# FIVE MYSTICAL WEEKS

A LENTEN JOURNEY OF WORDS AND MUSIC WITH GEORGE HERBERT AND RALPH VAUGHN WILLIAMS

# Recommended Recordings

Sir Thomas Allen (baritone), Corydon Singers, English Chamber Orchestra, Matthew Best (conductor), Hyperion 1990. Available on *Spotify* and *Youtube* Music. The accompanying essay to the cd gives a good introduction to Herbert and Vaughan William's cross the centuries collaboration. The pdf is available at: https://www.hyperion-records.co.uk/notes/66420-B.pdf

Another fine recording with Stephen Roberts, baritone, and music score and lyrics is available on Youtube here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huch5jFzsls

**Special thanks to:**
Neil Cockburn, Music Director, Christ Church Cathedral, Vancouver, who also recommends these programs introducing George Herbert (https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m0024lyy) and Ralph Vaughan Williams (https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01nr7f5)

Gerald Harder, Music Director, St. James', Vancouver, for recommending recordings of the Five Mystical Songs

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Reverend Liz Hamel for analysis of Vaughan Williams' musical techniques.

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# FIVE MYSTICAL WEEKS

## A LENTEN JOURNEY OF WORDS AND MUSIC WITH GEORGE HERBERT AND RALPH VAUGHN WILLIAMS

This is a study and a devotional that looks to increase our love for Christ's life within us and among us today. In 1911, the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams premiered Five Mystical Songs. They were five settings of poems by George Herbert, the 17th century metaphysical poet, from his large poem cycle "The Temple". Herbert is known for both a simple and profound lyricism; Vaughan Williams for a quality of music that is visionary and deeply felt.

Over five weeks, we will look at one song per week – its music and text. Each week will bring us on a journey of feeling, thought, and, yes, mystical vision. An introduction to the piece will be followed by an invitation to listen, reflect, and respond. Questions are available to prompt conversation or personal reflection. Journaling, whether drawing or writing, is encouraged. Take your time as you read, listen, reflect, and contemplate.

May this time be a reprieve from our tendencies to "watch what is worthless" (Psalm 119:37) and prepare us once again to recognize, hear, adore, and receive the Risen One.

Jessica Schaap
February 2025

# WEEK ONE
# NO.4 THE CALL - FROM "THE CALL"

**Read quietly through the poem.**
This is not the first song in the cycle but it is the first one for our study. It serves as our invitation to Christ – who is not named explicitly – to come as only Christ can in this season and at any time. The opening stanza references and interprets Jesus' words in John 14:6 – I am the way, the truth, and the life. The second to last line alludes to Romans 8:39 - which promises that nothing "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." Each stanza names and describes three qualities of Christ. Musically the song moves from quiet lilt to near ecstatic proclamation.

**Read the poem aloud.**

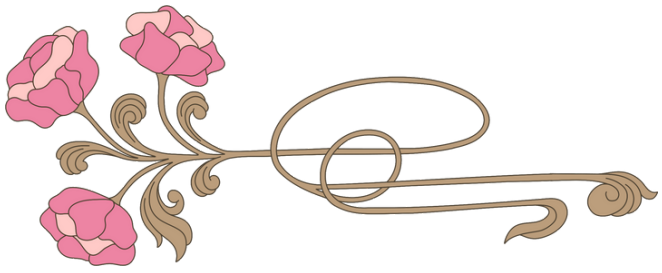
1. What line or line most moves you?
2. Was there a name and description of Christ that surprised you?
3. What does the repetition of "Such a" evoke in you? If you were to add a line beginning with "Such a... and then use a word to describe Christ how might you finish it?

**Listen to the song.**

1. What did you notice about the song? Did the music change or bring you on a journey? How and when?
2. Listen to the musical dynamics of the last verse. What moods or attitudes do they evoke in you?
3. What changed for you after reading the poem and then listening to the song?

During the week, listen to this song and read the poem as often as you like. Consider committing it to memory. You can sing it too. It's in the Common Praise hymnbook #569. Let it be your prayer whether you say it aloud in an armchair, sing along in your car, make drawings and doodles on it, or simply listen to it and let that be offered as a prayer. It is a prayer of adoration, a form of prayer we can neglect when needs press upon us, but one that gives our hearts new energy, hope and awareness of God's true character and action.

**Listen to the song again.**



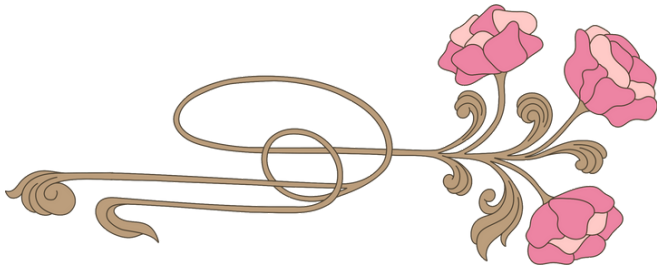
# NO.4 THE CALL - FROM "THE CALL"

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, my 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.





