

George Herbert: Sustaining the Rural Spirit

The Revd John Owen

I was a vicar in the Bemerton team ministry in the 1980s, now defunct, of course because it went through pastoral reorganisation a few years later. I lived on the nearby housing estate, a couple of miles from St Andrew's Church, which Herbert rebuilt, probably from his own sources. His rectory, now occupied by Vikram Seth is opposite. People today strike up a relationship of sorts with George Herbert; Vikram Seth says that at first he found living in Herbert's home to be a bit overwhelming, but after a while he got used to it, and felt that Herbert leaves a benign presence; W H Auden said that Herbert is one poet he really would have liked to meet; Wordsworth he would have found too irritable, but Herbert he warms to because of what he calls his obvious goodness. And in the visitors' book at St Andrews, there are the signatures of the many people who travel long distances to glimpse something of where Herbert lived and ministered in the first 3 years of the 1600s in Bemerton. They feel very often they know him, and warm to him, and are inspired by him: ranging from Seamus Heaney to visiting American professors of English. He also said: 'One might almost say that Anglican piety at its best, as represented by Herbert, is the piety of a gentleman, which means, of course, that at its second best it becomes merely genteel.'

I suppose the short answer to the question of how to sustain the rural spirit is to read or perhaps sing, George Herbert's poetry, as well as read his guide to the rural ministry, found in his 'Country Parson'. But there are other ways of being inspired. Isaac Walton in his 17th century hagiography of Herbert, does a great job in building up the picture of the gifted rising star who would have achieved preferment at court, but throws it all up for an obscure country ministry. The truth in that story is more complicated: Herbert's health was always fragile; he may have sensed his mortality, and Bemerton, put into his way by his cousin at Wilton House, would have offered space for working out his ideas as well as his poetry. There's an inspiration for rural life in that sort of story, which is obviously what Walton wants us to feel – that it's not all about preferment, getting on, achieving, but is really about what

matters to the heart. And Herbert's heart was set upon things other than preferment.

My favourite story from Walton occurred on the path from Bemerton Rectory to Harnham, a path you can still walk. It involves real grime, sweat and effort (a bit like some aspects of rural ministry, I guess)

"In a.. walk to Salisbury he saw a poor man with a poorer horse, that was fallen under his load: they were both in distress, and needed present help; which Mr. Herbert perceiving, put off his canonical coat, and helped the poor man to unload, and after to load, his horse. The poor man blessed him for it, and he blessed the poor man; and was so like the good Samaritan, that he gave him money to refresh both himself and his horse; and told him, "That if he loved himself he should be merciful to his beast." Thus he left the poor man: and at his coming to his musical friends at Salisbury, they began to wonder that Mr. George Herbert, which used to be so trim and clean, came into that company so soiled and discomposed: but he told them the occasion. And when one of the company told him "He had disparaged himself by so dirty an employment," his answer was, "That the thought of what he had done would prove music to him at midnight; and that the omission of it would have upbraided and made discord in his conscience, whensoever he should pass by that place: for if I be bound to pray for all that be in distress, I am sure that I am bound, so far as it is in my power, to practise what I pray for. And though I do not wish for the like occasion every day, yet let me tell you, I would not willingly pass one day of my life without comforting a sad soul, or showing mercy; and I praise God for this occasion. And now let's tune our instruments."

I love that piece of classic Anglican moderation found in the expression: *And though I do not wish for the like occasion every day, yet let me tell you, I would not willingly pass one day of my life without comforting a sad soul, or showing mercy; and I praise God for this occasion.* We need that measured kindness in sprawling rural benefices where resources are few - the ability not to over work, to be able to say no; NOT to seek out every occasion to help is a virtue of the Anglican tradition. Herbert knew he was saved by grace, not by work.

(2) Restorative to the rural spirit is the interpretation of Herbert as a networker. He had a large circle of friends and family. Of course he was a 17th century gentleman, an aristocrat, highly educated and privileged. His cousin, Philip Herbert, 4th Earl of Pembroke, lived in the Pembroke ancestral pile 4 miles away from Bemerton, at Wilton House. It was a house of high culture with a fine art collection, a rebuilding programme, Italian designers and craftsmen swanning around; Charles I was a visitor there. And George Herbert wined and dined at Wilton. It was not really the obscurity of a country living as Walton would have us believe. Herbert was involved with a wide cross section of aristocratic life but he was also closely in touch with the working farmers and labourers and their families of Bemerton and Fugglestone. And he had a pastoral heart that reached out to all of them because he believed his calling was to all of them, and it was personal. There was a network of interests and relationships which he managed to co-opt into the big design of being a priest and witnessing to God's love.

