

*'That they all may
be one'*



THE WORLD ARIGHT - Thomas Traherne today

Time at the turn of a century and a millennium seems somehow tinged with foreboding - deep down our all too human hearts faint with fear of what is coming on the face of the earth. Should this be so for a Christian? Probably not, but then it was Jesus himself who predicted that it would be so. Yet he followed this on immediately with those strong words of encouragement: 'Lift up your heads for your liberation is close at hand'. Christ comes, the kingdom is in our midst. Therefore we have hope and that is the gospel news we have to proclaim. A decade of evangelism must not be allowed to peter out with a whimper of despondency.

It is no artificial jollification that we are about. Ours it is to inject the true and lasting joy that has come to us in Christ out into the world about us, into the hearts and lives of others, since we of all people know what it is we are celebrating - LIFE IN ABUNDANCE

So we must discard our ghetto mentality, our sense of inferiority and fear of ridicule and recognise with St. Paul that the world, life and death, the present and the future are all ours and we are Christ's and Christ is God's (*1 Cor. 3: 22-23*).

Creation too is ours, as it groans in travail awaiting its full perfection through the ministry of God's priestly people - ourselves (*Romans 8: 18-25*). Thus care of the environment is a supremely Christian task. An incarnate Christ has hallowed his creation for all time and ours must be a world-affirming faith denying only what has been corrupted by evil (that aspect of the world we are not free to love *1 John 2: 15-17*).

A Christ-centred, sacramental faith will also know how to hold in check all deviant teaching, old heresies in new guise claiming allegiance: neo-pagan cults of goddesses and mother earth, a pantheism that would make ourselves and the whole material creation divine, and would promise escape from cold reality by absorption into the undifferentiated spirit of the universe.

If we feel inadequate for such a task it is doubtless because the teaching we have imbibed has been compromised by the secular suppositions of a technological post-Christian era. We need to go back behind all of this to find an authentic way forward.

Amazingly, a 17th century Church of England clergyman, poet and writer, Thomas Traherne (c 1636-74) might well help to point the way for us.

His outward life seems to have been uneventful, though he lived through the turbulent years of the Commonwealth and the Restoration, and few of his writings were published in his short life-time. In fact most of them, including his best known 'Four Centuries of Meditations', were only discovered in the early years of this century, and much of his work actually still remains unpublished. Providence seems to have decreed that now is the time for him to be brought to our attention.

A man of deep prayer and mystical awareness, though also a lover of good company, Traherne impresses us with his bold affirmation of the world of nature and of men, his communion in and with them, almost to the point of identification (though we must recall he is a poet). God too is found in them, but as Creator and Redeemer in a truly Christian sense, immanent yet transcendent. Nature in its awe and splendour overwhelmed Traherne from early childhood. It seemed somehow that all was made for him alone:

You never enjoy the world aright, till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars, and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world. (Cent. 1 No. 29).

But that is not all there is to say: 'and more than so', he adds, you are more than heirs of the whole world 'because men are in it who are every one sole heirs as well as you'. The bliss is a shared bliss with no selfish grasping and appropriation. Neither is there loss of individuality or personhood. This is truly the Communion of Saints.

Moreover the enjoyment of the world Traherne speaks of is itself an act of praise and adoration of God. We can never experience the inexpressable delight implied by Traherne's use of the word 'enjoy' until, as he puts it in the same place:

You can sing and rejoice and delight in God as misers do in gold and kings in sceptres..

Creation, then, brings us to God and invokes our praise. Thus we can never despise or misuse it. Nor may we lead others to do so. If a so-called Christianity has sometimes taught this, Traherne, standing securely in the biblical tradition, tells us otherwise. 'Can you take too much joy in your Father's works?' he exclaims in No.25 of the same Century. His categorical reply is given instantly: 'He is himself in everything'.

Take note of that last phrase. No, Traherne is not saying God **is** everything. He is no pantheist. It is right and fitting to see the Creator as immanent in that which he has made, revealing himself to us there, what is sometimes called panentheism, and we should not be afraid to speak in this way ourselves. Elsewhere (*Cent. 2 No. 67*) Traherne says something similar:

Who can love any thing that God hath made too much? His infinite goodness and wisdom and power and glory are in it. God the author and God the end is to be beloved in it. Angels and men are to be beloved in it, and it is to be highly esteemed for their sakes.

Nothing, indeed, is too mean or despicable to share in this glory nor is the wonder less with the passage of time:

Some things are little on the outside and rough and common. But I remember the time, when the dust of the streets was as precious as gold to my infant eyes, and now it is more precious to the eye of reason.

What a gospel of joy that is to share with a cynical, jaded world greedy for ill gotten gain that can never satisfy. Though custom may blunt the sharp edge of our sense of wonder with the passage of time, reason informed by faith assures us of God's enduring creative power and sustaining providence - the whole universe and we ourselves **are** Christ's and Christ indeed is God's.

Our enjoyment of the world, which one day will be seen in its fullest glory transfigured into the new creation, is therefore true and lasting. Even at times of darkness and foreboding, as followers of Jesus and living members of his body, we can like Traherne, still **see** the world aright. So seeing we become co-workers and co-preachers with the Lord to set that same world aright in its rediscovery of the One who made it.