

## Nicholas Ferrar Sanctity at Home

In May 1936 the poet, TS Eliot, visited an old manor house north of Huntingdon. It is fen country, it is the sky that you notice, and frankly there is precious little else to see in Little Gidding; just a manor house and a small chapel. Still, that visit was the prompt for the last of Eliot's *Four Quartets*, a poem called, inevitably, Little Gidding. It is pretty dense stuff, there are long books written about what it means. If you have not come across it, you may just possibly have heard it quoted,

You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid

*You are here to kneel, where prayer has been valid.* It was the little chapel that Eliot went to see, the little chapel and the memory of a man and his family who had lived there three hundred years before.

The man was Nicholas Ferrar. He was born in London in 1592 late in the reign of Elizabeth I; upper middle class, educated, he went to Clare College in Cambridge. Ferrar was talented and well-connected, his family had business interests in the Virginia Company; they were entrepreneurs exploiting the new American colony. He was elected as an MP. You get the picture, stylish, posh, and ambitious. If he was a Bristolian he would be a Merchant Venturer and read a lesson at the Carol Service. Then, in 1624, the Virginia Company lost its charter. Ferrar was blameless, but there had been mismanagement, some jiggery-pokery with accounts and there were rivals for the riches overseas. Suddenly the Ferrar family were thrust out of the fast lane. And Nicholas decided on a change of direction.

They bought the ramshackle manor house at Little Gidding in 1625, and began to restore house and chapel. Ferrar had always been devout, but now he took devotion seriously, made it a way of life. He was ordained deacon in London (he was never a priest) and then he moved and moved his extended family there. His mother, his brother and sister both married with children came too and others followed. The household fluctuated a bit, but 25-30 people lived at Little Gidding.

And this was a religious household. Now, we come to unfamiliar territory. Little Gidding in the 1660s is not a bit like Clifton in the twentieth century with everyone wearing ruffs and saying *Prithee* and *by my troth*. We would be strangers there, where there was no background noise, where the nights were properly dark, where children died in infancy of illnesses they could not name and where they brooded about God's providence. In that world Ferrar created a godly household with a rule of life. There were short services on the hour, every hour during the day. They read through all the psalms each day. There were also night watches and some of the community worked their way through the psalter again in the night. There was work in the garden, they ran a little school for local children and a surgery for the sick. They visited those in need. Ferrar himself oversaw a 'Little Academy' a sort of high-powered study group. And they also had an upmarket book binding business. Ferrar had a gift for friendship, there were letters and visits and when the poet, George Herbert, died he sent all his manuscripts to Ferrar wondering if they were of any

value or if they should be burnt. It's thanks to Ferrar that Herbert's poetry was published in 1633.

And that, largely, is the story of Nicholas Ferrar. He died in 1637 and he is buried just outside the chapel door. His community continued, a little fitfully, until his brother and sister died, within a month of each other in 1657. The house passed into other hands and he was only a dim memory when Eliot arrived on a midwinter day in 1936 and told us to pay attention - *You are here to kneel, where prayer has been valid*. It was Eliot who helped re-introduce Nicholas Ferrar when he was nearly forgotten.

So, why does Ferrar get a *commemoration* in the Church of England, and what on earth are we supposed to do with this slightly strange story?

Ferrar gets a commemoration because there is an edge to his story; an awkwardness that that is sometimes missed. If you read history books in bed you might have begun to wonder about where Ferrar fits in. He died in 1637 remember, within five years the English Civil war had broken out and religion was part of what they were fighting for. Ferrar was a high churchman; the chapel at Little Gidding was a thing of beauty with altar frontals, candles and silver. He used the services of the Church of England when puritans found fault with them, his faith was formal and he was loyal to the King. Charles came to Little Gidding after his defeat at Naseby. So, when you remember Ferrar, you remember a particular kind of faith. So particular was it that it got debated in Parliament. They called the house a nunnery and they were not being kind. They thought it was Popish, nasty, affected. Faith you see has loyalties and discontents. It is always *particular*.

And that is one of the really important points to make. You are going to hear about four saints over four weeks in Advent, all of them remembered in this month of December, and in each of them holiness was particular, distinct. Ferrar's piety is domestic, Ambrose another week was a politician, there's a social reformer and a man of silence. Don't overlook the variety. Holiness is not a club that has a tie and rules. Holiness is what happens when you connect your life and your faith. You can be holy and a tax inspector; you can be holy and a taxidermist. There is no one way you have to do this. Holiness is always particular; it is always yours not mine. It makes holiness interesting, 'How do you do it?' And it makes it tricky, 'Why on earth do you do it *like that*?' We can all be holy, but we will do it in different ways.

There is permission here, you can do it your own way. There is also a challenge to discern what your own holiness will be, no one can do that for you. If there is one thing I hope this little set of sermons does for you it is to give you permission to see that your holiness does not need to be like his, or hers. It needs to be yours.

Ferrar's holiness was a holiness of prayer and scripture. He was steeped in it, all those psalms all those offices. That is another challenge. I think we rather assume that the best prayers are heartfelt, personal, spontaneous. It is a nice idea, but the trouble with spontaneity is that it can never be routine, you cannot do it all the time. . I don't know about you, but before God I do not always feel spontaneous. Sometimes I feel tongue-tied, sometimes just downright shifty. Sometimes I am tired; sometimes my heart or my head are not in it. I discovered in the midst of Occupy that my prayers were broken for a while. That is when the prayers of the church help. The offices: Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer, the words that are given you they helped a lot. And so did the psalms. Take a look

at the psalms: they are written by people who are bewildered, cross, worried, frightened. They are untidy, awkward, they allow you to feel those things. If you find praying difficult hard try the offices, you can even get an app on your phone. Morning Prayer takes about fifteen minutes and there are shorter forms than that.

Pray the prayer of the church, like Ferrar, that might work for you. Remember that we each do holiness differently, but we still do it in company. At 8.30, most mornings, there is a ragamuffin assembly of God's own people in the chapel here in the cathedral. We could not be much more different from one another. We arrive in all states of mind. But for a few minutes we all say the same words. We manage to be different and together. Pray the prayers of the church. Don't despise them for not being your words; make them into your words.

It is what Ferrar did. Ferrar and the Little Gidding lived a Rule of life. There was a formal commitment to doing what they did. People do that still. There are people here in the congregation with a rule of life, pledged to certain routines. It is a good thing to do. It is one thing to do. Rules suit some of us and not others. You do not need a Rule, but you, all of us, probably need some routines or habits. Holiness, or at least the beginnings of a life of faith, does not depend on passion and conviction. Passion and conviction is quite tiring for us, and it is exhausting for those around us. Faith is habitual, like cups of tea and putting on your socks and we keep thinking it should be like poetry and sunsets. Ferrar knew it was habitual. Do not despise routines.

And Ferrar knew that the home, his own home was the theatre of faith. Wonderful as this place is, and Little Gidding (where prayer has been valid) and the shrine at Santiago de Compostella, faith and holiness are not heroic, they are ordinary, they are ours, they are domestic. Home is where prayer should be valid.

There is more, there is always more. There is a deep history of faith, a history of possibilities. Ferrar is just one voice calling us, asking us how our prayers can be valid. That is a good question for Advent.