(3) Herbert was a Fresh Expressions enabler. (Yes, it sounds distinctly odd to say this). Yet in his Country Parson, he was helping position the country parson within society, by defining what the scope and task was. This was not new, but it was significant. Martyn Percy (in 'Clergy: the Origin of Species' 2006, page 56) point out that Richard Baxter, Anglican puritan was doing something similar in a different vein at at Kidderminster in the 1650s, 20 years after Herbert had died. There was this need to redefine the work of the Anglican ministry, to give it coherence, not only for the practitioner but for the people who were then taught. Herbert didn't just react to expectations - he actively shaped his own little rural society. There's a lesson there for how we might respond to the sometimes diffuse and difficult expectations heaped on rural ministers.

(4) Herbert's own ministry was clearly sustained by things other than ministerial occupations. Although he was a good visitor, it's worth remembering that in the small hamlets of Bemerton and Fuggleston, he also employed two curates to beaver away for the church. When I was in Bemerton, the team rector and I took soundings from a 17th

century map of the area. We reckoned - and this is hardly a scientific survey - that there were 30 houses in the parish in Herbert's time, with say, eight people in each. That's roughly 240 people and 3 clergy. Pastoral visiting was on a different scale to anything that modern rural ministers face. But still, Herbert is sustained by lots of other things apart from his obvious commitment to the pastoral ministry. That included violin playing, his poetry and writing, as well as some experiments in community living. Nicholas Ferrar, a close friend, was also experimenting with community living at Little Gidding, at the same time that Herbert was establishing his daily prayers, in the little church, attended mostly by his family and their few servants. Herbert was both creative, and innovative, in how he approached ministry in those unsettled changing times, just a matter of 11 years before the outbreak of the English Civil War. He didn't live in a timeless bubble of contentment, as is sometimes imagined (as it is also for Gilbert White), but was very much forging a different way of living – and certainly different to many other men of his class and background.

Sustaining him throughout was this inner life which bubbles out in his poetry with such precision of expression. Rural ministry for Herbert is relational and personal, just as for him, the spiritual life is one lived in constant dialogue with God. Here's the ultimate refreshment of spirit for rural ministry:

John Owen
November 2008

GILBERT WHITE – Reflections by Revd Nicky Judd

(with thanks to Richard Mabey's biography and *The Natural History of Selborne*)

Gilbert White was born in Selborne on the 18th July 1720, in the Vicarage, for his grandfather was the parish priest. Gilbert was the eldest of 8 surviving children: 3 others died in infancy. Shortly after his birth, Gilbert and his parents moved to Compton, near Guildford. He had his early schooling at Farnham. The family returned to Selborne when Gilbert was 9, to live at the Wakes with his widowed grandmother. From his early teens Gilbert was educated in Basingstoke by the Revd Thomas Warton. Gilbert went up to Oriel College, Oxford, aged 19. He graduated in June 1743 and was made a Fellow of Oriel in March 1744.

In April 1746 Gilbert was ordained Deacon and began his first curacy, to his uncle Charles at Swarraton, Hampshire. In March 1749 he was priested and the curacy came to an end. There followed curacies at Selborne (October 1751-April 1752), Durley near Bishops Waltham (September 1753 -) – he rode over from Selborne, as only Sunday duties were required – West Dean near Salisbury (May 1755 - early 1756), non-residential curate of Moreton Pinkney, Northamptonshire (October 1757) – he put in a deputy – , Faringdon, 2 miles from Selborne, (1762) – he hung on to this one, again riding over from Selborne – and, finally, curate-in-charge of Selborne again (1784 until his death in June 1793). His surviving sermons, some hand-written in a book, are dated and named with the place where they were preached. He used each one more than once.

In between curacies, Gilbert spent a year (1752-3) as Junior Proctor of Oriel College. Later he tried for the post of Provost, but was unsuccessful. It seems that he enjoyed life in Oxford and would have been happy to live there permanently.

In Autumn 1747, he suffered a severe attack of smallpox and spent £31 on the doctor! This was a huge sum – one of his curacies only paid £20 per annum.

From 1745-1750 Gilbert spent his vacations travelling widely over lowland England, visiting family and friends, but developed severe

coach-sickness and seems later to have limited his travelling to that which he could achieve on horseback, especially regular visits to Ringmer in Sussex to visit his aunt; and to London and Fyfield (near Andover) to visit some of his siblings.

