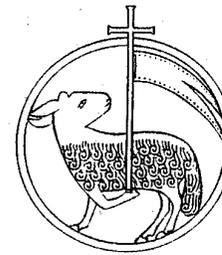


*The state of trial and the state of glory are so mysterious in their relation that neither without the other could be absolutely perfect. Innumerable beauties would be left, and many transcendent virtues and perfections be abolished if the estate of trial had been left aside . . . (since its effect is to enrich and beautify the kingdom of God everlastingly, and God loveth man far more and designeth more glory and perfection for him than if he had placed him in the throne at first. (Ethicks Chap. 23).*

So, however harsh life might be or costly the cross-bearing, we may lift up our hearts, knowing that in the Lord our mutual work shall not be in vain. An estate of trial is but the prelude to an eternal weight of glory.

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# FAITH

praying and believing

# ON THE EARTH

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## AN ESTATE OF TRIAL - Co-operation with God

Thomas Traherne 6

Life is hard even though we would like Christianity to be comfortable. Cross-bearing is actually on the agenda and we have to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. But isn't that heresy, though it is plucked straight out of Scripture? Are we not justified by *faith* and not by works, again quoting Scripture? Yes! to the *two* propositions, since it is a both/and situation, faith *and* works. In theology this is known as *synergy*, God and human beings working together, since we are people not robots. *Synergy* is an insight from Orthodoxy, part of the traditional teaching of the Eastern Church, but it isn't foreign to the West. We find it for instance, and perhaps surprisingly, in the writings of Thomas Traherne, seventeenth century Church of England priest and mystic.

Traherne lived in the exciting years when the classical Anglican theology of comprehensiveness was in the making. Various emphases were jostling for ascendancy while simultaneously being held together in precarious equilibrium. Extremes were not popular and it was still very much an age of intolerance and religious persecution. Like others of his time, however, and perhaps because as a poet he could to some extent get away with it, Traherne managed to draw from many sometimes seemingly contradictory sources and then reach unexpected syntheses. Here is a man, brought up during the Civil War and Commonwealth, and having graduated from the strongly Puritan Brasenose College Oxford, luxuriating over

the beauties of creation and even seeming to put the doctrine of justification by faith in a more balanced light. Faith, he claims, is actually a work, indeed the greatest and most demanding work conceivable:

*To believe that God will be so gracious as to pardon our apostasy and rebellion is a work so great that God accepteth it instead of all other works of piety. To believe that he hath given his eternal Son to die for us . . . is so much against the dictates of nature and reason that God 'imputeth this faith alone as righteousness'. (Ethicks Chap. 15).*

Traherne hastens to add that this doesn't mean that other works are not needed. It isn't a case of faith alone as some of the Reformists claimed. Granted we are **justified** by this work of faith, but having thus been justified, we are then empowered to fulfil the manifold obligations of the law of Christ, the works of him who said: "If you love me you will keep my commandments", and "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect".

*Not as if there were no good works necessary beside, but by this (ie faith) alone we are justified in his sight, and our justification cannot be ascribed to any other work of ours whatsoever. Howbeit, that which maketh faith itself so great a virtue is that we thereby receive a power, and an inclination withal, to do those works of love and mercy, the performance and the reward of which was the very end of our Saviour's coming. (Ibid).*

What a wonderful *synergy* we have, faith and works, God and us, but in the end it is all grace. God enables us to do what he requires us to do, though never usurping the freedom of our will.

