

## HENRY VAUGHAN 6

*This ring the Bridegroom did for none provide  
But for his bride.*

If prayer is indeed THE WORLD IN TUNE, a world released from evil and made one in perfect harmony with God, it must also be a world *totally* redeemed, where none are left outside the marriage-feast. Our task in prayer (and service) is therefore not some sort of esoteric self-fulfilment but, as with Vaughan himself, a costly intercession and working, in the power of the Spirit and the strength of the praying Christ, that *all* may be saved and *none* fall short of the glory of God. Could our blessed Creator want less himself for his world?



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## The World in Tune

### THE GOAL OF PRAYER HENRY VAUGHAN 6

Praying never comes easily but keeping it up is essential all the same. Without it the life of a Christian grinds to a halt. In fact if there were no prayer the world would cease to be. In the last analysis it is not we who pray but rather the Spirit who prays in us, while our task is to yield our emptiness and poverty to be filled with the divine fire of purification and empowerment

Henry Vaughan, 17th century poet and Christian mystic, knew something of the compelling drawing-power of prayer while, together with the rest of us, being only too well aware of the wretchedness of his own sinful inadequacy. This awareness can often come home to us most forcibly in church, where we are gathered with others, ostensibly to worship God. If we stop to take stock we know ourselves to be for the most part as dry,

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dusty and lifeless as the stones or brickwork of the building that houses us. Vaughan knew this of himself alright, but recognised as well his utter dependency on God:

*O how in this thy quire of souls I stand,  
Propped by thy hand,  
A heap of sand!  
Which busy thoughts, like winds, would scatter quite,  
And put to flight,  
But for thy might.*

(Church-service, from *Silex Scintillans* part 1)

Indeed, were it not for the powerful interceding work of the Holy Spirit, his hardened heart and distracted mind would stand no chance at all. As it is, that very influence of the Spirit enables him firstly to praise God, however haltingly, and then to beg his help:

*Blest be the God of harmony and love!  
The God above!  
And Holy Dove!  
Whose interceding, spiritual groans  
Make restless moans  
For dust and stones;  
For dust in every part,  
But a hard, stony heart. . .*

*. . . both stones and dust and all of me  
Jointly agree  
To cry to thee . . .  
Present, O God  
The echo of these stones,  
My sighs and groans.*

(Ibid)

And where are these sighs and groans to be presented? Where else but

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The contrast in Vaughan is graphic. The calm and unending light of eternity shines above while:

*. . . round beneath it, time in hours, days, years  
Like a vast shadow moved, in which the world  
And all her train were hurled.*

Vivid descriptions follow of several kinds of people, representative of the worldly-minded who never raise minds, hearts or eyes to the things of heaven. They spin round, as it were on the whirligig. There is the doting lover lost in *the silly snares of pleasure* and in reality totally absorbed, narcissus-like in himself. Next comes *the darksome statesman hung with weights and woe* to be followed by *the fearful miser* and then the *downright epicure*. The lust of the flesh and of the eye, together with the pride of life, have won the day.

But Vaughan was given to see that a few people at least managed to rise up towards the light:

*Yet some, who all this while did weep and sing,  
And sing and weep, soared up into the ring.*

Some, therefore, praised God and wept for their sins and were not far from the Kingdom of Heaven. But Vaughan marvelled that so many preferred the night of this world:

*O fools, said I, thus to prefer dark night  
Before true light!  
To live in grotts and caves, and hate the day  
Because it shows the way,  
The way, which from this dead and dark abode  
Leads up to God . . .*

Once we have met God in prayer, been touched by the vision of his love, light and holiness all else is emptiness. The ring of light is earnestly yearned for, an eternity of oneness with the beloved. That, Vaughan tells us, is the symbolism of the ring, the pledge of marriage:

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Having tasted this bliss Vaughan wants it always, *now*, who wouldn't? He returns to the night again, the ordinary 'night' of this world, where God can only be perceived dimly, and asks that, through faith, he might be allowed to rise above the clouds and shadows. Thus his life, hid with God, will then shine brilliantly there, albeit unknown to all below, even to himself perhaps, like a star hidden from human sight by the clouds:

*O let me climb  
When I lie down! The pious soul by night  
Is like a clouded star, whose beams  
    . . .  
Yet are above,  
And shine and move  
Beyond that misty shroud.  
So in my bed,  
    . . . though sleep, like ashes, hide  
My lamp and life, both shall in thee abide.*

But we cannot leave things there without reference to another of Vaughan's better known poems, entitled 'The World', (again from *Silex Scintillans* part 1). The familiar imagery recurs, the light of heaven contrasted with the night of this world:

*I saw eternity the other night  
Like a great ring of pure and endless light,  
All calm, as it was bright.*

So the poem begins. It is night and Vaughan is at prayer, as was his wont we sense. But night, for him, as always, is not merely darkness but radiant with light. He received a vision of eternity. At once, however, this is vividly contrasted with life in this world. What *seems* to us to be day, to be reality, to be meaningful and purposeful, is shown up for what it is. A biblical quotation is given at the end of the poem to summarise this, namely the first letter of John Chap 2 vv 16 & 17 – 'All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye etc. is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passes away . . .'

