

*'That they all may
be one'*



Sparks of Fire

HENRY VAUGHAN THE SILURIST - 1622~1695

Fire, like air and water and the solid earth on which we live, is vital for human life. But it cannot be dallied with; misused or untamed it devours and annihilates. Life is indeed a battle, a struggle to balance or hold at bay the forces which at times seem friendly but at others overwhelm us with a ruthless inevitability. And yet it is these very challenges of life that make for our greatness. There is no victory without combat, no resurrection unless first we pass, with Jesus, through Gethsemane and the cross.

The pattern is the same in the individual life and in the history of the rise and fall of peoples, nations and cultures. Each of us is born into a specific time and place. Our eyes are blinkered since we can only half understand our context. The past can only be imagined, the future surmised and even the present is hide bound by our limitations. So it is that we live on trust, by faith. Sometimes it helps to look back and see how other men and women have lived by that faith, a living faith in the Triune God and in Jesus Christ, Son of the Father, made human for our sake. After all it was Jesus who came to send fire on the earth and who himself passed first through that fire to make a safe way through for us.

The context of mid seventeenth century England must have been hard to come to terms with. It is difficult enough for us as we stand back and coolly analyse the situation, assessing what had happened before in Church and State and knowing what was to come. Living in the midst of it all would be quite another story. Henry Vaughan had to do just this. Political upheaval; conflict and disunity in the Church; and personal bereavement and crisis; all met together in

his life somewhere around the year 1650. The result was an enhanced spiritual awareness and intensity of feeling which found its outlet in religious verse, ensuring him a place among the greatest metaphysical poets of his era. Vaughan himself used the imagery of fire when speaking of his experience:

Certain Divine Raies breake out of the Soul in adversity, like sparks of fire out of the afflicted flint.

Henry Vaughan was born of a long-established Welsh family near Brecon in 1622. He is sometimes described as the Silurist, since in earlier times Brecknockshire had been inhabited by the Silures. He went up to Oxford but left without taking a degree, instead studying law in London. At some point he also studied medicine and by 1645 was practising as a doctor at Brecknock and, from around the time of his spiritual experience, at Newton-by-Usk, his birthplace.

Vaughan was a strong supporter of the Established Church ie the Church of England of the Elizabethan settlement. He rallied to the cause of Charles I and his high church principles, epitomised in William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury. Thus it was profoundly distressful for him when Charles was executed, even though proclaimed a martyr in the eyes of many, by fanatical army leaders during the civil war. All of Henry Vaughan's religious convictions were swept away, the Divine Right of Kings, the essential catholicity of the Church of England now replaced by a Calvinistic Puritanism, the Commonwealth instead of the Monarchy, and an independent Parliament. At the same time his brother died and he himself, perhaps not unsurprisingly, became ill. His soul was indeed in adversity, the flint severely afflicted. But God was in it all.

In fact Vaughan's first book of religious poetry, entitled '*Silex Scintillans*' appeared the same year, 1650 and the second part five years later in 1655. It is not for nothing that he chose the title – '*Silex Scintillans*' – the sparkling stone. The sparks of inspiration burst forth indeed from the afflicted flint as he knew well enough himself, and it is these verses that have secured him a place among the English poets.

They have also meant that he can speak to us today when once again
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our Church of England is in a state of confusion and disunity, seeming to have lost its bearings. There is uncertainty too in the air concerning the future of the monarchy and questionings whether the Church should be disestablished. The delicate balance between Church and State is in jeopardy, the constitution and time-honoured institutions could disappear or be altered beyond recognition – what does Europeanisation really involve? And with the worldwide scene being what it is, what next? The status quo is not to be maintained at all costs, however, nor are we to hanker after some imagined golden age of the past, anyway no longer retrievable. We too cannot ‘see’ the future. Henry Vaughan does not have all, not even necessarily any, of the answers for us, as he did not have them for himself. But he has faith, and divine inspiration, which he maintained through his varied life, which spanned not only the reign of Charles I, the Civil War and the Commonwealth, but also the Restoration under Charles II and James II with all the fluctuations between high Church and Calvinism that this involved. His last years were spent under a new dynasty, under William and Mary. Protestantism could have seemed to have won the day. He *could* not know of the Oxford Revival a century or more later. **We** cannot see ahead but we can remain faithful like flint whatever blows might be inflicted in the days ahead. Henry Vaughan could well serve us as an inspiration.