
On the Observance of George Herbert

An article from the *Cathedral Times*.

This week (February 27), the Episcopal Church will observe the feast of George Herbert, surely one of the finer poets in our tradition. Here is but one example of his work:

THE AGONIE

*Philosophers have measur'd mountains,
Fathom'd the depths of seas, of states, and kings,
Walk'd with a staffe to heav'n, and traced fountains:*

*But there are two vast, spacious things,
The which to measure it doth more behove:
Yet few there are that sound them; Sinne and Love.*

*Who would know Sinne, let him repair
Unto mount Olivet; there shall he see
A man so wrung with pains, that all his hair,
His skinne, his garments bloudie be.
Sinne is that presse and vice, which forceth pain
To hunt his cruell food through ev'ry vein.*

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

However, the figure of George Herbert, country parson, has also assumed a legendary and misleading image. In a little treatise called "The Country Parson," Herbert laid out a set of admirable criteria for what makes a successful parish priest. Those attributes of soft and genteel politeness have often been lambasted and critiqued, recently by Justin Lewis-Anthony in his delightful book, "If you Meet George Herbert on the Road, Kill Him." Lewis-Anthony noted that Herbert, in reality, was not really such a removed country parson. His little parish church was actually within walking distance of the high culture of Salisbury, and—even then—Herbert served there less than three years. He didn't really pay his dues!

Here is what Justin Lewis-Anthony wrote in *The Guardian*, June 2, 2009: "Close your eyes and picture a vicar of the Church of England. Whether you are a regular churchgoer or someone who once watched an episode of *The Vicar of Dibley*, your mental image will more than likely be this: a smiling, benign, inoffensive and unworldly cleric. This image has its origins in the life and ministry of one man, George Herbert (1594-1633). ... Too often Herbertism gets in the way of Christianity. The solution must begin with ridding the false memory of Herbert, who he wasn't and what he didn't do. Much of our reverence for "George Herbert" is the worshipping of a fantasy pastor, an impossible and inaccurate role model, a cause of guilt and anxiety. Like the Zen Master, if we meet George Herbert on the road, we must kill him."

George Herbert was actually born in Wales, and there is another Welsh-born poet and priest, a more contemporary one, whom I highly recommend for a fine model of country clergy. He is R. S. Thomas, a great giant of a poet. I can print here only a portion of his poem, "The Country Clergy," but look it up. It is an excellent and rugged juxtaposition to Herbert's fantasy country parson. From Thomas's "The Country Clergy:" *"I see them working in old rectories / ...They left no books, / Memorial to their lonely thought / In grey parishes; rather they wrote / On men's hearts and in the minds / Of young children sublime words / Too soon forgotten. God in his time / Or out of time will correct this."*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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