

MATERIAL FOR HOLY WEEK 2020

I have always enjoyed the poetry of George Herbert, and during Holy Week last year I used his poems as we said Morning Prayer at St Matthew's and Compline at St Edmund's, and read the Passion Narrative, the description of Jesus' final week. Here is the material again, in the hope it might be useful as we pray at home this year. You could easily link this with Morning or Evening Prayer from the leaflet we provided, or from the Church of England app or website, or even from the Prayer Book!

The poems of George Herbert are taken from the Everyman's Poetry edition (selected and edited by D.J. Enright), published by J.M. Dent, 1996.

Monday – Luke 22.1-13

George Herbert was born in Montgomery, Wales on 3 April 1593. He came from a wealthy family, was tutored at home, then went to Westminster School and to Trinity College Cambridge. He was a Fellow of the College by 1614, rose to the heights of University Orator (the man whose job it was to be the University's spokesmen) and also an MP. After only a few years he left it all and was ordained in 1625 or 1626. He became Prebendary of Leighton Bromswold in Huntingdonshire, then, in 1630, moved to Bemerton near Salisbury. He died there on 1 March 1633. We remember him as priest, poet and musician. Five of his hymns are in hymnbook, including "King of glory, King of peace", "Let all the world in every corner sing", and "Teach me, my God and King".

Today's poem "Come, my way, my truth, my life" is probably his best known poem, and one of his simplest. There's just a couple of words and phrases that need explaining - apparently "Such a feast as mends in length", is a feast that improves as it goes on (I'm not quite sure what that means - the pudding is the best course?), and "a joy as none can move", 'move' being short for 'remove'.

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:
Such a way as gives us breath;
Such a truth as ends all strife,
Such a life as killeth death.

Come, my Light, my Feast, my Strength:
Such a light as shows a feast,
Such a feast as mends in length,
Such a strength as makes his guest.

Come, my Joy, my Love, my Heart:
Such a joy as none can move,
Such a love as none can part,
Such a heart as joys in love.

The Call, page 66

Simple, but also one of Herbert's deepest poems. Its title is "The Call", and as the poem starts we think of John 14.6 "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Reader and poet know their bible, and it is clear that this poem is addressing Jesus. The way, the truth and the life; light, feast and strength - you can imagine yourself in a Jacobean dining room - wood panelling, a log fire, candle light, good food and good company. Joy, love, heart - those human relationships which make life worth living.

Passover was a Jewish feast that meant a huge amount to the men, women and children of Jesus' time. It was a feast, a festival to bring people together - families would have gathered in Jerusalem then, as people come together for festivals in our time. Jesus invited his disciples to eat with him.

This year, as our human relationships are curtailed, it gives another perspective - we won't be celebrating Easter with our families and won't take communion either, but we will still celebrate in God's love and God's presence.

For music, listen to Ralph Vaughan Williams' setting of his poem. My dad used to love this version, sung by John Shirley-Quirk - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=okRTkmp94o> but if you prefer to watch the performer, there are other versions available.

It is one of Ralph Vaughan Williams' "Five Mystical Songs", may it inspire us to walk this week with Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

Peter Barham, 6 April 2020