

At the end of tonight's service we will sing the well-loved hymn 'King of Glory, King of Peace'. Many of you are probably thinking that isn't a very Lenten hymn; the Organist certainly asked me why I put it on the music list. But I think George Herbert knew far more about the psychology of Lent than almost any poet before or since. Like many of his contemporaries, Herbert was a Calvinist, who believed that he could do nothing for his own salvation. 'I threatened to observe the strict decree/Of my deare God with all my power & might', he admits in one poem ('The Holdfast'). 'But I was told by one, it could not be'. '[T]o have naught is ours,' he concludes, 'not to confesse that we have naught.' Even the power of turning to repentance is, for the strict Calvinist, denied us. This is the joy, the sheer relief of grace; not only do we not have to be good, we don't even have to be good at being sorry that we are not good. Christ 'who cannot fail or fall' does all of that for us, even as we fail and fall over and over again.

But for all that this way of thinking is a relief, it also presents a deep conundrum, one that is played out over and over in Herbert's poems: if I can't do anything, than what can I do? For human beings who love to take control, for whom being is doing, that is a serious trouble: if I can't do anything, that what is faith calling me to be? In 'King of Glory, King of Peace', the speaker responds to the wonderful truth that God has heard him with promises of what he will do:

Wherefore with my utmost art
I will sing thee,
And the cream of all my heart
I will bring thee.

But these great resolutions, these promises of things to be done, are not really things to be done at all, but ways of being. 'I will love thee', 'I will move thee', 'I will praise thee', 'I can raise thee'. The closest Herbert gets to action is the promise that 'I will sing thee'. Not 'I will feed the hungry for you', or even 'I will be a better person for you'. Not because we shouldn't do those things, but because doing those things is impossible without God's love to move us. What can I do? To quote another poet, and another beloved hymn, 'Give my heart. Give my heart.'

There is a movement these days to make Lent more about what we *do* in this life, and less about reflecting on the sin that is so life-limiting. But I think there is deep value in the old fashioned practice of remembering that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. In contemplating the deep truth that there is little that we can do, so that when we do *do*, it is in the full awareness of our human frailty, of our desperately, dangerously mixed motives, of the fullness of our sin and the frailness of our flesh. This Lent, I challenge you: Do nothing, that you may know yourself, and see yourself as God sees you, remade in the image of the beloved Son.

In Herbert's words, we pray:

Lord, instruct us to improve our fast
by starving sinne and taking such repast,
As may our faults control:
That ev'ry man may revell at his doore,
Not in his parlour; banquetting the poore,
And among those his soul. ('Lent', final stanza)

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