

Jasper



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MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Poem of the day:

“Love”

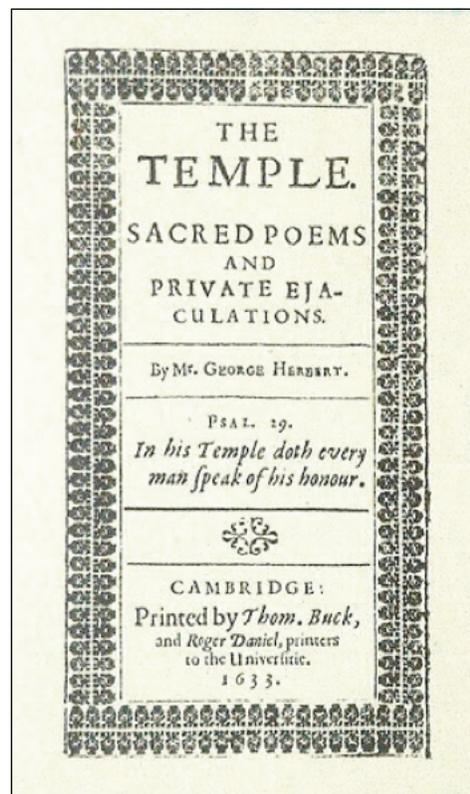
by George Herbert

The philosopher and mystic Simone Weil died before she was baptized into the Catholic faith she had come to accept with her mind and heart. It was during World War II, and she was in exile in England from her native land, France, and in exile *with* her people by flesh and blood, the Jews. She didn't believe that she should enjoy the fruits of conversion while her people were being persecuted and slaughtered in the concentration camps. Instead she fasted to show that she was still one with them. She died young, and her death was probably hastened by the discipline she made herself suffer.

Simone Weil kept a certain poem on her person at all times. It wasn't in French or German, but in English. It is simply called “Love,” and is the final poem in *The Temple*, a profound volume of religious poetry by George Herbert, who I think is the most brilliant lyric poet in the English language, period. Herbert also died fairly young, and probably also from the strain of the life he chose. He had left behind his prospects

for a fine and easy career in the English court, to become a clergyman, and his parish was in the rural country of Kent, his flock scattered far and wide. Many was the time when Mr. Herbert could be seen walking the long miles, in all kinds of weather, to visit the sick and tend to the poor.

We think sometimes that it should be easy, this faith of ours, and that we might step out to heaven just as we go to the kitchen to fetch a dish of ice cream, or as we walk in line at Communion, take the host, and return to our seat, with a pleasant sense that we have done the right thing, though we never think too hard about what that right thing is. Herbert asks us to think about it. His poem is short and its words are clear. Here are the first two of its three stanzas:



Love bade me welcome, but my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lacked anything.

“A guest,” I answered, “worthy to be here.”

Love said, “You shall be he.”

“I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,

I cannot look on thee.”

Love took my hands, and smiling made reply,

“Who made the eyes, but I?”

That’s not so difficult, is it? But it strikes you right in the heart. The person of Love is no other than Jesus, and the feast to which he welcomes the hesitant soul is the great wedding feast of the Lamb, the Kingdom of God itself, in celebration. So you enter that feast, as you

might draw near to the sanctuary of a church.

But then you grow “slack.” You look for a way out. Why? Partly it’s because your love is kind of weak, and partly

it’s because you know, as this soul does, that you do *not* really deserve to be there. You have been unkind to God and ungrateful, and you know it. But Love will take you by the hand anyway.

Here you might say, “Then everything is all right!” It isn’t, not yet. Don’t we see the infinite distance between our grubby selves and the perfect purity of Love? So the soul wants to retreat. Think about what that means. If you hold back from the Kingdom of God, there is only one other place for you at last. That’s where the guilty and

embarrassed soul wants to go, but Love won’t let him get away:

“Truth, Lord, but I have marred them; let my shame

Go where it doth deserve.”

“And know you not,” says Love, “who bore the blame?”

“My dear, then I will serve.”

“You must sit down,” says Love, “and taste my meat.”

So I did sit and eat.

“Even that last little unwillingness must be overcome: our unwillingness to receive the gift of the Eucharist in its fullness, because we know we don’t deserve it.”

Even that last little unwillingness must be overcome: our unwillingness to receive the gift of the Eucharist in its fullness, because we know we don’t deserve it.

The soul agrees to serve at the table, like a waiter, but the Lord of Love says no, he must give in. He must give in to the feast. He must be an honored guest. No fleeing with a grimy mortal coat into the darkness outside.

So let us sit and eat. And let us hope that Simone Weil, despite *her* hesitation, did the same.



Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

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