

*'That they all may
be one'*



EXILED RELIGION OWNED - The uses of flight - (Henry Vaughan)

Sometimes it is necessary to run away, or at least to be perceived as doing so in the eyes of the uncomprehending. From the earliest years the Church has had her hermits and the precursors of these were to be found in the pages of Scripture. Sometimes the vocation has been romanticised but the reality is stark and uncompromising, as was that of the Old Testament prophet. At times of crisis God often raises up Solitaries. Such figures are not, if authentic, bizarre individuals seeking attention, or conversely, hoping to escape from involvement or possible persecution even to the death. No, the genuine hermit is a person of prayer, totally given to God in a life of asceticism and withdrawal, to become a channel through whom God's purposes can be made manifest and, in his own good time, brought about.

Could Henry Vaughan, seventeenth century lawyer and physician, turned poet, be termed in any sense a solitary? Life could not have been exactly easy for him as a Royalist, and hence supporter of the High Church party in the established Church of England, particularly during the years of the Civil War and the Commonwealth. He might have had good reason for slipping away out of the public eye. Indeed, most of his life was spent in the Welsh borderlands of his origin, in a sense a step apart. Certainly much of his poetry has a prophetic ring about it. The profound religious experience that he underwent around 1650 is echoed in his writings, especially in the verses published under the title *Silex Scintillans*. Here are the words of a man with a message to proclaim, a divine imperative and he seems not to have been gainsaid by any fear of repercussion. Yes vestiges of a solitary vocation **can** be perceived in his life, even if circumstances neither called for or allowed its radical fulfilment. There is one poem in particular which seems to illustrate this. It is entitled *The Bee*.

The reason for the title only becomes apparent at the end, but maybe this is a device to divert attention from the subversive content lying just below the surface. The poem is included among *Pious Thoughts and Ejaculations* and so probably dates from sometime in the mid sixteen fifties. It is not part of *Silex Scintillans*. . At all events the opening lines leave little doubt from whom and what the author seeks to escape, though seemingly in the guise of a bee:

*From fruitful beds and flowery borders,
Parcelled to wasteful ranks and orders,
Where state grasps more than plain truth needs,
And wholesome herbs are starved by weeds,
To the wild woods I will be gone,
And the coarse meals of great Saint John.*

In other words, the state has taken over the garden of the Church and wastefully ruined it, not least for 'the bee', so he is heading off to the wilderness, there, like John the Baptist, to survive on honey from the wild and a few wild locusts.

The section that follows immediately beats even less about the bush. This time Elijah's flight to the desert to save his life from his religious and political enemies, is invoked as a precedent:

*When truth and piety are missed
Both in the Rulers and the Priest;
When pity is not cold but dead,
And the rich eat the poor like bread;
While factious heads, with open coil
And force, first make, then share, the spoile;
To Horeb then Elias [Elijah] goes,
And in the desert grows the rose.*

It is the concluding line that brings us up short and justifies the rapid change of tone in the lines that follow. The desert would surely be an inhospitable place, but because God is there it becomes a paradise. Here we are reminded of the imagery in the book of Isaiah – Yahweh’s promise that the desert places are to blossom (Cf. Isaiah 35: 1-2 seq). Vaughan yearns for the bliss of a solitude that will not be invaded by the worldly-minded, so-called believers intent only on their own gain:

Haile Chrystal fountains and fresh shades,

Where no proud look invades,

No busie wordling hunts away

The sad Retirer all the day!

Haile, happy, harmless solitude!

Our sanctuary from the rude

And scornful world; the calm recess

Of faith, and hope and holiness!

Here something still like Eden looks;

Honey in woods, Juleps in brooks

...

When the toyls of the day are done,

And the tired world sets with the Sun;

Here flying winds and flowing wells,

Are the wise watchful hermit’s bells.

Yes, there is a hint of nostalgic desire here, for the place where one can be alone, and at prayer. And Vaughan continues with exquisite nature imagery, joining all of it together with the hermit’s prayer – a taste of his own mystic awareness of the oneness of all things?

*When in the East the dawn doth blush,
Here cool fresh spirits the air brush.
Herbs strait get up; flowers peep and spread;
Trees whisper praise and bow the head:
Birds, from the shades of night released,
Look round about, then quit the nest,
And with united gladness sing
The glory of the morning's King.
The hermit hears, and with meek voice
Offers his own up, and their, joyes:
Then prays that all the world might be
Blest with as sweet an unity.*

Then, as the day advances, perhaps the storm clouds lower? The birds flock round the hermit
– his prayers will intervene:

*And hard by shelters on some bough
Hilarion's servant, the sage crow.*

Hilarion, monk in fourth century Egypt and founder of the anchoritic (or hermit) life in Palestine – all this recalls the whole tradition of the solitary life to Vaughan and brings him abruptly back to the present. How marked the contrast!

*O purer years of light and grace!
Great is the difference, as the space
'Twixt you and us, who blindly run*

After false fires and leave the sun.

For Vaughan, what now passes for religion is false, the real has been left behind:

...fancy and some artist's tools

Frame a religion for fools.

Truth is overgrown, with fables, wild speculations and discord, so that the very name of religion is stained with blood and discredited:

So snow, which in its first descents

A whiteness like pure heaven presents,

When touched by men is quickly soiled,

And after trodden down and spoiled.

Thus Vaughan swings back again, like a bee to and fro, from the solitude and the purity of religion he yearns for to himself:

O lead me, where I may be free

In truth and spirit to serve Thee!

Where undisturbed I may converse

With thy great self; and there rehearse

Thy gifts with thanks . . .

Clearly his desire is not merely escapism; he seeks God for **His** sake, so that he may do His will, with thanksgiving. Only after this does he ask for blessing. Remembering the title of the poem he prays:

*Give me the wisdom of the bee,
And her unwearied industry
That from the wild gourds of these days,
I may extract health, and Thy praise,
Who canst turn darkness into light
And in my weakness shew Thy might.*

So, if like Vaughan, we are not actually free to fly off to some longed for paradise, we too can hope to produce at least a modicum of honey from our harsh environment. God will not deny our prayer and will supply enough strength to our weakness. But of course fidelity is required of us. We must not go seeking truth in wrong ways, by compromise, as Vaughan perceives:

*Suffer me not in any want
To seek refreshment from a plant
Thou didst not set; since all must be
Plucked up, whose growth is not from Thee.*

In fact it is not the whereabouts or anything else that gives wholesomeness to the plants in **God's** garden – in other words, Vaughan tells us to beware of false, merely human doctrines, teaching and ideas. God alone is the author of his own truth.

These thoughts are enough to remind Vaughan once more of his desire to escape from pernicious and false growth of every kind, and like the bee to fly to purer realms, to return to the soundness of the traditional faith, the religion which, as Vaughan perceived it, had been exiled. Flight, for him, as for any of us, could only be justifiable if it concluded in full restoration, where God is all in all:

*Then since corrupt man hath driv'n hence
Thy kind and saving influence,*

*And balm is no more to be had
In all the coasts of Gilead;
Go with me to the shade and cell,
Where Thy best servants once did dwell.
There let me know Thy will and see
Exiled religion owned by Thee;
For Thou canst turn dark grotts to halls,
And make hills blossome like the vales,
Decking their untilled heads with flowers,
Till from them, like a laden bee
I may fly home, and hive with Thee!*

Vaughan, we can feel sure, has made it back. Who knows how many unexpected bees from unexpected places have also made it as well, to the corporate hive.