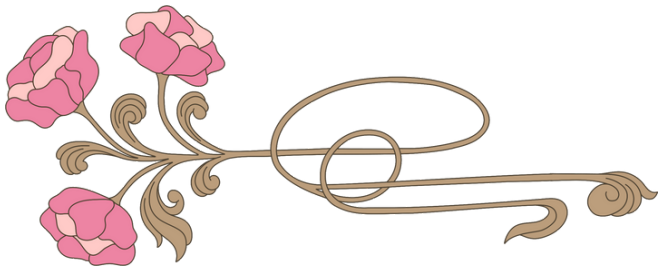
# WEEK TWO
# NO.2 I GOT ME FLOWERS - FROM "EASTER"

**Read quietly through the poem.**
What? No, we can't read about Easter yet. While this poem may seem a bit out of our seasonal order, we sometimes forget that in Lent, each Sunday remains a celebration of the resurrection as it is every other Sunday of the year. We are re-enacting the journey to the cross during this season but the fundamental process of the resurrection is the enduring reality of our life. This poem and song speaks to both our forgetting and to a glorious remembering of that reality. The poem begins with imagery that recalls Palm Sunday – "I got me flowers to strew thy way/ I got thee boughs" – the speaker is ready to adore and honour the Lord, but the action is flipped as the speaker realizes the Giver is already up and before him, already giving his "Sweets." That God acts first, moves towards us first, is a common theme in Herbert's poetry.

Then he profoundly reflects that the day of Christ's rising is the day of all days, a day of new creation that is even more powerful and life-giving than the sun of our solar system, even all the suns of our universe. 17th century poets loved to pun the Sun with Son. The day of resurrection is the revelation of the power that is the source of all that is. Christ's resurrection is the demonstration of what God and therefore ultimate reality is really like. There is nothing greater. We count our short days by the earth's turning but there is only one day – one reality – and that is what we call God – who is before, beside, and beyond us.

**Read the poem aloud.**

1. Can you relate to the speaker wanting to do something for God, but finding God is already there and offering gifts and blessing?
2. Can you imagine a power more reliable and enduring than the rising of the sun each day?
3. Does it bring Jesus closer to or farther from you to think he is the embodiment of the power that creates and sustains the universe?



*Continued from page 6*

**Listen to the song.**

1. What happened for you by the end of the song?
2. What did you notice musically, what instruments were prominent at the beginning and how did voices/instrumentation change, as the song progressed? What effect did that have?
3. Did the song affect your understanding of the poem? Did it affect your faith?

The last line of the song is a full-throated statement of faith - There is but one, and that one ever! Choose this line as your statement of faith and prayer for the week. Or if there is another line that comes to mind use that but keep it short. Let it be like a mantra: write it on a piece of paper and keep it with you; put it on your fridge or taped to your bathroom mirror. Try to say it aloud whenever you need or recall it. Listen to the song or read the poem when you need a reminder of its context. This week in Lent let your heart affirm the resurrection in whatever way you've been given to understand it.

**Listen to the song again.**

# NO. 2 I GOT ME FLOWERS - FROM "EASTER"

This is the second half of the poem. Vaughan Williams divided it up and wrote two different songs for each part of the text.

I got me flowers to strew thy way;
I got me boughs off many a tree:
But thou wast up by break of day,
And brought'st thy sweets along with thee.

The Sun arising in the East.
Though he give light, and th'East perfume;
If they should offer to contest
With thy arising, they presume.

Can there be any day but this,
Though many suns to shine endeavour?
We count three hundred, but we miss:
There is but one, and that one ever.

# WEEK THREE
# NO. 1 EASTER - FROM "EASTER"

**Read quietly through the poem.**

**Read the poem aloud.**

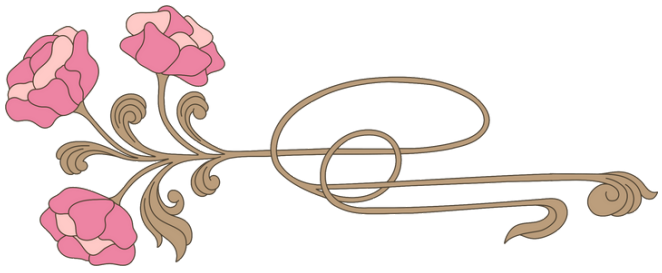
1. What line or image catches your mind and heart?
2. Herbert makes an extraordinary conceit using musical instruments. He suggests that any stringed one can make sound that is intimately connected to Christ's cross and stretched out body upon it. This conceit suggests a very high place for music being uniquely a vehicle for divine revelation and communication. How has music shaped your life of faith?
3. How is a justified (put in right relationship to God) life of much more substance than having a very valuable/golden life?

