

Prayer of the Month • June 2011

Keep me, O Lord, while I tarry on this earth,
in a daily serious seeking after thee,
and in a believing affectionate walking with thee;
that when thou comest,
I may be found not hiding my talent,
nor serving the flesh,
nor yet asleep with my lamp unfurnished;
but waiting and longing for my Lord,
my glorious God, for ever and ever.

Richard Baxter 1615-1691

This prayer is a bit like a New Year resolution, a definite commitment from here onwards. The author is thinking about the distance between the present moment and the end of time when the Messiah will come in glory. As in the Advent theme of being prepared, Richard Baxter expresses the desire to make progress day by day and to be always ready. He refers to Jesus' statement about the servants at the wedding banquet (Luke 12.35), a verse that is also referred to in the hymn 'Ye servants of the Lord': 'Let all your lamps be bright, and trim the golden flame'. I admire the balance between 'serious' and 'affectionate' – this is a real relationship.

Richard Baxter was born in 1615 at Rowton, Shropshire. His early education was quite poor, but he set himself to study divinity, especially after the death of his mother. He was ordained and licensed by John Thornborough, Bishop of Worcester. Baxter took an interest in the controversy about nonconformity and the Church of England. He came to reject episcopacy, especially after the requirement of the 'et cetera oath'. Appointed as a preacher in Kedderminster at the age of twenty-six, he formed an association of ministers in the area, and also began to write theological works, generating over two hundred of them, including *The Reformed Pastor* (1656), which was described by Hensley Henson (Bishop of Durham), in 1925, as 'the best manual of the clergyman's duty in the language'. However, the work that made him Puritanism's favourite devotional writer was *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, which began life as a sermon for his own funeral, at a time when he was expecting to die imminently. He did however live for many more years, though in poor health, and continued to add to it – the full work runs to 800 pages. Baxter refused the bishopric of Hereford after the Restoration, and after the Act of Uniformity was passed (1662) he left the Church of England. He continued to cause controversy and was imprisoned for eighteen months convicted of having libelled the Church of England in his *Paraphrase of the New Testament* (1685). He died on 8 December 1691; his feast day in the Church of England calendar is 14 June.

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