A lifetime could be spent with Henry Vaughan’s poetry, but few of us could afford to do that. Before leaving him, though, we will look briefly at just a few more of his memorable poems, quotes from here and there, which we may well have met before, ideas that were especially his.

It can come as a surprise to some that William Wordsworth was not the first English poet to idealise childhood and to see our birth into this world as a ‘sleep and a forgetting’ ie a being thrust out of a pre-earthly paradise into the chaos of life as we come to experience it in our adult years. People like Thomas Traherne and Henry Vaughan were there before him. Here is perhaps the best known example from Vaughan, though it is not unique in his writings:
HENRY VAUGHAN 8

Happy those early days, when I
Shined in my angel-infancy!
Before I understood this place
Appointed for my second race

When I had not walked above
A mile or two from my first love,
And looking back, at that short space,
Could see a glimpse of His bright face.

O how I long to travel back
And tread again that ancient track!

Some men a forward motion love,
But I by backward steps would move;
And when this dust falls to the urn,
In that state I came return.

(From: ‘The Retreat’ – Silex Scintillans part 1)

Thought-provoking ideas for a post-modern age disillusioned by the failure of so-called ongoing and upwardly-mobile progress to deliver the goods; an age frantically searching for the God, the ‘some-one’ supposed dead?

Vaughan, moreover, as a poet of acute sensitivity, could write with vivid awareness about the enigma of life, of human restlessness and searching. Little has changed in the intervening three centuries and more:

Man hath still either toys or care;
He hath no root, nor to one place is tied,
But ever restless and irregular
About this earth doth run and ride.
He knows he hath a home, but scarce knows where;
He says it is so far,

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Sweet peace sits crowned with smiles,
And One born in a manger
Commands the beauteous files.
He is thy gracious friend
And (O my soul awake!)
Did in pure love descend
To die here for thy sake.
If thou canst but thither,
There grows the flower of peace,
The rose that cannot wither,
Thy fortress, and thy ease.
Leave then thy foolish ranges;
For none can thee secure,
But One, who never changes,
Thy God, thy Life, thy Cure.

(‘Peace’ from Silex Scintillans part 1)

One day it will be alright. We shall all be there, together with Henry Vaughan, to whom be thanks for his help to us on the way, for his inspiration.
Not many of us in our day and age can look death so squarely in the face. At a time when sudden and horrific mass-destruction could be a very real possibility for any of us we prefer to run away and forget. Vaughan, by contrast, actually prays for death, so that he may have his yearning-longing fulfilled, to know as he is known:

_O Father of eternal life, and all_  
_Created glories under thee!_  
_Resume thy spirit [ie Vaughan himself] from this world of thrall_  
_Into true liberty!_  
_Either disperse these mists, which blot and fill_  
_My perspective still as they pass;_  
_Or else remove me hence unto that hill,_  
_Where I shall need no glass,_  

(From ‘They are all gone’. . . Silex Scintillans part 2)

God alone can make life possible for us in this world of increasing foreboding. He alone can give us a vision of his will and purpose for the redemption of the world and for ourselves within and of it. Fear is not thereby taken away but, under God can be transcended. This is the gospel we are called on to share with one another.

By way of epilogue we turn to the well-loved and familiar verses which are found in some of our older hymn books. The title given is ‘Peace’. This, surely, more than anything else is what we pray for. Ultimately it lies beyond time but as we look towards it in hope then most certainly traces of it will be given even now to sustain us:

_My Soul, [Vaughan says] there is a country_  
_Afar beyond the stars,_  
_Where stands a wing-ed sentry_  
_All skilful in the wars. [St. Michael ?]_  
_There above noise and danger;_  

_Few would deny that restlessness and unrootedness have increased immeasurably in our modern western society. Is it, as it were, God’s fault? St. Augustine gives us part of the answer when, addressing God he says on behalf of us all: ‘Our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee’. Without God we can have no anchor._

_Vaughan, however, knew his God, was found by Him, and so was granted glimpses of glory. Thus, though still confined to this world he looked in faith and hope beyond it – to the paradise once known, yes, but supremely to that which lay ahead beyond the grave. This is a constant theme in his poetry. One of the best-known examples is to be found in a poem written in mourning for the death of those he loved:_

_They are all gone into the world of light!_  
_And I alone sit lingering here!_  
_Their very memory is fair and bright_  
_And my sad thoughts doth clear:_  

_this prompts Vaughan to thank God for showing him something of the joys of heaven to kindle his hope and love, and then, St. Francis-like, he eulogises death:_  

_Dear beauteous death; the jewel of the just!_  
_Shining nowhere but in the dark;_  
_What mysteries do lie beyond the dust,_  
_Could man outlook that mark!_