Iona School for Ministry

The Caroline Divines

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Historical Context: the Elizabethan Age spanned a period of almost 45 years from 1558-1603. James I reigned as King of England and Scotland from 1603 -1625. The Authorized Version (AV) of the Bible was published in 1611 known to us as the King James Version (KJV). His son, Charles I became king in 1625 and was executed in 1649 following the Puritan Revolution and his son did not become king until the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. The age of Shakespeare is dated from 1564-1616.

Who were the Caroline Divines? They were Anglican preachers and theologians living under Charles I and Charles II. Many of their works were collected by leaders of the Oxford movement in the 19th century and published in a volume known as Anglo-Catholic Theology. Source: www. anglicanhistory.org

A number of the Caroline Divines were also among a group known as the Metaphysical Poets. We’ll be looking at three of the Caroline Divines today because they are the best known. Both George Herbert and John Donne have poems that are set to music in the 1982 Hymnal. It may be useful, however, to give you a definition of the Metaphysical Poets before we look specifically at their works.

The metaphysical poets were a name given to a group of English lyric poets of the 17th century. The term was first used by Samuel Johnson (1744). The hallmark of their poetry is the metaphysical conceit (a figure of speech that employs unusual and paradoxical images), a reliance on intellectual wit, learned imagery, and subtle argument. Although this method was by no means new, these men infused new life into English poetry by the freshness and originality of their approach. The most important metaphysical poets are John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughan, Thomas Traherne, Abraham Cowley, Richard Crashaw, and Andrew Marvell. Their work has considerably influenced the poetry of the 20th cent. –from the Columbia Dictionary

Many of their poems can be found in the Oxford Book of English Verse. They were known for their theological reflections, works on pastoral care as well as their poetry.

1. **George Herbert (1593-1633**) is one of the best-known poets of this period. He had a successful career at Cambridge where he became the Orator of the University as a young man. He may have had a career in the court of James I, but instead took Holy Orders and became the Vicar of the church in Bremerton.

At Bremerton Herbert both greatly endeared himself to his parishioners, and also gently but firmly led them, persuading the large majority to join him in saying the Daily Office at ten and four o’clock. Walton, author of his biography in 1670, wrote “Thus he continued meditating and praying and rejoicing till the day of his death.” (Thomas 9).

Herbert’s poetry reflects the best of the Anglican spirit as well as the height of the literature of the day. He was a younger contemporary of Shakespeare. Thomas adds this point, “And the emphasis is on mind, for the appeal of Anglicanism was to the intellect via the language, as witness the case of John Donne (9).

A number of his poems have been set to music in the Anglican hymnal: “Come my way, my truth, and my life,” “King of Glory, king of peace” and “Let all the world in every corner sing, My God and King.” The last one is written as an Antiphon (19).

One can feel the depth of his devotion as well as admire the beauty of his use of his images. His poem, “Prayer” contains the memorable lines:

Prayer the churches banquet, angels’ age,

God’s breathe in man returning to his birth,

The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,

The Christian plummet sounding heaven and earth (Thomas 27).

Hebert also could express passion as in his poem on Love.

Immortal love, author of this great frame,

Sprung from that beautie which can never fade;

How hath man parceled out thy glorious name,

And thrown it on that dust that thou hast made. (Thomas 29).

It’s quite interesting to compare this poem with another one entitled Love:

Love bade me welcome: yet my heart drew back,

Guilite of dust and sinne (Thomas 91).

Perhaps his most beautiful poem is “The Call.”

Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life:

Such a way, as gives us breathe:

Such a truth, as ends all strife:

And such a life, as killeth death.

There is a simple attractiveness to his verse and the repetition of themes. Not only does he often write of love, but also of joy. “Such a heart, as joys in love.”

**Poems by George Herbert set to music in the Hymnal 1982**

**“Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life” Hymn 487**

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, 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.

**“King of glory, King of peace” Hymn 382**

King of glory, King of peace, I will love thee; and that love may never cease, I will move thee. Thou hast granted my request, thou hast heard me; thou didst note my working breast, thou hast spared me.

Wherefore with my utmost art, I will sing thee; and the cream of all my heart, I will bring thee. Though my sins against me cried, thou didst clear me; and alone when they replied, thou didst hear me.

Seven whole days, not one in seven, I will praise thee; in my heart, though not in heaven, I will raise thee. Small it is in this poor sort to enroll thee; e’en eternity’s too short to extol thee.

**“Let all the world in every corner sing, my God and King! Hymn 402, 403**

Let all the world in every corner sing, my God and King!

The heavens are not too high, his praise may thither fly; the earth is not too low, his praises there may grow.

The Church with psalms must shout, no door can keep them out; but, above all, the heart must bear the longest part.

1. **John Donne (1572-1631)**

In his day, John Donne was just as well known for his sermons as his poems. Although he came from a Roman Catholic family, he became Anglican and eventually took Holy Orders. He ended his career as the Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral where he was known for the power of his preaching. He wept during the sermon in memory of Lady Danvers who was the mother of his fellow poet, George Herbert (Edwards 207). He has been criticized for his fascination with sin and death. One must remember that he was struck by grief at the death of his young wife at the age of 33 and the bubonic plague erupted from time to time during the 17th century. Donne in many ways is a much more complicated figure than Herbert.

The third of his Holy Sonnets begin with the famous lines:

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee

Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so

(Oxford Book of English Verse - 197).

The fourth of these sonnets reveal his passion intensity for God’s love, although one can find many sexual references in his works.

