

*'That they all may  
be one'*



***DEAR LORD, DO THIS! – true sheep all in one fold (Henry Vaughan)***

It is Jesus himself who both prays and promises that one day there will truly be one flock under one Shepherd. His followers have wanted this too, sometimes more urgently sometimes less so. Inexplicably, from a merely human estimation, the more ardent the desire so much more does division seem to increase. Innumerable **little** flocks spring up, each estimating itself to contain the true sheep within its own minute pen, the devil presumably take the rest. Faith tells us, all the same, that there is a way through, that Way is Jesus.

The seventeenth century Church of England both desired unity and yet fomented division. The so-called Anglican comprehensiveness was being forged, a brave endeavour to hold divergent understandings of the Church together in balance – basically the Catholic and the Reformed. Now one side, now the other was in the ascendant and there were casualties on the way. Both the Roman Catholics and the Calvinistic non-conformists suffered, but so also did those **within** Anglicanism who inclined more to one side or the other. What is to be done in a situation like that?, one, incidentally, that is not without parallels in current Anglicanism. Henry Vaughan, Church of England poet and man of prayer (some would say a mystic) expressed these tensions frequently in his verse, and, one senses, felt them very strongly indeed in his prayer. His insights are worth pondering. Here we will look at the poem entitled *L'Envoy*' published around 1655 as the conclusion of the second part of *Silex Scintillans*.

As so often in his poetry Vaughan begins with an urgent prayer for the fulfilment and completion of all things in Christ. It is quite probable that he had had some sort of mystical experience at the time of crisis which fixed his religious and poetic spirit, prior to the publication of *Silex Scintillans*. Most probably this is what lies behind his frequent attempts to describe the things of heaven. In this instance he would appear to see himself as an envoy to

the heavenly realms asking for God's definitive intervention to bring about his will on earth – his glorious second coming:

*O the new world's new quickening Sun!  
Ever the same, and never done!  
The seers of whose sacred light  
Shall all be drest in shining white,  
And made conformable to his  
Immortal shape, who wrought their bliss;  
Arise, arise!*

With allusions to the concluding verses of Psalm 102, and Hebrews 1, verses 10-12, he asks that the elements be dissolved and the Kingdom brought in:

*. . . like old cloaths fold up these skies,  
This long worn veyl: then shine and spread  
Thy own bright self over each head,  
And through thy creatures pierce and pass,  
Till all becomes thy cloudless glass . . .  
And without blemish or decay,  
Fixt by thy spirit to a state  
For evermore immaculate.*

Vaughan in fact, as so often in his poetry, is pleading for a return to a first state of innocence, to a glory lost, which is to be ours again at the last day. Then the image of God will be renewed in human kind and they will be fit for the vision of God:

*A state fit for the sight of thy*

*Immediate, pure and unveil'd eye,*

*A state agreeing with thy minde,*

*A state thy birth and death design'd.*

Yes, the whole purpose of the Incarnation and Redemption was this very thing: the sanctification and glorification of the world. True believers know this too, and like Vaughan himself struggle and strive that it should come to pass. As so often, Vaughan is moving rapidly now from descriptions of the heavenly ideal to the contrasting reality of present disarray. He does not need to spell it all out, for his readers would be only too well aware of the divisive state of the Church and of society by comparison with the heavenly state he is speaking about:

*A state for which thy creatures all*

*Travel [ie travail] and groan, and look and call.*

[Cf. Romans 8: 19-25]

Abruptly Vaughan follows this immediately with the question our limited human vision finds so incomprehensible: Why, seeing that once and for all in Christ, salvation has been given, why does the Church continue to sin, **why** are we divided?

