

Easter Day 2021

They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him John 20.2

Rise heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise
Without delays,
Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
With him mayst rise:
That, as his death calcined thee to dust,
His life may make thee gold, and much more
just

You may wish to look at your pew sheet, in which you'll find printed George Herbert's poem Easter. Its musical version, by Ralph Vaughan Williams, will be sung after communion. It is the first of the Herbert settings which Vaughan Williams called five mystical songs, and the second such song is actually the second half of the same poem. In a conscious allusion to the

songs and psalms of scripture, Herbert elides two poems into one, to progress and to unite his theological ideas.

This first half poem stands easily alone, however, not least because of its Trinitarian structure. The heart of the believer is led forth into new life by Christ, just as Christ is raised from the dead by the Father who is the origin of all life. And just as the death of Christ brings humanity to its original dust, as the alchemist pounds his substance into powder before remaking it into gold, so Christ's bursting from the tomb remakes everything about human beings – gives them the rich value of gold but much more, makes them just, righteous, restored to a right relationship with the God who made them.

Building on Psalm 57 – Awake up, my glory, awake lute and harp – Herbert then reflects that the strings of his lute, made from animal gut, are tightened over the wood of the lute instrument just as the sinews of

Christ himself were stretched out upon the cross. That cross – the instrument of death which brings about new life – now becomes the archetype of all wooden instruments, transforming things of nature – the wood, the gut – and things into which they are manufactured – the lute, the harp – into the new creation which has been remade to offer itself in praise to the God of risen life.

So instead of harp and lute, Herbert has heart and lute – my very self, and the efforts of my life – consorting, coming together to sing the victory of the resurrection. And, in case we have missed what, for Herbert, is obvious, we are reminded that all music is but three parts vied and multiplied: everything which is played, is a reflection of the eternal polyphony which is the Holy and Blessed Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The coming together of heart, lute and Spirit maps onto the triune God – who creates, who redeems, who gives life. In the wonder that is Easter that life - breathed into us by the Holy Spirit - is now

transformed, and the defects of our human efforts are made into the perfect artistic offering by the breath of God himself.

Today Herbert's reputation as a poet has never been higher. It was not ever thus. The Times obituary for the Tractarian priest poet John Keble, written in 1866, compares the Oxford man with his 17th century forebear, and safely concludes that Keble is clearly superior. If ever you want evidence that value judgements need not be relative, but can be straightforwardly wrong, that would be a good example. It's a bit like claiming that Gary Barlow writes better music than did Johann Sebastian Bach. When Vaughan Williams set the Five Mystical Songs, before the First World War, Herbert was only beginning to be fully appreciated. But Vaughan Williams clearly appreciated him, for he captures in this setting the combination of ecstatic joy, and ongoing life, which is the essence of Christ's resurrection. The interplay of soloist and choir,

climaxing with the gloriously slushy repeat of the first line, must come down as surely as it has gone up, as the single voice leads us away from the mountain top and into the reality of our new but ongoing Christian existence.

“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” The assumption made by Mary Magdalen in our gospel reading from John is as reasonable as can be. She saw the body being buried, she saw the tomb being sealed. If Jesus is no longer there, he must have been taken away, and of course she knows not where. The male followers who come next – Peter and the beloved disciple – fare little better. They see inside the tomb, but in essence what they see is nothing. As the crowd controllers say, there is nothing to see here. But Mary will shortly learn the truth, she will shortly come to know where Jesus is to be found. It isn’t quite as simple as seeing him – she doesn’t recognise him, supposes him to be the gardener. But when he calls her by name, when, in our

language, he rechristens her, then her eyes are opened to the truth which stands before her. She does not know where Jesus has been put, because he hasn't been put anywhere, at least nowhere other than in the lives and the hearts of those who love him.

Rise heart, thy Lord is risen. The heart can rise, because it is Christ who lifts it up. The life given in Christ is the life remade at Easter, the life which opens up a world in which love, mercy and forgiveness now constitute the building blocks of what we call creation. What it means to live, day to day, from triumph to disaster, from the suffering we have known this last year to the joy which still awaits us, what it means to live is to be risen with Christ, to know the presence of the living God in our hearts, to sing and shout for joy on this most holy day, yes, but also to breathe that life in and out in every moment of our existence, to walk in the presence of the Lord all the days of our life.

They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him. We do not know where they have laid him, because they have not laid him anywhere. Only he can choose his dwelling. Only he can give his life. In the beauty of a world remade, in the agony of suffering and the ecstasy of rebirth, in the music of creation, in the hopes and fears and lives and loves of every human being. In the best and in the worst and in everything which breathes. He has left the tomb behind him. He has made his home within our hearts.