The Wakes at Selborne was his base for most of this life, although he was not permanently there. It was in late 1749, when his first curacy came to an end, that he began seriously working on the garden at the Wakes: he grew herbs, vegetables (popularising potatoes, which had not really caught on), fruit and flowers. He had hot beds for melons and cucumbers and pursued all this growing with great enthusiasm and with help from the village. He also had indoor servants. Gardening styles were changing – formal beds which expressed man's dominance over nature were giving way to a more picturesque style where nature was incorporated into garden design, with, for instance, romantic ruins in the landscape!

From 1751 White kept extensive notes about what he planted, how it thrived and produced and how the weather affected growth (the first 'Garden Documentary') – therefore it has been possible to begin reconstructing the garden at the Wakes to be close to how it was in his time. The sharing of plants and produce among neighbours, and the correspondence with seed producers and other gardeners is an example of networking! Close to the parish grapevine, Gilbert had animated conversations with villagers – we are given a verbal portrait of him standing in the middle of the village street, waving his stick and shrugging his shoulders in his characteristic way as he talked.

Gilbert had been interested in birds, animals, insects and plants of the countryside from early in his life. He must have made notes throughout his life, but they became more and more detailed as time went by, especially as a result of his interest in the garden - this made him study the creatures in it in greater detail. It is clear that he knew every nook and cranny of the parish. He read the work of others in this field and corresponded with like-minded people. He also read more widely and was very familiar with classical texts in Greek and Latin, which he quotes freely (as would have been normal for a well-educated man of this time). Once his interest in the natural world became known, villagers and people from further afield brought him news of their own

observations as well as specimens for him to examine. He even had his brother in Gibraltar engaged in such activity. These explorations became a shared enterprise. Eventually Gilbert put together many of this own observations in the form of letters, published in 1788 as the *Natural History of Selborne*. His writing was in a new style – fresh and intensely personal.

Gilbert believed the study of creatures revealed more about the Creator. His studies of the natural world at such close quarters – unusual for his time – led to understanding, then respect and then insight into the kindredness of all living things. He developed the realization that humans are part of the scheme of things, not outside, controlling. He helped pioneer affectionate writing about place. He was an early ecologist! There is a danger of idealising his work and of using that idealisation to bolster our desire for the rural idyll and the positing of ‘village’ as the ideal community.

It is important to realise that Gilbert’s life was not totally confined to Selborne. He enjoyed the life of a man-about-town. In Oxford he went boating, played chess, gambled, went to the races, joined the music club, went to coffee houses for debate and reading, drank port, wine and cider, kept a gun and described himself as a sportsman – he freely shot small birds in summer to keep his hand in for the shooting of game birds in the winter. He enjoyed a wide-ranging diet, had many friends, but also had enemies. Although he might like to have lived permanently in Oxford, Selborne had a strong attraction and he embedded himself more and more deeply there.

Throughout his life he kept in touch with many people through letter-writing, including friends from college days. There was a constant stream of family visitors to the Wakes, some to stay long-term. Gilbert was proud of the fact that he had 60+ nephews and nieces by the end of his life. Although Gilbert didn’t marry or father children himself, there is a suggestion that he had at least one romantic attachment early in his life which might have led to marriage. He got on well with young people and treated them with respect and intelligence, never showing the slightest sign of condescension. He had a good sense of humour, as this extract from a letter to one of his nephews illustrates. It was written during a prolonged period of harsh weather that had brought

real hardship to the village. “My (hay) rick is now almost as slender as the waist of a virgin, and it would have been much for the reputation of the two last brides that I have married, had their waists been as slender.”

Gilbert was a literary critic and encourager, commenting on the writings of friends. He was also a willing contributor to other’s volumes, and self-effacing about his own work. He was a builder, too, closely supervising an extension to the Wakes.

He was a resolute supporter of the rights of the common people, a strong believer in the need to foster independence and self-help, who had no time for measures that kept labourers in a state of subservience.

Mabey comments that White’s meticulous and detailed observation of the dramas of life in the natural world reflect his delight and inspiration in a way which is almost sacramental. His book is a celebration of the life of the whole community. It speaks of a place of vitality and change set within an ancient framework and a geographically enclosed, wrapped-in, landscape. While the author is very much part of that scene, he also travelled frequently outside its bounds and is interested in discovering more about the widest possible world which came to him through books.

We talk about the book which made, and makes, him famous, but it is the man who wrote it to whom we look for clues about the rural spirit. We find a man filled with curiosity about the natural world around him; a man with a good brain, prepared to work with the questions it asks, prepared to adapt and change as his research reveals new things. We find a man filled with wonder; one who, on the one hand loves company and the good life, but who, on the other, can be still, observant and reflective. One who has a feeling for the sacredness of place, of people, of the natural world. One who sees the hand of God in all things. His good friend, John Mulso, commented, “You are the richest man that I know, for you ... (do) not want money.”

