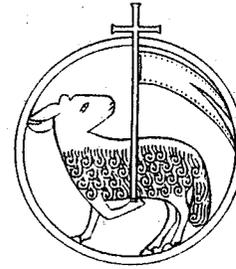


But first, in the opening stanza, he addresses the blessed Trinity: the Father who has created him; the Son, the Redeemer; and the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier. Note, in passing, how the poem consists of three verses, each of three lines – in honour of the Trinity. Similarly, in the concluding verse, each of the three lines contains a threefold grouping of words . . .

In the second stanza we have Herbert's acknowledgement of personal sinfulness, 'the heavy score'. But this doesn't lead to despair or, as in the previous poem, to a seeming resignation. Instead there is an alertness and vigour: "I will strive to sin no more," he says, knowing that God allows us a multitude of second chances and clean sheets throughout our lives, if our repentance is in earnest. It is as though the graces asked for in the third verse are already beginning their work, prompting Herbert to a positive purpose of amendment.

And so to the final prayer itself, a plea for the gift of the theological virtues (as they are called) of faith, hope and charity – those directly God-given endowments which we cannot merit or achieve of ourselves. And notice that it is heart, mouth and hands that are to be strengthened and enriched by these gifts, the very places where sins of thought, word and deed come to birth as we saw earlier. Only God's sovereign and all-powerful mercy, then can bring about our healing.

Thus, by his grace alone can *we* hope to begin to break out from the treadmill of our wearisome round of sinfulness. Drawn by the very One to whom we aspire we, like George Herbert, seek to run, rise and ultimately rest in the vision and presence of God the blessed Trinity. There sorrow and sighing will be done away, when there is no more sin to be sorry for, no more apology to be made.



FAITH praying and believing ON THE EARTH

SORRY I AM

**George Herbert on
sin, hope and repentance**

Apologising is never easy. We rarely admit to ourselves that we are wrong, never mind doing it openly to other people, though we know full well that the healing of broken relationships can be brought about in no other way.

Saying sorry to God can sometimes feel easier, for we do it in the privacy of our hearts, or in a general non-committal sort of way with everyone else, in church. But if the awfulness of sin, and our own connivance in it, suddenly hits us, then things are different. There are feelings of remorse, the urgent impulse to make amends, to atone. We begin even to fear for our eternal wellbeing and to grieve that we have offended an all-holy God. This is at least as it should be for a believing Christian.

Sometimes, though, we need to be reminded to take sin seriously. Older generations needed no such reminders, for the daily examination of conscience, acts of repentance and reparation, sacramental confessions even, were part of the warp and woof of Christian living, and that not only during Lent. Much of this is out of fashion now. The old books of devotion and spiritual manuals are rarely opened. A glance or two at them now and then might be a sobering experience all the same.

Many of our Christian poets, too, have described something of their own personal anguish in the face of sin, their own awareness of the need to face up to and accept its reality in order to find healing and forgiveness in Jesus. George

Herbert, the saintly country parson and poet of seventeenth century England (1593-1633) is no exception. He knew the importance of saying sorry, especially to God. Also, he recognised that sin isn't only something dramatic and spectacular. It has an almost humdrum regularity about it, though it isn't any less serious for all that. This is vividly expressed in his poem *Sin's Round*.

He begins and ends with the same heartfelt yet resigned admission:

Sorry I am, my God, sorry I am.

We can almost hear God saying: "Never mind; I know you don't mean it; I understand. . ." But that is perhaps wishful thinking. Between these repeated lines, the poet in fact give us the whole sorry story of sin's repetitiveness, 'sin's round' as he entitles it. The resignation, if there is any, is George Herbert's rather than God's.

Sins of thought lead to sins of the tongue, and these in turn to well-nigh inevitable sins of deed. Action and activity then stir up feelings and thoughts yet again, and so the whole round starts off once more . . . *We* understand too. Sorry are we as well, for it is all so familiar. "We have sinned against you in thought, word and deed . . ." It trips off the tongue as easily as we repeat the misdemeanours we deplore.

All this is uncompromisingly expressed in the three stanzas of George Herbert's poem:

*Sorry I am, my God, sorry I am,
That my offences course it in a ring.
My thoughts are working like a busy flame

And when they once have perfected their draughts
My words take fire from my inflamèd thoughts.*

Then stanza two begins with a repetition of that last line, emphasising the link between thought and speech and suggesting the circular movement of the whole process:

My words take fire from my inflamèd thoughts . . .

And now Herbert compares his impassioned and imprudent words with the spitting forth of a volcanic eruption. All that previously lay hidden now bursts

out. Then he continues:

*But words suffice not where are lewd intentions;
My hands do join to finish the inventions.*

Stanza three uses the same device as before and so repeats this last line:

My hands do join to finish the inventions.

This time a comparison is made with the Tower of Babel:

*And so my sins ascend three stories high
As Babel grew, before there were dissensions.*

But just as the collapse of Babel didn't, alas, put an end to humankind's sinful arrogance, so George Herbert finds that passion-filled thoughts and feelings have far from disappeared. There they all are, more turbulent than before. We are back at the beginning again. Is there a way out?

A hint is given in the reiterated words: "*Sorry I am, my God, sorry I am.*" Though seemingly trapped in the endless round, Herbert is not a truculent, hardened sinner. He still repents.

Moreover, there is another, shorter poem: *Trinity Sunday*, which seems to point a way forward:

*Lord, who has formed me out of mud,
And hast redeemed me through Thy blood,
And sanctified me to do good;

Purge all my sins done heretofore;
For I confess my heavy score,
And I will strive to sin no more.

Enrich my heart, mouth, hands in me,
With faith, with hope, with charity;
That I may run, rise, rest with Thee.*

Once again we note the humility of George Herbert's self-appraisal, but this time there is added his own promise to seek to amend, and also his prayer to the Trinitarian God to draw him, by grace, beyond his sinfulness into the divine fellowship.