

Prayer of the Month • February 2017 • Robert Southwell

My tongue, O Lord, talketh of thee because I have no other means to satisfy my desire, but to keep and observe the respect that is due unto thy glory. My understanding humbleth itself, and casting her eyes downwards, saith that it is not able to endure so great brightness, and that if it think and talk of thee, it is not with intent to comprehend what thou art, but to inflame the will the more in thy flame, the heat whereof is now somewhat felt, and the clear light whereof shall be seen in thy Kingdom, enjoying thee amongst those angelical hierarchies, and multitude of thy elect, in that eternal bliss and celestial Jerusalem, which is thy glory, where thou livest and reignest for evermore. Amen.



St Robert Southwell c.1561-95

We can sense the keenness to praise the Lord right from the beginning, as the author writes 'My tongue ...'. He feels the intensity of relation to God, which makes him look down. He says he does not seek so much to understand God, which would be presumptuous, as to be motivated by such proximity, and he is impelled to look towards the brightness of eternal glory.

Robert Southwell, the youngest of eight children, was born in Horsham St Faith around 1561, and brought up in a family of Catholic gentry. In 1576 he was sent abroad, to be educated at the Catholic English college of Douai. By 1578 he had set off for Rome, intending to join the Society of Jesus. After two years probation he was allowed to join the Society. In spite of his youth, he was made prefect of studies in the Venerable English College at Rome and was ordained priest in 1584. In that same year an act of parliament was passed forbidding any English-born subject of Queen Elizabeth, who had entered into priests' orders in the Catholic Church since her accession, to remain in England longer than forty days on pain of death. However, Robert requested to be sent as a missionary to England. He ministered to various Catholic families and wrote several tracts, for six years until he was arrested at the house of Richard Bellamy near Harrow. He was imprisoned, and tortured a number of times over the next three years. He was put on trial for treason, and convicted of being a traitor, though he said he had only ministered the sacraments to those who wanted them. He was taken to Tyburn and executed in 1595. In his poem 'Life is but Losse' he views martyrdom as one of the sincerest forms of religious devotion. Southwell believed that he could use his writing to stir up religious feelings or passions, as in the prose work *Marie Magdalens Funeral Teares*, published late in 1591. Southwell was beatified in 1929 and canonized by Pope Paul VI as one of the Forty Martyrs of England and Wales on 25 October 1970. The Forty Martyrs are celebrated together with all the 284 canonized or beatified martyrs of the English Reformation on 4 May in the Catholic Church.

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