
George Herbert, Country Parsons, and R.S. Thomas

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Rev. Sam Candler**

I salute country parsons this week!

Actually, I guess we are all “country parsons” these days, whether we are ordained or not. We are all trying to care for our isolated pods of loved ones. But I want to particularly salute those leaders of smaller communities of faith who have been gallantly trying to lead their flocks, in the midst of pandemic isolation and frustration and impatience and real struggle.

Here at the large Cathedral of St. Philip, we benefit enormously from our ability to gather outside, to livestream many services, to gather in video conference calls, and to assemble several online services every week. We do so with real grace and excellence, all at once! I am glad for that. But I also realize that not every parish, or community of faith, has been able to do that.

My principle during this pandemic Christianity is to encourage people to support their local parish, and whatever that parish is doing. Whatever your parish is doing, it is probably doing the right thing; it is being true to its identity. There is no way that every parish can be a mega-parish these days, with superbly polished technical productions! In these days, the best thing for both smaller, and larger, parishes, is to be true to our identities, with neither regret nor boasting. Be true to who we are, and God will bless us during this Lenten wilderness!

The Episcopal Church observes this week (February 27) the feast day of George Herbert, that supposedly “rural” English pastor of Fuddlestone Saint Peter. He wrote exquisite and concise poetry, but the only work he published during his lifetime was “The Country Parson,” which was intended to be a holy and practical guide to being an ordinary parish priest. He wrote, for instance, that “things of ordinary use” such as ploughs, leaven, or dances, could be made to “serve for lights even of Heavenly Truths”.

Today, Herbert is remembered more for his poetry, works such as “The Altar” and “Love (III),” and “The Agonie,” which concludes with these powerful lines:

*Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,
Which my God feels as bloud; but I, as wine.*

It has been noted lately that the figure of George Herbert, country parson, has also assumed a legendary and misleading image. Yes, “The Country Parson,” laid out a set of admirable criteria for what makes a successful parish priest. But those attributes of soft and genteel politeness have been critiqued, most recently by Justin Lewis-Anthony in his delightful book, “If you Meet George Herbert on the Road, Kill Him.” Lewis-Anthony noted that Herbert, in reality, was not really such a removed country parson. His little parish church was actually within walking distance of the high culture of Salisbury, and—even then—Herbert served that little parish less than three years. The critique is that Herbert never really paid his dues as a long-laboring, patient, country parson!

Here is what Justin Lewis-Anthony wrote in “The Guardian,” June 2, 2009: “Close your eyes and picture a vicar of the Church of England. Whether you are a regular churchgoer or someone who once watched an episode of *The Vicar of Dibley*, your mental image will more than likely be this: a smiling, benign, inoffensive and unworldly cleric. This image has its origins in the life and ministry of one man, George Herbert (1594-1633). ... Too often Herbertism gets in the way of Christianity. The solution must begin with ridding the false memory of Herbert, who he wasn't and what he didn't do. Much of our reverence for “George Herbert” is the worshipping

of a fantasy pastor, an impossible and inaccurate role model, a cause of guilt and anxiety. Like the Zen Master, if we meet George Herbert on the road, we must kill him.” (The Guardian, June 2, 2009).

I understand the critique. But I also do not begrudge George Herbert doing the best he could, with what he could. So what that he was able, often, to leave his little parish and go enjoy the grand Salisbury Cathedral. That's much like anyone these days, struggling to serve a small, local parish, online but also tuning in to the online offerings of a grand Cathedral, too! We can do both.

George Herbert was actually born in Wales; and there is another Welsh-born poet and priest, a more contemporary one, whom I highly recommend for a fine model of country clergy. He is R. S. Thomas, a great giant of a poet. This poem, “The Country Clergy,” is an excellent and rugged juxtaposition to Herbert’s rather fantasy country parson:

THE COUNTRY CLERGY

R.S. Thomas

*I see them working in old rectories
By the sun's light, by candlelight,
Venerable men, their black cloth
A little dusty, a little green
With holy mildew. And yet their skulls,
Ripening over so many prayers,
Topped into the same grave
With oafs and yokels. They left no books,
Memorial to their lonely thought
In grey parishes; rather they wrote
On men's hearts and in the minds
Of young children sublime words
Too soon forgotten. God in his time
Or out of time will correct this.*

Thank you. Thanks to all the country clergy, the country parsons, serving God’s people in a pandemic with both forgotten and sublime words.



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