

In George Herbert's 'The Temple' this poem comes at the end of a sequence of poems on the suffering and death of Jesus, which includes 'Good Friday', and is followed by poems on 'Easter'. A poem for the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday (often called Holy Saturday), it is a meditation on the burial of Jesus in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. The poem is built around the comparison between the stone tomb and our hard hearts – hearts of stone.

'Sepulchre'

O blessed bodie! Whither art thou thrown?  
No lodging for thee, but a cold, hard stone?  
So many hearts on earth, and yet not one  
Receive thee?  
Sure there is room within our hearts good store;  
For they can lodge transgressions by the score:  
Thousands of toys dwell there, yet out of doore  
They leave thee.

But that which shows them large, shows them unfit.  
What ever sinne did this pure rock commit,  
Which holds thee now? Who hath indited it  
Of murder?  
Where our hard hearts have took up stones to brain thee,  
And missing this, most falsly did arraigne thee;  
Onely these stones in quiet entertain thee,  
And order.

And as of old, the Law by heav'nly art  
Was writ in stone; so thou, which also art  
The letter of the word, find'st no fit heart  
To hold thee.  
Yet do we still persist as we began,  
And so should perish, but that nothing can,  
Though it be cold, hard, foul, from loving man  
Withhold thee.

Commentary

The poem is austere in form, but rich in biblical associations. It is addressed first to the body of Jesus, placed in a cold, hard stone tomb, but also to Jesus as a living person who can enter into our hearts and lives. It starts from the statement in Mark's gospel (15.46) that Joseph of Arimathea 'taking down the body (of Jesus), wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock'. The first stanza suggests that the body of Jesus is thrown into a cold hard stone tomb because our hearts are too full of other things to receive him. They are large enough ('good store') but filled up with 'thousands of toys' (trivialities) and 'transgressions' (breaking God's law). The idea that we have 'hearts of stone' comes from the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel (36.26).

By contrast, in the next stanza, the stone of the tomb is innocent, unlike us whose hearts are full of transgressions. Continuing to play with the theme of stone in the Bible, Herbert refers to an incident in John's gospel (10.31) when Jesus' hearers, angry at what he had said, 'took up stones to stone him', the traditional punishment for blasphemy. Herbert goes on to compare 'our hard hearts' with those who rejected Jesus and wanted to kill him in this way. By way of contrast the stone tomb, in a quiet and orderly way, received him – 'entertain' in the sense of entertaining a visitor to a meal.

The third stanza refers to the book of Exodus (31.18) where Moses was given 'the two tablets of the covenant, tablets of stone'. Jesus is described as 'the letter of the word': the detailed spelling out, the explanation of God's word, God's message to humankind. The poem is severe in its judgement of humanity, but all the way through the speaker includes himself as under the same judgement, speaking of 'our hard hearts' and 'we still persist'.

But Herbert ends the poem on a note of hope. Although 'we still persist' in a way that would lead to our destruction, nothing, however 'cold, hard, foul' it is, can stop Jesus from loving us. If we are moved to despair by the hardness of our own hearts, the assurance that Jesus loves us is our source of hope.