

*'That they all may
be one'*



THE JOY AND STRENGTH OF UNION - God's holy days - Thomas Traherne

Holidays are not what they were. Now they are merely things that we go on, two or three times a year if we can, one of the ever-increasing number of rights we demand. Hard luck on those who don't get any at all but as long as **we** are alright and have something to brag about we don't get over concerned.

Not that there is anything wrong in relaxing and having a necessary break, meeting new people and seeing new things, enjoying the beauties of God's world. Burnout is not a Christian virtue. Rather, what is largely missing in contemporary life is a sense of the sacredness of time, the realisation that some seasons and days, as well as some places, are especially pregnant with God's presence and activity and that for the sake of our spiritual well-being we need to savour them. God's healing power and saving work have to be appropriated by us, re-experienced as present reality in purposed rituals of remembrance. This is what an incarnational and sacramental religion is about.

Mostly we are quite good on birthdays and on the anniversaries of the death of those we knew and still love. Jubilee celebrations of world events have also caught on. But so often it is God himself who is left out - and it is even being tried on with the Millennium celebrations. Whitsunday has been swallowed up by the Spring Bank Holiday . . . So it goes on.

Our forebears lived quite differently. Holidays were what they say they are, holy days, breaks from the round of work and routine to celebrate the things of God. Admittedly they got out of hand sometimes, but the intention was there. They were corporate occasions too, times for being together. It wasn't all that easy to feel left out in the more close-knit societies of former times.

All the same the real purpose behind the celebrations needed to be stressed. It is interesting to look, for example, at some of the things Thomas Traherne had to say in his seventeenth century work *The Church's Year Book*. Writing as a Church of England priest and man of prayer at a time when different emphases in theology and ecclesiastical understanding were competing for ascendancy, his obvious concern is to ensure that the value of liturgical celebrations, the keeping of feasts and holy days, should be recognised and therefore maintained. Why, he asks:

... should we not spend some time upon holy days in contemplating the beauty of holy days in themselves?

And why shouldn't we join him and let the lyrical beauty of his writings inspire us to find again some of the treasures we have lost in our materialistic and sceptical age. We have to start though from where we are. Holy days, like holidays, **are** given us to relieve monotony and add colour to our lives, if we are properly attuned that is. Traherne describes them as '*a grateful relaxation from cares and labours*'. This won't be immediately obvious in our secular society which relentlessly sweeps everything along with it in frenzied activity. But as Christians we must resist all this and find ways and means of entering into our heritage.

Such days, in truth are:

*... the ornaments of time and the beauty of the world;
The lucid intervals and lights of the year.
... seasons of melody, joy and thanksgiving.*

If this seems a far cry from reality maybe we need to look into things and see why we are missing out. How **real** is our faith? Paradise certainly seems to have been lost, while Traherne sees the yearly round of feasts and festivals as '*relics of Eden and superadded treasures*', but at the same time pointing forward as well to what is still to be:

*... days of heaven seen upon earth ...
The very cream and crown and repose of our lives,
Wherein we antedate the resurrection of the dead.*

These days, then, are too precious to be frittered away. As far as we can we should seek to escape from the normal run of things:

*... come from our shops to our Saviour's throne,
From ploughing our fields to manna in the wilderness
From dressing our vineyards to the wine of angels
From caring for our children, to be the sons of God.*

Not that we are to drop everything in selfish indulgence, but maybe we could find just a little space to celebrate and let the mysteries of our faith seep into us. Our earthly preoccupations can be transmuted into another sphere. God comes to mingle among us at these times, these:

*... Market days of heaven,
Appointed seasons wherein God keeps open house,
... spiritual regions wherein we walk in the paths
of God.*

Possibly we can only find a brief interval to slip off on our own to pray. So be it. But if possible we should join with others in celebration:

'A private person is but half himself; and is naturally magnified in others'.

For these holy days are:

*... blessed opportunities wherein we come from our solitary closets to see ourselves in
solemn assemblies,
Single devotions are weak in comparison of these; here is the JOY and STRENGTH of UNION
...
The difference between earth and heaven is that here we are dispersed, there we shall
ever be united together.*

Fellowship and community are so desperately needed in our fragmented world and it is precisely these things that we inherit as Christians. Holy days and liturgical celebrations enable us to experience in time what will eventually be ours in fulness. They are:

*Golden links uniting our souls and all things together.
Apostles, prophets, patriarchs appear in them and come unto us.
Moses, King David, and Solomon welcome us,
Saints and martyrs visit us.*

We taste already, if we will, the JOY and STRENGTH of UNION. Yet we cannot take it all simply as a given. Merely to be there with one another doesn't always make for harmony and bliss! Our

celebrations must not be mere jamborees to disguise all the underlying tensions. There must be silences, spaces for prayer and meditation, for penitence and for letting the Holy Spirit impart the mysteries of our faith to us in secret. *'Without contemplation we lose the benefits of the ages'* Traherne says. But he concludes by saying that without celebration together we also lose the benefits of contemplation. Holy days open up God's exchequer to us and:

Without sanctifying these we lose the benefit and the end of our lives, which is to enter into the treasures of God almighty, and to feel his love, and to offer up ourselves in joy and thanksgivings.

So it is that with Traherne we pray to our:

Most Holy God, and author of all sanctity and lover of all unity, whose wisdom hath established an admirable communion between the Church triumphant in heaven and militant on earth . . .

to strengthen us to resist the pull of earthly attractions and instead draw our strength from the truly holy days given us from him as *'earnests of our eternal rest'*, where we shall *'all meet before (his) glorious throne to adore with one heart the Saviour of us all'*.