All that God has done for us in Christ would be to no purpose in fact,

*love and mercy, made infinitely more deep and mysterious than the former. (Ethicks Chap. 14).*

One good reason, then, for our present state of trial, Traherne tells us, is so that we can grow in patience, courage, faith and son on:

*The great end for which God was pleased not to set us immediately in the throne, but to place us in an estate of trial, was the multiplication of our virtues . . . which virtues are the very clothes and habits of the soul in glory. (Ethicks Chap. 21).*

The vision of God in the kingdom of heaven is the end of all our endeavour, and yet the bliss of that encounter can already be experienced in some measure even here in the midst of our trials and tribulations. It is after all more glorious to **strive** after that vision than to experience it effortlessly as pure unworked-for gift:

*To love God in the light is a cheap and easy thing. The love that is showed in a more weak estate to an absent object is more remiss, perhaps and black in appearance, but far deeper, if, in the lover's weakness and its object's absence, it be faithful to the death . . . All the courage which it shows is more full of mystery than is imaginable. . . while it struggles with impediments . . . than if without any such occasion of showing its virtue it did smoothly and peaceably proceed in the highest rapture. (Ibid).*

There is hope for us still, then, when the going is hard, prayer next door to impossible and God seemingly a thousand miles away. Indeed Traherne stresses that without the state of trial the state of glory itself would somehow be impoverished, the two are inextricably bound together. Only by divine/human co-operation can we attain to the unity of God's purpose for us and for all creation:

of The Ethicks: ‘We rail on the world when the fault is in ourselves’. But then the world is a harsh place and even our Christianity, as we have noted, is far from being a soft option. Traherne was realistic about this too but didn’t sit down under it. More than most he revelled in the beauty and majesty of creation, as we have said, but he knew creation to be warped and marred through the sinfulness of fallen humanity. Interestingly, his ideas about Eden and the original state of innocence link him again with the Eastern Christian tradition. Adam and Eve in paradise are depicted not so much as already perfect but rather as in a state of potentiality for growth. Options were open but initially with a real possibility for the choice of the good. Genuine freedom, however, implies both choice and the testing of that power to choose. God as it were gambled and humankind chose the road of disobedience. The state of potentiality for growth remained but the way was now blocked by brambles and thorns. Traherne describes both the Eden and the post-Eden situations as an estate (or state) of trial.

Nevertheless, such a condition is humanity’s glory. It is part of God’s rescue operation and the means by which, in Christ, humankind is raised to an honour and dignity greater than that of the angels. All along there is still the concept of *synergy* - God inviting and enabling and men and women, where they will, freely choosing to correspond. God in fact might have forced redemption on us to the detriment of freedom but that happily is not his way:

*God hath in his infinite mercy redeemed us . . . yet he hath with infinite prudence ordered the way and manner of our redemption in that we are not immediately translated into heaven, but restored to a new estate of trial, and endued with power to do new duties, as pleasing to him as those which he required from us in Eden . . . (those new duties of faith and repentance . . .) This (second) kingdom of evangelical righteousness, being founded on the blood of Christ, is, by death and sin and by the supernatural secrets of*

Traherne claims, if our wills did not co-operate. There has to be room for repentance and amendment, for a return of love to Love. He says paradoxically: ‘It is not the love of God to us, so much as our love to him, that maketh heaven’. (Ethicks Chap. 17). He admits that this may surprise his readers but goes on to explain that even God’s love if unrequited would remain unfruitful and serve only to increase our guilt, shame and pain. ‘It is the concurrence (ie *synergy*) of our love and his, when they meet together, that maketh heaven’. (Ibid).

Still on the topic of love, Traherne startles us even more. What he says here seems to have an oddly up to date psychological ring about it. Instead of deprecating self-love he claims that it is absolutely essential to love oneself before one can begin to love God - indeed we actually love God out of love for ourselves! There is a *synergy* or partnership in this too:

*Even Jacob’s ladder will not bring us to heaven, unless we begin at the bottom. Self-love is the first round, and they that remove it had as good take all away; for he that has no love for himself can never feel obliged. (ie that he owes a debt of gratitude for blessings received). (Ethicks Chap. 32).*

Such a person can neither delight in God nor enjoy him, still less love him. In fact, Traherne concludes:

*Self-love is so far from being the **impediment** that it is the **cause** of our gratitude, and the only principle that gives us power to do what we ought. For the more we love ourselves, the more we love those that are our benefactors. (Ibid).*

Our principle benefactor is of course God.

With equal psychological insight Traherne remarks in the Appendix