Book of Common Prayer *Sustaining the Rural Spirit*

Martin Coppen

Arguably the greatest sustenance to the rural spirit over the longest time is the *Book of Common Prayer*. I'm no supporter of the Prayer Book Society, but I do have considerable respect for the Book itself. Apart from the memorable phrases and beauty of language, I've long had a hunch about why the BCP endures especially in rural areas in this liturgically competitive age, and this gives me an opportunity to test it out. In particular, my suggestion is that it is a rural book, which engages spiritually with village life as it is.

Small communities can be socially difficult in ways that large communities are not. *Bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking with all malice* [Ephesians 4.31] ... The negative side of human nature is magnified in the small-scale rural setting. Agatha Christie's *Miss Marple* claimed there was no sin that was not found in an English village. (I haven't come across cannibalism yet, but you never know.) The village resident is known and privacy is not easily protected, except by the very rich. Gossip is very powerful. On the other hand, we might complete that quotation from Ephesians 4: *And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you*. The BCP comes out of small community life.

The Prayer Book has notably warm and stirring general confessions in the office services as in Holy Communion. *We are heartily sorry* (HC), and plead the mercies of God. Intensity is added by repetition: of our misdoings, *The remembrance of them is grievous ... the burden of them is intolerable* (HC). Social readiness to receive the sacrament of communion has a high bar which makes good sense in a small community: *'Ye that are in love and charity with your neighbours, and intend to lead a new life following the commandments of God, draw near ...'* Yet we leave church as redeemed sinners still vitally in need of grace and fearful of God's wrath, deferring to his power. Contrast our departure as the commissioned Christians of the modern rite, sent out to love and serve the Lord. The dominant image of the Prayer Book office confession is that we have erred and strayed like lost sheep, a simile from the farm. All in all, the BCP confessions are

more engaging and more difficult to say without meaning it. The modern confessions have almost a legalistic, bureaucratic feel. In the Prayer Book view, we are silly sheep, rather than negligent and deliberately faulty. Though maybe the humility of the Prayer Book rather jars our modern self-importance.

Its chief shaper, Thomas Cranmer, was himself brought up in a Nottinghamshire village. Morning and Evening Prayer are his adaptations of the old monastic services, lubricants of the praise of God and small community life. The Psalms run in course for a month through the daily saying of the office. The hope was that the Prayer Book would maintain the spiritual current running through a community gathered for daily prayer. A fellowship of prayer would be at the heart of village life.

The Prayer Book encourages learning by repetition of the same words week by week, with the only changes from one service to another being the collect and readings. How many books of services do we need to negotiate the Church year now? Modern educational theory of course proceeds by exploration and questioning, and repetition is theoretically outmoded. Yet as a spiritual discipline, repetition is validated by different traditions, from the Jesus Prayer of the Orthodox tradition to Benedictine *Lectio Divina* to charismatic choruses based on Biblical texts. The Prayer Book encourages depth rather than breadth.

Does the Prayer Book have anything specifically for farmers and farm workers? Rather more than its modern revisions. The prayers for *Rain*, for *Fair Weather*, in *Time of Dearth and Famine*, take a realistic view of agricultural and village vulnerability, and the dependence upon what the harvest brings. This summer was not just inconveniently rainy, but for farmers and growers very difficult. We in the villages could not but be drawn into their problems. The Prayer Book assumes a deep faith in both the righteousness and providence of God, which is comparatively subliminal in modern urban-suburban services. But it also has a robust concept of corporate sin, *'although we for our iniquities have worthily deserved a plague of rain and waters, yet upon our true repentance, thou wilt send us [fair] weather.'* Surprisingly, this has found a new voice in the guilt-raising of the environmental lobby.

The Prayer Book's political theology is set within a monarchy, the

Queen's Majesty and the Divine Majesty, to whom we offer confession: sin is a sort of treason, which must have exercised minds during a tumultuous century of civil war and religious turbulence. This appeals to the traditional monarchist and rural flag waving patriots.

Now that money has become the dominant value of the village, and with the vastly increased proportion of prosperous middle-classes living there by choice, the BCP is somewhat beached, except for an older generation hankering after the simple certainties of public school chapel. It speaks out of society where so many were trapped where they were occupationally or residentially, and where most did not have the luxury of choosing whether to opt in or out of community life. Yet it offers an enduring sense of where redemption is to be found, and of the sins which corrupt village society and hinder spiritual growth. It clearly portrays a Saviour who, through God's creatures of bread and wine, brings grace and heavenly benediction to kneeling sinners. It is a worthy book to sustain the rural spirit and small community life.