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before the throne of the Father, taken there by God the Holy Spirit through Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

Henry Vaughan knew, as well as any, that all our prayer is in, with and through Jesus the incarnate Son, who himself lives for ever, at the other side of death, as our heavenly Intercessor. (Hebrews 7:25) While on earth Jesus prayed, in public in temple and synagogue certainly, and possibly supremely, by himself, in lonely places, in the depths of the night . . . Vaughan too is happiest with the night as so much of his poetry reveals. Perhaps the best known example is the poem entitled simply 'The Night' (from *Silex Scintillans* part 2)

A text from John's gospel is given at the head of the poem, John 3 v2, Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night. Vaughan speaks in high praise of this:

*. . . Wise Nicodemus saw such light  
As made him know his God by night.  
Most blest believer he!  
Who in that land of darkness and blind eyes  
Thy long-expected healing wings could see,  
When thou didst rise;  
And what can never more be done,  
Did at midnight speak with the Sun!*

But this leads quickly on to Vaughan's conjecturing where exactly it was that Jesus was to be found at night:

*O who will tell me, where  
He found thee at that dead and silent hour?  
What hallowed solitary ground did bear  
So rare a flower . . . ?*

It was *not* among the dust and stonework of man-made shrines, where perhaps even Jesus, like Vaughan and ourselves sometimes found it less than easy to pray. Rather, the poet sensed, it was the whole created universe itself that proved to be the sacred place for the Son of God to

commune with his heavenly Father:

*No mercy-seat of gold,  
No dead and dusty cherub, nor carved stone,  
But his own living works, did my Lord hold  
And lodge alone;  
Where trees and herbs did watch and peep  
And wonder . . .*

Then follows an exquisite eulogy of the night, as the time when Jesus prayed (Cf Mark 1:35 and Luke 21:37) and where Vaughan himself could find his God:

*Dear night! this world's defeat;  
The stop to busy fools; care's check and curb;  
The day of spirits; my soul's calm retreat  
Which none disturb!*

*Christ's progress, and his prayer time;  
The hours to which high heaven doth chime.*

*God's silent, searching flight:  
When my Lord's head is filled with dew, and all  
His locks are wet with the clear drops of night;  
His still, soft call;  
His knocking time . . .*

Vaughan is so deeply enamoured of this holy tabernacle, this place of Christ's prayer, that he would wish to be there always, even down here in the midst of earthly living. But here day has to dawn and we, like Vaughan, find ourselves entangled with the business of living and are marred and stained by it. Yet night *does* return and we must use our times of prayerful withdrawal wisely and well. Then, with Vaughan, it might also be given to *us* to glimpse, in foreshadowing, something of the inner reality of the divine, shrouded as it must be for our frail human eyes by the veil of darkness:

*There is in God, some say,  
A deep but dazzling darkness; As men here  
Say it is late and dusky, because they  
See not all clear.  
O for that Night! where I in him  
Might live, invisible and dim!*

Yes, the dawn does have to recur for us, incessantly, while we live in this world. We cannot always be hidden in prayer with God. But even for Vaughan the dawn too can be a sign of hope, and maybe a precursor of the eternal and everlasting joy of heaven. The early morning is traditionally the time of praise. Vaughan recognises this too. The dew of anticipation had been falling through the long hours of sleep and rest and then suddenly, with the dawn, the whole world bursts into praise:

*. . . the quick world [ie the living, resurrected world]  
Awakes and sings!  
The rising winds,  
And falling springs,  
Birds, beasts, all things  
Adore him in their kinds. [ie their individual ways]  
Thus all is hurled  
In sacred hymns and order, the great chime  
And symphony of nature . . .*

*(The Morning Watch from Silex Scitillans part 1)*

Suddenly Vaughan knows what it is to pray: it is to be in harmony with the whole creation, united in one hymn of adoration, where all sin, discordancy, sadness is done away – the perfection of joy. He is granted a vision of what has been dimly revealed to him in his nights of prayer:

*. . . Prayer is  
THE WORLD IN TUNE,  
A spirit-voice,  
And vocal joys  
Whose echo is heaven's bliss.*