

George Herbert, as one would expect of a priest, puts public prayer first, although being unable to resist confessing the enchantments of private prayer. The latter are frequently quoted, the former rarely, but we would do well to read what he said for it might improve our services. How I dislike the ‘barked out’ responses: this is the Anglican writer Ronald Blythe considering public as opposed to private prayer in Under a Broad Sky – that is, under the skies of East Anglia which he so loved. And here is what Herbert said:

*Though private prayer be a brave design,
 Yet publick have more promises, more love:
 and love’s a weight to hearts, to eies a signe.
 We are all but cold suitors: let us move
 Where it is warmest. Leave thy six and seven,
 Pray with the rest: for where most pray is heaven.*

(pp.69-71)

Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the heart of Jewish prayer; to the place, one might say, where Jewish prayer was thought to be most valid. This presentation is a very public act though confused by the gentile Luke, with the Jewish rite of purification or, perhaps, not so, as it allows Luke to both highlight Jesus as the one who will validate the Temple, and Mary as the knowing, and yet unknowing, mother, prefiguring Jesus in his coming to baptism, of which he has no need but does so because it is fitting, an example for us to follow, a validation of public ritual as the fruit of private prayer. You are hearing a Benedictine perspective here, too, where prayer in common, ‘in ordinarie’, matters more, or at least as much, as prayer in private – it’s what we’re for and *where it is warmest* though we may not always think so. Now, imagine, also, that this is Jesus as a single candle flame brought into the darkness of the world; a small guttering flame, easily blown out, but with the task of enlightening us all, of driving out that darkness so that we can see clearly once more and recover our original purpose, to image God as creatures; not to become angels, but fully human. And this is his priestly quality, to bring light and life to God’s people. But this priest will also be victim, attracting all the darkness to itself – and seemingly overcome: *a sign that is rejected; a sword that will pierce* Mary’s heart. One thinks of King Solomon’s test of the true mother; this is both Jesus and Mary sharing the wound of humanity, the depth of human love. And this solidarity is what saves us; because it is so total we learn of God’s total love for us. The guttering flame sets all alight.

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