

*'That they all may  
be one'*



## Music of the Spheres

HENRY VAUGHAN - 1622~1695

Nature, red in tooth and claw is not the whole story. Nature is also mystery, awe, majesty. In it and through it we sense the divine. Our forebears knew this and responded appropriately, and our poets, inspired themselves, have often enough led the perceptive reader deep into the heart of things. Perhaps, in our post-modern age, we are more than ready to be drawn into the vastness of cosmic immensity in search of the transcendent . . . Like the ancients, we too sense the wonder of the order, harmony and dependability of the planets and the stars in their seemingly endless courses. The silent music and harmony of the spheres makes a great deal of sense to us as it did centuries ago when it was first mooted as a concept. It is but a short step, then, to reach out to the 'Creator of the rolling spheres', the God of harmony, peace, concord, love . . .

Henry Vaughan, back in the mid seventeenth century, at a crisis point in life, was fired with poetic zeal and inspiration. After the example of George Herbert, his predecessor by a few years, his fervour expressed itself in religious verse which still speaks eloquently today. True poetry is often forged out of adversity.

Vaughan grieved particularly because of the state of confusion and disunity in the English Church of his day. King Charles I had been executed in 1649 so that Church and State together were in disarray. As a strong Royalist supporter and High Churchman Vaughan found that his whole world view had collapsed about him. Not surprisingly these things are echoed in his verse, though importantly, they are not the whole story, there is much else besides. However, there is a particularly moving poem, entitled *The Constellation* (published about a year after the martyrdom of King Charles) in which Vaughan finds himself able to put some of his deepest

feelings into words. It is in fact the awesomeness of the night sky and the order and harmony of the heavenly bodies that inspire him to express his anguish.

The poem begins not merely descriptively but with Vaughan addressing the stars in recognition of their divine origin and in admiration of their silent, ordered movement across the firmament in obedience to their fixed laws. The sheer beauty of their quiet motion speaks of the ineffable joys of heaven:

*Fair, ordered lights, whose motion without noise  
Resembles those true Joys  
Whose spring is on that hill, where you do grow,  
And here we taste sometimes below,  
With what exact obedience do you move  
Now beneath, and now above!  
And in your vast progressions overlook  
The darkest night, and closest nook!*

Sometimes the stars appear here, sometimes there and even when they cannot be seen by mortal eye they do not cease to shine. How different it is with human kind:

*No sleep nor sloth assailes you, but poor man  
Still either sleeps, or slips his span.*

Vaughan develops the contrast. Humans spend most of the time with their eyes fixed on the earth, scarcely ever raising them to heavenly things. O yes, they occupy themselves with ‘*musick and mirth*’, but not the heavenly harmonies of the spheres. Frivolous human pleasures can scarcely be termed ‘*music*’ but men and women for the most part are trapped and weighed down by them. Those who see things otherwise are deemed to be crazy:

*Who kneels, or sighs a life, is mad.*

Nothing has changed, once in a while on a sleepless night some one may glance at the night sky and some even claim to be able to foretell the future by the stars, but they are deluded. The true lesson learnt from the stars is their ‘*obedience, Order, Light*’ and above all their harmony and peace:

*... though the glory differ in each star,  
yet there is peace still and no war.*

This is the cue for Vaughan to contrast such peacefulness with life in the Church and State of the England of his day – precious little order, obedience or peace there. The stars have been fixed in their courses by divine decree and never deviate, but far different is it from this on the human plane:

*But here, commissioned by a black self-will  
The sons the father kill,  
The children chase the mother, and would heal  
The wounds they give by crying zeale.*

Those who should lead and show the way are instead like shooting stars out of the true and destined for perdition from of old (Cf. Jude verses 6 & 14):

*Thus by our lusts disordered into wars  
Our guides prove wandering stars,  
Which for these mists and black days were reserv'd,  
What time we from our first love swerv'd.*

This is strong language, perhaps too much so for our present taste, but it comes from the heart of one deeply pained for the Church and the country he loves. That this is so can be clearly seen from the three concluding stanzas of the poem which are in the form of a prayer addressed to God the Father:

*Yet O for his sake who sits now by thee  
All crowned with victory,  
So guide us through this darkness, that we may  
Be more and more in love with day!  
Settle and fix our hearts, that we may move  
In order, peace and love;  
And taught obedience by thy whole Creation,  
Become an humble, holy nation!  
Give to thy spouse her perfect and pure dress,  
**Beauty and holiness;***

*And so repair these rents, that men may see*

*And say, **where God is, all agree.***

So the stars in their set courses, teach us orderliness, peace and harmony, qualities which are sadly still largely lacking in the politics and religion of our day, despite our best endeavours. We who are rediscovering the sacredness of Creation and seeking to atone for our misuse of the physical world around us, will surely be in tune with what Vaughan is pointing out. A right humility and docility is called for, not least in our relationships with one another as Christians. But as Vaughan shows us, we cannot achieve this ourselves. If society is to be changed because of our Christian witness then the **Church** must be changed and her divisiveness healed, that the world may believe (Cf. John 17). If we claim that God is with us then severe judgement is upon us where we manifestly do **not** all agree.