**Listen to the song.**

1. What did you notice first about this song?
2. Listen to the last line and notes of music 4:33-5:28. What do you notice about the music's progress after the words end? What do you notice about the last chord?
3. How would you describe all the moods of the song? Do they relate to your own faith journey?

This week's poem and song takes a little longer to grasp. We may find that our lack of familiarity with the lute or stringed instruments for that matter may make the poem's sentiments less accessible. If you can find or bring a stringed instrument of any kind and pluck and strum its strings, listen to its resonances – bring to mind Herbert's conceit and see what thoughts and feelings are evoked. Or, if you practice some other craft or art (writing, baking, painting, mechanics) try explicitly inviting the Spirit this week to be with you as you work.

**Listen to the song again.**



# NO. 1 EASTER - FROM "EASTER"

Rise heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise
Without delays,
Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
With him may'st rise
That, as his death calcined* thee to dust,
His life may make thee gold, and much more, just.

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part
With all thy art.
The cross taught all wood to resound his name,
Who bore the same.
His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key
Is the best to celebrate this most high day.

Consort both heart and lute, and twist a song
Pleasant and long;
Or since all musick is but three parts* vied
And multiplied.
O let thy blessed Spirit bear a part,
And make up our defects with his sweet art.

*calcined. reduced to lime or other basic substance. Also burned to ash or purified.
*three parts. Since all harmony is based on the common triad, the song of heart and lute also needs the Spirit. Note the triadic structure of the poem and the rhyming scheme (aabbcc).

# WEEK FOUR
# NO.5 ANTIPHON FROM "ANTIPHON (I)"

**Read quietly through the poem.**
The poem is a psalm that asks everything, from the human heart to the whole world to sing. It recalls Psalm 95:1-4, the psalm sung or said at Morning Prayer in the Book of Common Prayer and the Book of Alternative Services. This is also another well known anthem in the Anglican church. The title "Antiphon" refers to a versicle or sentence sung in response to another choir, creating a surrounding, immersive, dialogic experience of music. It could even be sung by the choir on this Sunday since it's known in Lent as Laetare Sunday – "Rejoice Sunday" – a day of celebration and anticipation of Christ's victory over the grave.

The Vaughan Williams' setting begins in a rush of anticipation with trumpets, drums and then tenors and basses booming.

**Read the poem aloud.**

1. What speaks to you personally about this poem? What speaks to you about the communal nature of praise?
2. Where and when does praise come to you naturally? How do you, or would like to, give expression to it?

**Listen to the song.**

1. What happens in your body when you listen to this song at a fairly loud volume?
2. How does the refrain of the song land with you?

Observe how things in the skies and on earth may be seen as offering praise. Consider how you would like to offer praise to the Creator this week. Through movement? Words? Song? Silent adoration? A work of some kind?

**Listen to the song again.**

# NO.5 ANTIPHON FROM "ANTIPHON (I)"

*Cho.* Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
*My God and King*.
*Vers*. The heav'ns are not too high,
His praise may thither fly:
The earth is not too low.
His praises there may grow.
*Cho.* Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
*My God and King*.
*Vers*. The church with psalms must shout,
No doore can keep them out:
But above all, the heart
Must bear the longest part.
*Cho.* Let all the world in ev'ry corner sing,
*My God and King*.

# WEEK FIVE
# NO.3 LOVE BADE ME WELCOME - FROM "LOVE (III)"

**Read quietly through the poem.**
The poem alludes to Luke 12:37 - Blessed are those slaves whom the master finds alert when he comes; truly I tell you, he will fasten his belt and have them sit down to eat, and he will come and serve them. Herbert renames "the master" Love and the slave becomes the beloved.

T.S. Eliot wrote of Herbert's poetry, "The great danger, for the poet who would write religious verse, is that of setting down what he would like to feel rather than be faithful to the expression of what he really feels. Of such pious insincerity Herbert is never guilty." These words certainly apply to this poem. The poet authentically imparts the genuinely difficult experience for many of receiving the breadth and depth of God's love. Vaughan Williams's setting does the same, even heightening the emotional and relational drama through phrasing, tone, and pauses.

**Read the poem aloud.**
1. Is there a part of the dialogue between Love and the speaker that you most strongly resonate with?
2. In addition to words said, what actions does Love make?
3. What do you notice about the poem's language overall?

**Listen to the song.**
1. What did you notice about the voice of Love and the voice of the Speaker/poet?
2. What was your favourite moment in the song? What did it evoke for you?
3. Williams has the choir wordlessly sing the melody of "O Sacred Convivium" an ancient hymn for the Eucharist at the end of the song. How does the Eucharist, if it does, give you an experience of Love?