*O seeing thou has paid our score,*

*Why should the curse reign any more?*

But the enigma is neither elaborated nor bewailed. Straightaway Vaughan lets scripture answer for him (Cf. Revelation 6:11) and himself obeys the injunction found there – patience:

*But since thy number is as yet*

*Unfinish'd, we shall gladly sit*

*Till all be ready, that the train*

*May fully fit thy glorious reign.*

Over three hundred years later we are still waiting, **and** we are called to the same dispositions. The times, and the final outcome, are in God's hands and our impatient striving to bring things about, when and how we perceive they should be, is far more of a hindrance than a help. God give us grace to know when to act and when to forbear! Vaughan's plea, following directly on, must be ours as well, however:

*Onely, let not our haters brag*

[Unbelievers who scoff and deride?]

*Thy seamless coat is grown a rag,*

*Because we forc'd thy judgements down,*

Indeed it is all too easy for the world to mock the Church – 'Since God has let things turn out like this for you, you must have got things wrong in the first place!' We admit our sins, and seek to atone, but we will not give up or fail to know of a surety that God's purposes for his Church cannot be gainsaid, since even the gates of hell must yield.

But Vaughan next waxes strong against the real, concrete enemies of his day, the 'iconoclasts' who plundered all that was sacred for their own selfish ends. We too are entitled to pray against our enemies – against the materialism, apathy, or even downright malice of the many who mock the Church still. However, it would be totally unbecoming to answer 'violence' with 'violence' whether physical or verbal, whether against our opponents outside or even within the Church. Such behaviour merely perpetuates or increases divisiveness:

*Dry up their arms who vex thy spouse,*

*And take the glory of thy house*

*To deck their own; then give thy saints*

*That faithful zeal, which neither faints,*

*Nor wildely burns, but meekly still*

*Dares own the truth, and shew the ill.*

Grace and courage are certainly required of us nowadays to hold on, without arrogance, to the truth, while at the same time pointing out what is amiss, in the Church of which we are all members, as sinners in need of salvation. It is a very tight rope to walk along. Vaughan seems to have been particularly grieved by verbal abuse in the Church which can sometimes wound the spirit more grievously than any physical assault does the body. We must take note as well:

*Frustrate those cancerous, close arts,  
Which cause solution [dissolution] in all parts,  
And strike them dumb, who for meer words  
Wound thy beloved more than swords.*

Typical again of himself, however, Vaughan cannot rest there and end with recrimination. God he repeats, is the only one who can remedy the situation. ‘*Dear Lord, do this!*’ he exclaims, all this that I, the envoy of your Church ask of you:

*...and then let grace  
Descend, and hallow all the place.  
Incline each heart to do good,  
And cement us with thy Son’s blood.*

‘Join us together through the blood of Christ’, is his cry, and note that it is **us**, all of us, not just ‘them’ who are to be made one:

*That like true sheep, all in one fold  
We may be fed, and one minde hold.*

Moreover, as a layman, Vaughan recognises that it is the priestly leaders in the Church who hold a special responsibility and who, because of this, are particularly vulnerable to the inroads and subtleties of temptation:

*Give watchful spirits to our guides;  
For sin like water hourly glides  
By each man's door, and quickly will  
Turn in, if not obstructed still.*

Those with God-given authority in the Church must be faithful to the injunctions of God's teaching and law, as found in scripture, and Vaughan also asks that they may be enabled to learn from the sharp judgement that is being inflicted on the Church through its sufferings, (for after all God's hand **is** in it all). If the leaders can stand the test, living upright and holy lives, then God's mercy **will** descend:

*Therefore write in their hearts thy law,  
And let these long, sharp judgements awe  
Their very thoughts, that by their clear  
And holy lives mercy may here  
Sit regent yet, and blessings flow  
As fast as persecutions now.*

It is a tall order, but no more than has always been required of those God places in positions of oversight in his Church. May God indeed give the enabling grace, now as at all times.

*So shall we know in war and peace  
Thy service to be our sole ease,  
With prostrate souls adoring thee,  
Who turn'd our sad captivity!*

Once more Vaughan will not let us lose sight of the End, which, under God we **can** all begin to taste of even in our present struggles.