So Vaughan perceived, back in 1650. As the presence and power of God burst upon him with tremendous force, in the midst of personal crisis, his poetic inspiration also burst forth, in poem after poem. Only in *The Constellation*, however, does he openly express his distress about church disunity. Later, in 1655, in the second part of his *Silex Scintillans* however, he does speak out more boldly in at least seven or eight poems, while in many others there are oblique references, perceivable by those in tune with Vaughan's sentiments. We can only look at one or two poems here, choosing instances where once more the imagery of the stars plays some part.

*White* (or *Whit*) *Sunday* opens with a paean of praise for the day of Pentecost, the brightness of whose light shines more resplendently than a thousand suns since it is eternal. Vaughan then recalls the cloven tongues of fire that first descended upon the apostles' heads and filled them with prophetic powers. But in the third stanza he asks abruptly whether the claims of some in the Church of his day to be inspired by the same Holy Spirit can really hold water. Their fruits are not those of their alleged Master, Jesus, or of the Spirit they claim:

*Can these new lights be like to those,  
These lights of serpents like the dove?  
Thou hadst no gall ev'n for thy foes,  
And thy two wings were grief and love.*

Even if these upstarts claim the inspiration of the Spirit, in special ways as a daily occurrence, and openly brag about it and about their trust in Christ, yet Vaughan will not allow **himself** to

be deceived. Just as long as the Holy Spirit inspires the Scriptures, so will Vaughan know where to look for discernment:

*Yet while some rays of that great light  
Shine here below within thy Book,  
They never shall so blinde my sight  
But I will know which way to look.  
. . . I can discern wolves from the sheep.*

Fearful though, lest he is being too severe in his judgement, Vaughan claims that he prays for the conversion of his opponents – ‘*that these may be as first, or even better*’. However, Scripture seems to imply that, with the passage of time, enemies **within** the ranks of the Church are going to be **worse** rather than better. (Cf. for example 1 Timothy 4:1; 2 Timothy 3:1 and 4:3). Anyway, it is clear from his treatment of his Chosen People (the Israelites), as found in Old Testament Scriptures, how God will respond to **Christian** believers who prove faithless, since:

*Our stories are in theirs set down,  
And penalties spread to our crimes.*

Still , all is far from lost and it is here that we come to the stars again:

*And yet, as in night’s gloomy page  
One silent star may interline;  
So in this last and lewdest age  
Thy antient love on some may shine.*

Minorities, the ‘chosen few’, are often God’s way of restoration when hope seems lost:

*. . . thou the great eternal Rock  
Whose height above all ages shines,  
Art still the same and canst unlock  
Thy waters to a soul that pines.*

Since God has redeemed us and has remained faithful ever since, despite our sinfulness, so Vaughan can pray that the Holy Spirit of Whitsuntide will continue his cleansing work, so that the light of the faithful stars in God’s firmament may continue to burn. It is a prayer we could surely use in our time.

*O come! refine us with thy fire!  
Refine us! We are at a loss.  
Let not thy stars for Balaam's hire  
Dissolve into the common dross.*

(Cf. Jude v:11 ; Numbers 22:6 and the following verses).

Immediately after *White Sunday* we meet a much stronger invective against the enemies of the Church who are only thinly disguised under the imagery of a swarm of unwelcome insects:

*Be still, black parasites,  
Flutter no more . . .  
O poysonous, subtile fowls!  
The flyes of hell,  
That buz in every ear, and blow on souls,  
Until they smell,  
And rot, descend not here, **nor think to stay!***

(The Proffer).

It was a brave person who could write and publish such verses at such a time of religious strife and civil war. The enemy in fact was openly named:

*I skill not your false tinsel and fine hair,  
Your sorcery,  
And smooth seducements: I'le not stuff my story  
With your poor Commonwealth and glory.*

But maybe Vaughan felt he had little to lose as he was, at the time, a sick man, though young. In the event he lived another forty years:

*Shall my short hour, my inch  
My one poor sand,  
And crum of life now ready to disband,  
Revolt and flinch;  
And having borne the burthen all the day,  
Now cast at night my crown away?*

No, Vaughan does not intend to lose heaven which he knows to be the reward of fidelity. Heaven, perhaps not unsurprisingly, is the place where the redeemed shine like stars:

*Think you these longing eyes,  
Though sick and spent,  
And almost famish'd, ever will consent  
To leave those skies  
That glass of souls and spirits, where well drest  
They shine in white, like stars, and rest.*

The 'rest' is attractive, but perhaps, like Vaughan, we still have a good few years ahead of us of struggle and combat. It would be a pity to lose faith and in any sense give up the struggle. Since Vaughan's own star has not been extinguished over three centuries later, perhaps we owe it at least in part to him to keep our own lights burning in the current darkness.