

*'That they all may  
be one'*



**THE DEARLY LOVED DAY – God’s arm not shortened. (Henry Vaughan )**

*O day of life, the light of love!*

*The onely day dealt from above!*

*A day so fresh, so bright, so brave . . .*

Which day could that be? The first day of creation? The day of Christ’s nativity, or perhaps that glorious morning when he rose from the dead? It is none of these things for Henry Vaughan, one of the foremost of 17th century metaphysical poets in Britain. These lines are the opening words of his poem entitled *The Day of Judgement!* Yes, he is actually asking for that day to come, swiftly, a day which **we** relegate to some distant time in the future, comfortably far off, if we ever think of it at all. It is the same day which, by contrast, was brought vividly before the eyes of every believer during the Middle ages, day in day out, a day of gloom and terror beset with horned devils with pronged forks thrusting unrepentant sinners into the flames of hell. It seems hardly the day to be asking for, unless of course we are feeling particularly vindictive towards our imagined enemies.

Why then did Henry Vaughan see it so positively, why did he yearn for it? He is not alone in this, needless to say. From New Testament times Christ’s followers have longed for the coming of Jesus in glory – to judge the living and the dead as the Creed expresses it. The return of the Lord will mark the consummation of all things, the completion of Christ’s redemptive work. Evil will be definitively overcome and all that is good, beautiful and true fully and eternally exonerated. In times of severe testing and persecution it is indeed the most

longed-for day conceivable – **Maranatha! Even so, come Lord Jesus!** Henry Vaughan lived at a time of religious and political upheaval, when it was easy enough literally to lose your head if you did not toe the current line. *The Day of Judgement* was written around 1655 when King Charles I had been executed and there was civil and religious war between Cavaliers and Round-heads. Parliament was overthrown and the Commonwealth set up.

But it was not fear for his skin that motivated Vaughan. If that had been the case it would have been more prudent for him to keep silent. Rather he grieved because God's name was being profaned and the Church was divided. Only God could set things right by coming in Judgement and bringing in his kingdom. That is the true motivation behind the poem. How then does Vaughan set it out; how does what he has to say help us twenty-first century believers, in an indifferent, and for some a hostile environment? Is it possible for Christians somehow to hold together despite petty quarrels and sometimes bitter recriminations? If not there is little hope for our global village, our world of conflicting ideologies and religions and, at times, of apathy, of despair and meaninglessness.

Naturally Vaughan does not give us answers but rather shows us where to look, and by his own faithfulness, during a whole life-time of religious and political turmoil, encourages us to stand firm and quietly resolute come what may. God alone can enable us to win through. We must co-operate with his age-long redemptive plan and expect **him** to act. Jesus came to save us from death and hell and indeed to draw back the whole cosmos from disintegration. That is why Vaughan prays so earnestly for the coming of judgement day. He **wants** fulfilment and the definitive triumph of good over evil. Still addressing the longed for day he exclaims that it will:

*...show us each forgotten grave,  
And make the dead, like flowers arise  
Youthful and fair to see new skies . . .*

*O come! arise! shine! do not stay,*

*Dearly lov'd day!*

And aligning himself with the very words of Jesus concerning the immanence of harvest-time, Vaughan draws creation itself into his prayer, again using the imagery of his Master; even the stones will cry out:

*The fields are long since white, and I  
With earnest groans for freedom cry;  
My fellow creatures too say, **Come!**  
And stones, though speechless, are not dumb.  
When shall we hear that glorious voice  
    *Of life and joys?*  
That voice, which to each secret bed  
    *Of my Lord's dead,*  
Shall bring true day, and make dust see,  
The way to immortality? . . .  
    *Dear Lord! make haste.**

Perhaps Vaughan is here grieving over his own friends and acquaintances who have lost their lives in the violence of the times. He would wish their death to be vindicated. And yet it is clear that Vaughan is not writing from a purely human motivation. It is God and **his** purposes that are at stake. It is sin that must be overthrown since things seem to be going from bad to worse. We too, in our anxiety to set things right, in ways and areas that to us seem obvious, must take care to see that it is truly God's cause that we are striving for else our apparent zeal will merely be adding sin to sin, conniving instead with God's enemies:

*Dear Lord! make haste!  
Sin every day commits more waste;  
And thy old enemy, which knows  
His time is short, more raging grows.  
Nor moan I onely, though profuse,  
Thy creature's bondage and abuse;  
But what is highest sin and shame,  
The vile despight done to thy name.*

God's name, then, was being blasphemed, and how, principally, was this being done? Vaughan, characteristic of himself, as seen in several other of his poems, pins everything down to the misuse of sacred scripture. This is a bold claim from a Royalist. The Protestant, Calvinistic cause was in the ascendant at the time of writing and it is there especially that scripture was set out as being all important and was the guiding principle of doctrine, yet Vaughan, and others like him, sensed that actually that particular party had got things wrong; Scripture was being perverted and twisted.

The controversy still continues. What does Scripture really teach? Who interprets it faithfully? But in our times it is more subtle still. The divine inspiration of scripture is undermined, or else it is interpreted individualistically or in unacceptable fundamentalist ways. By some professed believers it is even marginalised, or simply used in parts to grind a pre-determined axe. With Vaughan we too need to lament the misuse of scripture and beg God to set things right for us. May we not incidentally find ourselves on the wrong side of the equation:

*But what is highest sin and shame*

...

*The forgeries which impious wit*

*And Pow-er force on Holy Writ,*

*With all detestable designs,*

*That may dishonour those pure lines.*

God's mercy is indeed called for on that score, now as well as then. Yet begging God's mercy may not be quite all, God **is** a God of judgement as well. Believers, of whatever party, shade or side, must all be made to know that God is not to be mocked, his holiness is not to be dallied with. There are times when we can presume too much on God's mercy, imagining that he is far too nice to contradict us and demand retribution for our wrongdoings. Vaughan is in fact asking God to show that he **is** God, that he is in control and his arm is not shortened. It is a bold prayer but a necessary one, and one which perhaps we need to make our own even more in our present day and age. The proviso of course is that we do not exempt **ourselves**, since we are all in it together, all partially guilty. Only God, coming in triumphant judgement can ultimately set things right, for ourselves as individuals, for our Churches, and for our world:

*O God! though mercy be in thee*

*The greatest attribute we see,  
And the most needful for our sins;  
Yet, when thy mercy nothing wins  
But meer disdain, let not man say  
**Thy arm doth sleep;** but write this day  
Thy judging one: Descend, descend!  
Make all things new, and without end!*

May God give us courage and sincerity to add our amen to that.