

But since our Saviour's death did put some blood
 Into thy face;
 Thou art grown fair and full of grace,
Much in request, must sought for as a good.

For we do now behold thee gay and glad,
 As at doomsday;
 When souls shall wear their new array,
And all thy bones with beauty shall be clad.

Therefore we can go die as sleep, and trust
 Half that we have
 Unto an honest faithful grave;
Making our pillows either down, or dust.

Death, page 86

Death is a reality - more of a reality to Herbert and people in the seventeenth century, than it is to us. More death, more suffering, and not hidden away in a hospital or a hospice (though COVID19 is changing all that. There is so much pain this year). The groans, the bones, the open mouths. For Herbert, as a parish priest, death was a familiar acquaintance. No doubt, on many occasions, he had sat with dying and with death. No doubt the Sexton in his churchyard turned up bones as he dug a grave - I wonder how many people lie in the graveyards that surround our churches; men, women and children who sat and prayed in the churches where we (usually) sit and pray.

The first three verses of his poem are practical. The open mouth, the dust and bones, "the shells of fledge souls left behind" - empty egg shells, no more than that. "Dust thou art, and to dust thou shalt return".

The last three verses take death in the context of Jesus' death and resurrection. "But since our Saviour's death did put some blood into thy face" - I have seen the difference a blood transfusion makes to someone very ill, bringing back their life and colour - Herbert would not have experienced that. But he can imagine how life can return to a dead face - Christ's death brings colour back to cheeks, because death brings us to the presence of God.

Death is "much in request", the recipient of many invitations, because death is now the pathway to life. We know many people who, as illness drags on, as the years pass by, are looking forward to death - sometimes simply because it will be an end to pain, suffering and tiredness, but for those of us with faith, that it will lead to something better.

Death is "gay and glad", something marvellous - it is a happy doomsday, when the dead rise again, when bodies are resurrected, when life is renewed, when we meet our loved ones again. A physical resurrection - "all thy bones with beauty shall be clad" (this in the days before cremation, when burial, when physical remains, can be re-clothed, renewed, come alive again. Our understanding of physical resurrection has changed in the last 400 years, but we still believe we will meet our loved ones again).

"We can die as sleep". In a normal Easter, Saturday is a long day and Sunday will be even longer. There is nothing better, at the end of a long day, than to stretch out, or to snuggle down under the duvet, bury your head on the pillow, and let sleep bring you the peace and healing you need. Christ has promised us, by his death and resurrection, that we will wake. Until then, whether our pillows are down or dust, we can rest in the Lord.

Like yesterday, we have a beautiful piece of music to reflect on something dreadful.

Ex Ore Innocentium

It is a thing most wonderful,
Almost too wonderful to be,
That God's own Son should come from heav'n,
And die to save a child like me.

And yet I know that it is true:
He chose a poor and humble lot,
And wept, and toiled, and mourned, and died,
For love of those who loved him not.

I sometimes think about the cross,
And shut my eyes, and try to see
The cruel nails and crown of thorns,
And Jesus crucified for me.

But even could I see him die,
I should but see a little part
Of that great love, which, like a fire,
Is always burning in his heart.

And yet I want to love thee, Lord;
O light the flame within my heart,

And I will love thee more and more,
Until I see thee as thou art.

Words: William Walsham How, 1823-1897

Music: John Ireland, 1879-1962

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_t7b9qtMFI

The Choristers of Canterbury Cathedral