25 he was appointed Reader in Rhetoric and 2 years later elected Public Orator and the MP for Montgomery. This life though had prepared him for change and protest. Notably now his writings included a book published with joint title "A priest in the Temple or The Country Parson". Although small, it has 37 chapters, some hardly more than long paragraphs, but all of them pithy with a kind of commanding advice. Not a polite request or hope but a requirement, saying "The parson will do this, he will do that. As the Lord's representative in the parish he has no leeway."

George Herbert's short life at Bemerton was an open book to the 300 or so farming folk who became his parishioners in April 1630. One might call it a field day for Anglicanism. Behind the many injunctions in his writings lay his pain that things

had come to such a state. Buildings apart (for he stressed and re-taught the sacredness of church architecture) the country people were unvisited, untaught, even shunned by the clergy who found them too "low" to know. By his persistent use of the word "Parson" Herbert reminds each priest that he is the person in each community: The man to whom all have access for their needs, "spiritual and practical, altar and heath, body and soul." He and his wife who had married a few months earlier and their servants walked across the lane to church twice a day to say their prayers..... and he was ill with tuberculosis working like a mole inside him. Christ accompanied him everywhere and in everything. His happiness and privilege overwhelmed him and so it was that he wrote a Rule for those who, like him, looked to what he knew the best of all lives, that of a country parson. That was in 1630: Before the Industrial Revolution, First Education Act and in a rigid class-ridden society.

In 2009 Justin Lewis-Anthony, a Rector in the City of Canterbury, published a book "If you meet George Herbert on the road, kill him". The title is an Anglican adaptation of a Zen story: If you meet the icon of your faith in your journey, be very suspicious, as it is more likely to be the projection of your fantasies than the real Buddha, the real George Herbert. The subtitle is less arresting "Radically re-thinking priestly ministry".

The first half of the book refers to how, since the days of George Herbert attempts have been made to apply his pattern of rural ministry to an industrial urban society and with description of burnout in the 1970's and psychological studies of church life in the 1990's. These have been brought about by the false image conveyed by "Herbertism", a busy-ness, that it all in the end boils down to the Vicar.

But if we kill "Herbertism" what do we put in its place? Although addressed primarily to the ordained ministry this approach can speak (if we can hear!) to all forms of ministry and therefore to Tertiary Formation in terms of the priesthood of all believers. It is a pity if the title discourages listening to the issues raised. As we consider the meaning of Formation does our understanding of George Herbert's legacy help us? The book may be addressed specifically to the ordained ministry yet its content can speak to a wider context.

The author referring to Rowan Williams in a lecture on Michael Ramsey's book "The Christian Priest Today" explores these images:-

**Witness:** St. Matthias replaced Judas Iscariot because he was a witness of the resurrection. Subsequently the church interpreted this in terms of how we are seen for what we are e.g. how we exercise authority, hospitality, serving and what the whole church in all its members is seen to be..... those who remember God's story. That is, Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

**Watchman:** Acting as a watchman, as a discerner and interpreter of culture the church recognizes earthly signs of God's goodness and must make his friendship for men visible in the world.

**Weaver:** God is at work both within and beyond the confines of the church: Making connections, interpreting the church's teaching to the world, helping people to make sense of each other, facing conflicts in the church and elsewhere and working through conflicts, keeping an over-view of community life rather than just 'firefighting'.

**Worship and Prayer** above all.

George Herbert lived in a different age and culture. His writings have lasted and are valued as ever. How do we interpret them for today? Against what may be an unfair, false and corrupted interpretation of Herbertism there are issues here for the church and for our Formation.

If we question the legacy of George Herbert in terms of the ordained ministry how does that questioning apply to other forms of ministry, notably our Formation?

### **Worship and Prayer**

Overall may we capture George Herbert's confident faith and imagination.

For example, he describes prayer as "a banquet, angels' age". At which some of us will say "that's not my experience". It is a sense of duty, rather than a sense of feasting that drives our prayer. But for Herbert it is a feast, a banquet and his imagination leaps to the angels.

The poem "Love bade me welcome" ends "You must sit down, says love. And taste my meat. So I did sit and eat".

And the response is gratitude. "Thou hast given so much to me, give me a grateful heart". George Herbert's image is of a people confident in God, flourishing in banquet prayer with "a heart whose pulse may be thy praise".