The C17th poet George Herbert was an exceptionally gifted scholar who held important positions at Cambridge University in the 1620s. For a short time he served as Member of Parliament for a fine place called Montgomery on the English/Welsh border, and was viewed favourably by King James I. However, after king’s death he abandoned secular ambitions, took Holy Orders, and spent what remained of his life as rector of a small parish near Salisbury,

He wrote a famous piece of prose describing the pastoral role of the clergy and he tended towards a Catholic, sacramental approach to the liturgy. He truly cared for his parishioners and he understood their concerns. He also committed many of his own religious thoughts to poetry.

One poem in particular, comes to my mind every year on Maundy Thursday. It has a one word title: *Love*.

It reminds me in particular of Peter’s reluctance to allow Jesus to wash his feet. In feigning humility Peter comes perilously close to the sin of pride. He has great difficulty in submitting to Jesus’ act of kindness. We can only speculate on why he tries to excuse himself. If he thinks Jesus is far better than him, he is right; yet Jesus wants us all to know that true greatness is always an expression of love. Or maybe he considered himself too sinful and undeserving of such an act. But Jesus is intent on breaking down all barriers between sinful humanity and the mercy of God.

I sometimes imagine that George Herbert had Peter in mind when he wrote this poem. It is as if Peter himself is telling of his struggle to accept an invitation to sit at table and be waited on by Love incarnate. He tries all kinds of excuses but each is deftly dismissed by Love until Peter submits.

As we listen to the poem we may identify ourselves with the reluctant guest. We have our own misgivings about trusting God’s Love. We are all too aware of our personal shortcomings and still afraid to truly admit the vulnerabilities which lurk beneath the surface of daily life.

But we too are invited to sit down at Love’s table. To feast on Love’s provisions and rejoice in Love’s company.

But perhaps our resistance will one day melt away; we will know ourselves to be helpless and surrender to Love in ways that free us to love in return.

So, to the poem, and I know I must have used it previously, for like all truly beautiful poem it bears repetition:

Love bade me welcome. Yet 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 hand, and smiling did reply,

‘Who made the eyes but I?’

‘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. © pcm 2017