We're at the end of our five mystical weeks in preparation for Holy Week and Easter. Bring all of your thoughts, emotions, and intentions from this devotional study to the week to come. See what new life emerges.

**Listen to the song again.**

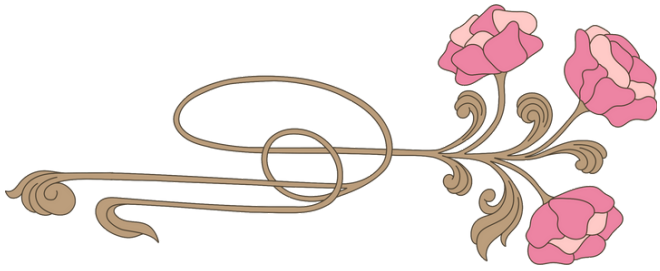
# NO.3 LOVE BADE ME WELCOME - FROM "LOVE (III)"

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 any thing.

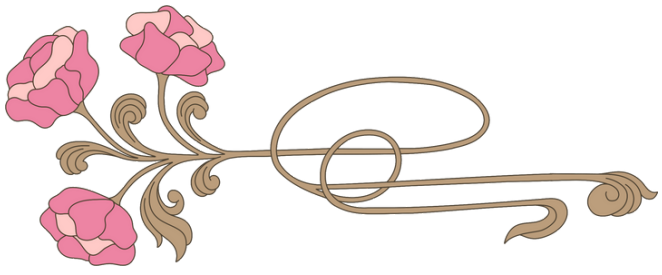
A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
Love said, You shall be he.
I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
I cannot look on thee.
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
Who made the eyes but I?

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.





# JOURNAL WITH WORDS OR IMAGES



# GEORGE HERBERT

George Herbert (1593-1633) was a 17th century Anglican priest who was born into a wealthy, artistic, and educated family and expected to have a brilliant and publicly successful career. While he excelled at school, becoming public orator at Cambridge University at age 27, and was a member of parliament at 31, he left his burgeoning career and pursued ordination. He became rector in 1629 of a two-point rural parish and lived in Bemerton with his wife Jane Danvers. They lived there with three adopted nieces while Herbert cared for his parishioners and wrote poetry of profound devotion. He only lived and worked there a few years however, dying from tuberculosis at the age of 39. His poetry, never published in his lifetime, he sent to his friend Nicholas Ferrar shortly before his death with the request to publish it if he thought they might "turn to the advantage of any dejected poor soul". He is celebrated in the Anglican Church of Canada's calendar on February 27.

# RALPH VAUGHAN WILLIAMS

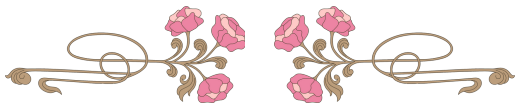
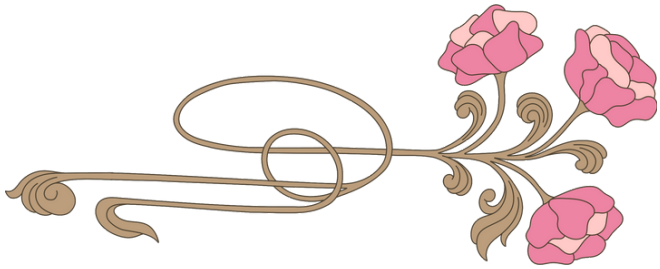
Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) was a 20th century British composer who did much to restore the reputation of English music and composition. He was born into a well off, progressive family and showed musical talent at an early age. He professed to be an atheist for a time, then was described as "cheerfully agnostic," but he wrote music of transcendent visionary power that was often inspired by Tudor religious music, the Authorized Version of Bible, and religious writing such as Pilgrim's Progress and George Herbert's poetry. He was a collector and researcher of English folk song and wrote music in many forms: ballet, opera, symphonies, choral, concertos, art songs. Several of his hymn tunes are still sung in churches today including: Come Down O Love Divine, For all the Saints, Hail thee, Festival Day, and Come my Way, My Truth, My Life. He died at age 85 after a brief illness.

# EMBARK ON A LENTEN JOURNEY OF WORDS AND MUSIC

Over five weeks, take time to reflect on the music and poetry of Ralph Vaughan Williams and George Herbert. Each week will invite a journey of feeling, thought, and, yes, mystical vision.

Herbert is known for both a simple and profound lyricism; Vaughan Williams for a quality of music that is visionary and deeply felt.

This resource is suitable for individuals and groups.



Jessica Schaap has been an ordained Anglican priest in the Diocese of New Westminster for over 16 years. She was rector of St. Paul's, Vancouver, and assistant priest at St. James', Vancouver. Since 2018, she has been the Missioner for Christian Formation for the diocese. Her mandate includes the development and support of Christian formation for all ages. She lives in East Vancouver with her spouse, daughter, one cat, and several bird feeders.