

HENRY VAUGHAN 7

*Thou didst lead to, and still all strife.
Living, thou wert my soul's sure ease,
And dying mak'st me go in peace.
The next effects no tongue can tell;
Farewell, O book of God! farewell!*

With this Vaughan yields himself to sleep, image and precursor of the final sleep of death when not even the holy and sacred text of Scripture can go with us.

If it should be that the cosmic struggles and death throes of the last days, predicted in Scripture, should lie ahead of us, more nearly than we had cared to think – then what better thing to do than turn back in full confidence to the sacred text – God's map and recipe of enabling come what may.



Holy Cross Series FE20B

Holy Cross Convent, Rempstone Hall, Nr Loughborough LE12 6RG

Community of the Holy Cross. A Registered Charity

Holy Scriptures



THE GREAT ELIXIR, THE OIL & THE WINE-HOUSE HENRY VAUGHAN 7

For all our new versions, revisions, commentaries, and despite the hype, the Bible has a bad press in many circles today. Alright, it has been brought down from a pedestal and that is not always a bad thing. A realistic approach is usually an advantage. Alright too, a rationalistic, academic appraisal of the text over the last couple of hundred years has borne much fruit, and yet for many the Bible has grown stale, all sense of transcendent respect for the revealed word of God has been lost. Ignorance and indifference have set in. Others have approached the sacred pages with an arrogant self-assurance. To paraphrase St. Benedict (speaking of another matter) what pleases them they call holy and what goes against the grain they disallow. We need to pause and back-track, in order to build up again and advance as we should. Finding a morally-acceptable way forward in our disintegrating civilisation is dependent on an enlightened re-implementation of timeless biblical truth.

HENRY VAUGHAN 7

How remote some of the eulogies of Scripture from previous ages can at times seem. But where there is respect and awe, rightly perceived, there usually follows an attempt to emulate. Henry Vaughan, for instance, seventeenth century Christian poet and person of prayer, knew without a doubt how central the scriptures needed to be in his life. Like many of us he met them in his early years then let their influence drift. Later he saw things differently. What he has to say about all this is not simply poetry, gifted though he is. He lived at a time of great upheaval and uncertainty and was brought up short by an experience of God. Scripture henceforth became his anchor and guiding principle. Perhaps he has something to say to our own time.

We will look firstly at a short poem to be found in Vaughan's *Silex Scintillans*, part one, written around 1650. It is simply entitled 'Holy Scriptures'. The first two verses extol the bible, in the poetic style typical of the metaphysical poets of his era, and of which he was himself a master:

*Welcome dear book, soul's joy and food! The feast
Of spirit's; heaven extracted lies in thee.
Thou art life's charter, the Dove's [ie the Holy Spirit]
spotless nest
Where souls are hatched unto eternity.
In thee, the hidden stone, the manna lies;
Thou art the great elixir rare and choice;
The key that opens to all mysteries,
The Word in characters, God in the Voice.*

Space will not allow for word to word commentary, but meditation on these verses can yield depths of relevant meaning if we approach things prayerfully, chewing slowly over the words. After all that is how we should behave towards Holy Scripture itself.

Having thus eulogised the bible – sincerely and meaningfully and not simply through a clever use of words – Vaughan brings the sacred book down to his own level in the third and last stanza. He knows his own sin

HENRY VAUGHAN 7

Like most of us, though, the teenage Vaughan revolted, thought he knew better than his mentors and turned his back on the scriptures, like children escaping from their parents and only running back when they get hurt. Yet God was watchful. Sometimes an open bible lying around would catch Vaughan's eye and something of the message would go home, at least momentarily. He didn't easily succumb, for that was more than his prideful self-assertion could allow:

*So with that first light gained from thee
Ran I in chase of vanity,
Cried dross for gold, and never thought
My first cheap book had all I sought.
. . .and thou [ie the bible] cast by
. . .didst woo mine eye,
And oft left open wouldst convey
A sudden and most searching ray
Into my soul . . .*

At last, though, the sword of the Spirit, the word of God, pierced irresistibly between joints and marrow and Vaughan found joy, peace, wholeness again:

*By this mild art of love at length
Thou overcamst my sinful strength
And having brought me home, didst there
Shew me the pearl I sought elsewhere.*

Still musing, before giving himself to sleep, Vaughan is carried in an ecstasy of delight up, out and beyond time to what will be, under God, his and our blissful experience at the other side of death. Something of this is tasted now but the reality is inexplicable and must be awaited. Because of this very inexpressibility, a hint of bathos can be excused:

*Gladness, and peace, and hope, and love,
The secret favours of the Dove [the Holy Spirit]
. . .
Fruition, union, glory, life*

HENRY VAUGHAN 7

*Wherefore with tears, tears by thee sent,
I beg my faith may never fail!
And when in death my speech is spent,
O let that silence then prevail!
O chase in that cold calm my foes,
And hear my heart's last private throes!*

And now to the second of the two poems mentioned. The title this time is 'To the Holy Bible'. There are *some* eulogies, but now the tone is more intimately personal. Vaughan is reading in bed, the bible of course, and begins the poem by kissing the book goodnight and lamenting that sleep beckons him and he has to stop. This is a twofold device since it enables him firstly to look back again with regret to the days when he had carelessly and so wilfully neglected the bible altogether. Then, secondly, there is the implicit awareness that sleep is but an image of death, after which comes the great awakening and the blissful fulfilment of all that Scripture promises to the true of heart. So he begins:

*O Book! Life's guide! How shall we part,
And thou so long seized of my heart?
Take this last kiss; and let me weep
True thanks to thee before I sleep.*

Can *our* love and appreciation of scripture come anywhere near to this? Would we grieve inconsolably if deprived of access to the sacred text for the rest of our days, as some believers in our own era have been? Vaughan recalls how he was brought up on the bible from earliest days:

*Thou wert the first put in my hand,
When yet I could not understand,
And daily didst my young eyes lead
To letters, till I learnt to read.*

Sadly, few now have their first reading lessons from the bible, and, more sadly still, many are given only a nodding acquaintance with it, if at all, during the rest of their schooling, and that in a once predominantly Christian environment. Vaughan would weep.

HENRY VAUGHAN 7

and hardness of heart and wishes that the words of Scripture could be engraved permanently on that stony heart. Then God would of necessity hear his prayer since he would be praying always with God's own words. With acceptable familiarity he could remind God that his own Son had become one of us, had taken our sin upon him and done away with it. How then could God refuse to redeem and sanctify him?:

*O that I had deep cut in my hard heart
Each line in thee! [ie the Scriptures] Then I would plead
in groans
Of my Lord's penning, and by sweetest art
Return upon himself the law and stones:
Read here, my faults are thine. The Book and I
Will tell thee so; **sweet Saviour thou didst die.***

The autobiographical aspects of Vaughan's attachment to Scripture are elaborated in greater detail in two later poems, this time from the second part of *Silex Scintillans*, which appeared some five years later. The first is entitled 'The Agreement'. This poem begins with pathos. Vaughan remembers his early years, a youthful pact made with God but idly set aside and forgotten, not least, as he saw later, through the subtle temptations of the evil one. He was so blinded that he didn't even recognise his own writing, his own written-out promises. It all went completely out of his mind:

*I wrote it down. But one, that saw
And envied that record, did since
Such a mist over my mind draw,
It quite forgot that purposed glimpse.
I read it sadly oft, but still
Simply believed 'twas not my quill.*

Possible? Alas, yes, if we are honest with ourselves – so many half-meant promises unfulfilled. But God does not forget, he doesn't let us rest. For Vaughan he sent an angel. Each of us will know what form that angel has taken in our individual lives, which person, event, thing even, turned us back to God again:

HENRY VAUGHAN 7

*At length my life's kind angel came,
And with his bright and busy wing
Scattering that cloud shewed me the flame . . .*

And where *did* the angel direct him? Yes, you are right, *back to the Scriptures*. The two following stanzas are eulogies of Scripture again, similar to those quoted above, but containing further, particular insights:

*O beamy book! O my mid-day
Exterminating fears and night!*
.
.
.
*Thou art the oil and the wine-house;
Thine are the present healing leaves,
Blown from the tree of life to us
By his Breath . . .
Each page of thine has true life in it,
And God's bright mind exprest in print.*

Then, in the following stanza comes a brief digression, but all the same something very much needing to be said. It was no different then from how it is now. So many would-be spiritual writers inundate the market but their wares are like straw by comparison with Holy Writ:

*Most modern books are blots on this,
Their doctrine chaff and windy fits.*

When such works were written their authors were all caught up in the theological controversies of the Reformation and post-Reformation era. They had ulterior motives and humility was not their strongest virtue. Any difference now?? Continuing the quotation above, then, Vaughan says:

*Darkened along, as their scribes be,
With those foul storms, when they were writ;
While the man's zeal lays out and blends
Only self-worship and self-ends.*

But the digression is quickly over and Vaughan returns to praising Scripture:

HENRY VAUGHAN 7

*Thou art the faithful, pearly rock,
The hive of beamy, living lights . . .
Thy lines are rays the true Sun sheds;
Thy leaves are healing wings he spreads.*

Healing reminds Vaughan that this is precisely what happened to him through his meeting up with the Scriptures again, and the next six concluding stanzas of the poem return again to the autobiographical emphasis found in the opening lines.

Vaughan knows *himself* to be a writer, but recognises that anything he tried to say before rediscovering the inspirational force of sacred Scripture was merely nothing:

*. . .until thou didst comfort me
I had not one poor word to say . . .*

And he knew this had been his own fault, just as he acknowledged his current weakness and his total dependence on God's mercy to keep him from falling away again. All the subtle temptations of the evil one, to which he had succumbed in his youth, could, he knew, so easily overwhelm him again, but for God's sustaining help. Yet he remains convinced that God's calling is irrevocable. Is it not so for all of us, this fluctuating between doubt and certainty, this need to go on believing, sometimes even against hope?

*But while time runs, and after it
Eternity which never ends,
Quite through them both, still infinite,
Thy covenant by Christ extends;
No sins of frailty nor of youth,
Can foil his merits, and thy truth.*

Yet Vaughan, like us and despite his certainty, still has to pray for the grace of final perseverance – that he may never again listen to the artful whispers of the tempter and overlook half-unwittingly the commitment he has made of himself to God: