

*'That they all may
be one'*



REBIRTH – The next nativity - (Henry Vaughan)

Birth is joyous yet it is marked by pain. The Christian religion is nothing if it is not realist; it deals with life, and with death, as we know them to be, a mixture of joy and anguish, of yearning yet of shattered hopes. But because of the birth and death of Christ there **is** hope because there is also resurrection. A broken world and a divided Church are not the end of the story.

To all intents and purposes our faith begins with a birth, with the promise of one and then its actuality: **'When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Herod the Tetrarch . . .'** (Matthew 2:1). But even this birth, the one of the promised Messiah, seemed to go wrong. It was not quite what was expected. Jesus was born in poverty and died in ignominy, for the most part unrecognised. Despite his unassailable victory over death, death in our every day experience has not gone away. The Church which Jesus founded in its turn seems to have gone wrong. Are we then to expect another birth, a sort of second chance?

In some ways yes. Each of us has to discover, personally, who Jesus is, appropriate him to ourselves (or rather ourselves to him), enter a second time metaphorically speaking, into the womb to be born anew of water and the Spirit (1 John 3: 4-6). It is not so much that Christ's birth or even 'the Church' went wrong as that **we** have to be put right. This is the work of each individual's lifetime and indeed of the full life-span of creation as we know it. Small wonder that there is pain and confusion since birth pangs must needs be endured before life bursts forth.

At particular times in life and in history, death can seem stronger than life. These are testing times when our faith and hope are tried to the utmost. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were such a time for the Church of England, as elsewhere of course. In the midst of

constant change and of bitter party rivalries hopes and expectancies rose and fell. The temptation might have been to give up all together but somehow men and women of every faction were given grace to hold on and come through, a real new birth, and new patterns of 'being Church' and of learning to live together gradually evolved. One of those who felt the pain of the situation particularly strongly was Henry Vaughan, recognised now as one of the great religious poets in English literature. In two poems particularly he expresses with poignancy his awareness that somehow or other things have to start again – everything is winding down, is religion dead? There are some who say that events in the Churches of our present day and in our world indicate a crisis as severe and complex as in the Reformation era and its aftermath. Henry Vaughan might perhaps offer us some pointers for finding our way.

The poem '*The Nativity*', written in 1656, is no idealised account of the peace and joy of Christmastide such as **we** have become accustomed to. No, Vaughan begins with bitter irony about the distinct **absence** of peace both at the time of Christ's birth and in his own day:

Peace! And to all the world! Sure One

And He the Prince of peace, hath none!

He travails to be born, and then

Is born to travail more again.

Poor Galilee, thou canst not be

The place for His nativity.

His restless Mother's called away,

And not delivered till she pay.

A Tax! 'tis so still . . .

Church and state are all tangled up and the state seems to call the tune. It is the Church which has to respond to the beck and call of the secular powers but Vaughan exclaims that it was far far worse for Jesus and the holy family;

. . .We can see

The Church thrive in her misery,

And, like her Head at Bethlehem, rise,

When she oppressed with troubles lyes.

Rise? - should all fall we cannot be

In more extremities than He.

For Vaughan the Church that he loved (the High Church party of the once established Church) was in dire straits. King Charles I had been executed, civil war ensued and an extreme Calvinistic Protestantism had taken over . . . It was a true dying and yet **was** nothing by comparison with the sufferings Jesus had endured:

Great Type of passions! Come what will,

Thy grief exceeds all copies still.

Jesus came to earth that he might lead us to heaven, to mansions prepared there for us, but we gave him no welcome here but a bare stable. His courtiers were not men but beasts, the ox and ass. He was clothed in the meanest of rags and, as Vaughan continues:

No rockers waited on Thy birth

No cradles stirred, nor songs of mirth;

But her chaste lap and sacred breast

Which lodged Thee first, did give Thee rest.

At least there was Mary, faithful all the way through, God's holy and chosen one, perhaps for Vaughan an image of holy Church herself. This marks a turning point in the poem in fact, leading into the final section and a resurgence of hope. There is a sudden ray of light, the beams of a descending star, that favourite image of Vaughan's:

But stay! what light is that doth stream

And drop here in a gilded beam?

It is Thy star runs page, and brings

The tributary Eastern Kings.

The star runs ahead like a page, leading the Magi to the manger. Is there here perhaps a hidden prayer for the restoration of the monarchy? Anyway Vaughan returns at once to the present:

Lord, grant some light to us; that we

May find with them the way to Thee!

Behold what mists eclipse the day!

How dark it is! Shed down one ray,

To guide us out of this dark night

And say once more "Let there be light!"

So the poem ends, not without trust and hope, dark though it really must have been.

The second poem on a similar theme is entitled *To Christian Religion*. It is in fact a sort of elegy in advance because of the apparently approaching death of Christianity! The situation was at a low ebb indeed. The date of the poem would also appear to be sometime after 1655. And yet death will hopefully be followed by new birth. Vaughan recognises the pattern. Once again too the stars and the heavenly bodies typically have their part to play in the imagery:

Farewell thou true and tried Reflection

Of the still poor and meek Election!

Farewell, Vaughan would seem to be saying, to true and proven Christianity which has been more than food for Christ's humble chosen ones. Then, a little later, he speaks more personally:

Farewell my morning star, the bright

And dawning looks of the true light!

O blessed Shiner, tell me whither

Thou wilt be gone, when night comes hither!

Where **will** the light of faith and true religion go when the darkness really does descend? There are those who say it will go Westwards (to America, the New World?) but meanwhile in England Vaughan perceives that things will become darker yet. But he does **not** give up hope, he **expects** a new birth, once more returning to the imagery of the nativity, this time to the shepherds:

O hated shades of darkness! When

You have got here the sway again,

And like unwholesome fogs withstood

The light, and blasted all that's good,

Who shall the happy shepherds be

To watch the next nativity

Of truth and brightness, and make way

For the returning rising day?

O what year will bring back our bliss?

Or who shall live, when God doth this?

Surprisingly to himself, no doubt, Vaughan **did** live to see the Restoration of the Monarchy and the re-establishment of the Church of England and many of its high Church principles, at least spasmodically. But he also lived through all the contrasting events of the concluding years of the seventeenth century, even to the revolution establishing a new dynasty under William and Mary, with Protestantism back in the ascendant . . .the cycle of birth and death, decline and renewal is constant. No, Vaughan is surely looking for something more than temporary victory of this party over that in Church or politics. He would wish for definitive victory for the One Church of Christ over the opposing forces of evil, whatever their source.

To this end he concludes the poem with a prayer for a renewed descent of the Holy Spirit:

Thou Rock of ages! and the rest

Of all that for Thee are oppressed!

Send down the Spirit of Thy truth

...

Then if to blood we must resist,

Let Thy mild Dove, and our High Priest,

Help us . . .

To bear the cross and save our crowns . . .

Let none defile what Thou didst wed,

Nor tear the garland from her head!

But chaste and cheerful let her dye,

And precious in the Bridegroom's eye!

So to Thy glory, and her praise,

These last shall be her brightest dayes.

If persecution is needed to bring all or any of us into the fullness of the Church as God wills it to be, the next nativity, so be it. Our prayer, together with Henry Vaughan's, is for the strengthening and enabling of the blessed Trinity to keep us faithful.