Batter my heart, three personed God, you

As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;

That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me and bend

Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new. (OBEV - 198).

Donne also has two of his poems set to music in the 1982 Hymnal of the Episcopal Church.

The first one is: “Wilt thou forgive that sin…?”

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,

Which is my sin, though it were done before? (OBEV 198).

The other is attributed to John Donne, but some argue it was a quote from Queen Elizabeth I.

**Also found in the 1982 Hymnal 322.**

When Jesus died to save us,

a word an act he gave us;

And still that Word is spoken,

And still the bread is broken.

He was the Word that spake it,

He took the bread and brake it,

And what the Word did make it,

I do believe and take it.

**“Wilt thou forgive that sin…” Hymn 140**

Wilt thou forgive that sin, where I begun, which is my sin, though it were done before? Wilt thou forgive those sins through which I run, and do run still, though still I do deplore? When thou hast done, thou hast not done, for I have more.

Wilt thou forgive that sin, by which I won others to sin, and made my sin their door? Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun a year or two, but wallowed in a score? When thou hast done, thou hast not done, for I have more.

I have a sin of fear that when I’ve spun my last thread, I shall perish on the shore, swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore.

And having done that, thou hast done, I fear no more.

1. Lancelot Andrewes. One of the great persons to follow in the tradition of the metaphysical poets was Lancelot Andrewes who is numbered among the “Caroline Divines.” He was Bishop of Chichester and later served the dioceses of Ely and Winchester. He was remembered as one of the great preachers of his age. He had a prominent role as one of the translators of the King James Version of the Bible published in 1611.

Andrewes compiled a series of Private Devotions. They were not meant to be seen by anyone and were found among his papers after his death. The first edition was not published until 1675 by Oxford University Press. This translation from the Greek edition was done by John Henry Newman in 1842. There is this note in the Publishers Forward:

The devotions of Lancelot Andrewes belong to the timeless literature of Christianity. Although written for himself alone, and reflecting here and there his personal interests and the spirit of his time, they express the deepest feelings of the devout Christian in every generation (v). This meditation is from “Course of Prayers for the Week - Day One”

O hope of all the ends of the earth,

And of them that remain in the broad sea;

O Thou on whom our fathers hoped,

And Thou didst deliver them;

On whom they waited,

And were not confounded;

O my hope from my youth,

From my mother’s breasts;

On whom I have been cast from the womb,

Be thou my hope

Now and evermore,

And my portion in the land of the living:

In thy nature,

In Thy names, in thy types,

In word and deed,

My hope--let me not be disappointed of my hope. (34)

An Intercession for Day Seven

O heavenly King,

Confirm our faithful kings,

Stablish the faith,

Soften the nations,

Pacify the world,

And receive us in orthodox faith and repentance,

As a kind and loving Lord.

The Power of the Father guide me,

The Wisdom of the Son enlighten me,

The working of the Spirit quicken me. (115,6)

1. **Jeremy Taylor (1613-1667**) is best known for his two works, *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Living (1650)* and *The Rule and Exercise of Holy Dying (1651).* We’ll end this session with an excerpt from “Advice on Daily Living.”

Suppose every day to be a day of business; for your whole life is a race and a battle, a merchandize, and a journey: every day propound to yourself a rosary, or a chapel of good works, to present to God at night…

Read not much at a time; but meditate as much as your time, and capacity, and disposition will give you leave’ ever remembering, that little reading, and much thinking; little speaking, and much hearing; frequent and short prayers, and great devotion, is the best way to be wise, to be holy, to be devout…

The Caroline Divines are important figures in the development of Anglican theology and devotion. They wrote during the Golden Age of English literature following Shakespeare and the translation of the King James Bible. Their love of Scripture and deep spirituality inspired them to produce some of the finest poetry and prose known in the English language. Their works are evidence of some of the treasures we can still use and enjoy in our worship.

1. **Nicholas Ferrar (1592-1637) and the Little Gidding Community**

He was a student at Clare Hall, Cambridge and even became a member of Parliament in 1627. In 1625, he established a community Little Gidding among some close relatives. They were committed to praying the Daily Offices and service to the local community. He was ordained deacon in 1626 and even Charles I visited the community. Sadly, after his death the Puritans destroyed most of his manuscripts and the community was disbanded (Love’s Redeeming Work, 163).

A Thanksgiving Prayer

*Thou hast given us a freedom from all other affairs that we may without distraction attend thy service. That Holy Gospel which came down from heaven, with things the angels desire to look into, is by Thy goodness continually open to our view; the sweet music thereof is continually in our ears; heavenly songs are by thy mercy put into our mouths, and our tongues and our lips made daily instruments of pouring forth thy praise. This, Lord, is the work of, and this the pleasure of angels in heaven; and dost thou vouchsafe to make us partakers of so high a happiness? The knowledge of thee and of thy Son is everlasting life. Thy service is perfect freedom; how happy are we that thou dost constantly retain us in the daily exercises thereof.*

**For further reading:**

*A Choice of George Herbert’s Verse* (with an introduction by R.S. Thomas) London: Faber, 1967.

*Love’s Redeeming Work, the Anglican Quest for Holiness,* ed. Geoffrey Rowell, et al. Oxford: OUP, 2001.

*New Oxford Book of English Verse*. Ed. Helen Gardner, Oxford: OUP, 1972.

*Private Devotions of Lancelot Andrews,* tr. John Henry Newman Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950.

*The Story Books of Little Gidding,* ed. E.C. Sharland. London, 1899.