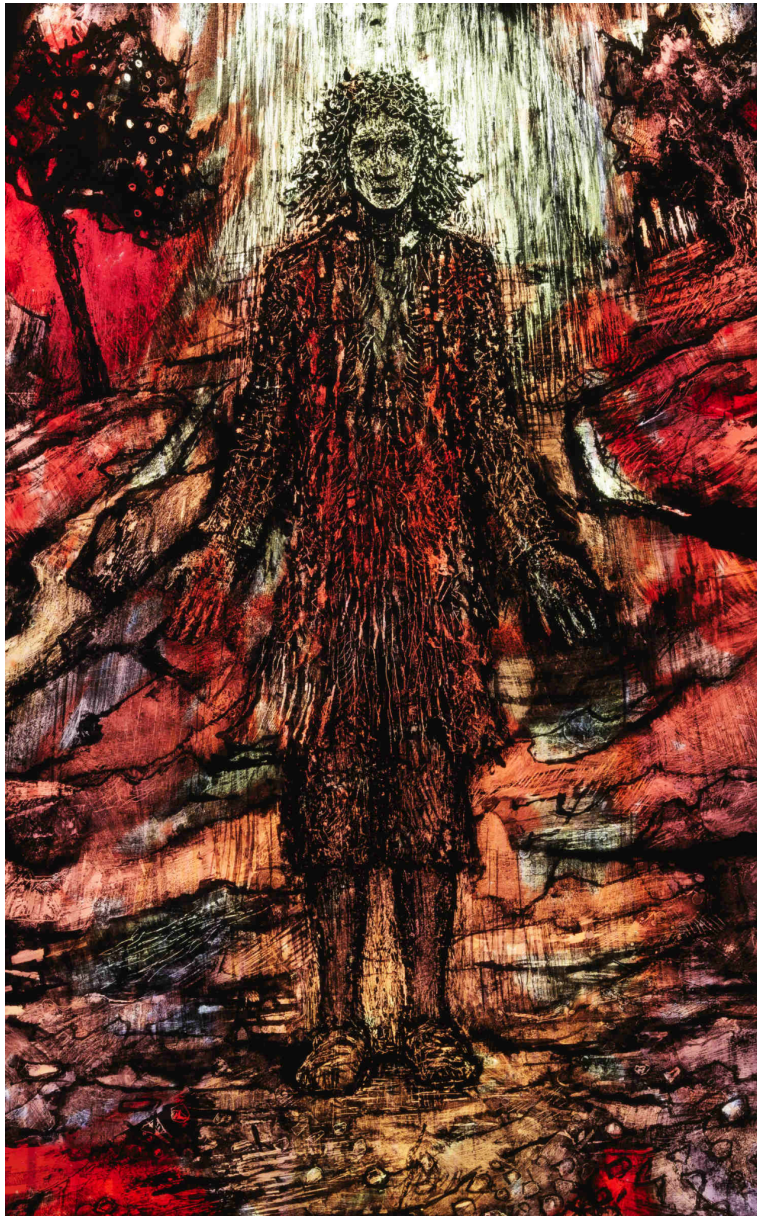


# Thomas Traherne

## Four Meditations for Advent



Thomas Denny's *Thomas Traherne windows*, Audley Chapel, Hereford Cathedral. Stained and painted glass, 2007.

Thomas Traherne was born in Hereford c.1637, the son of a shoemaker. Despite the vividness with which he writes about his experience of childhood, we know very few details about his life until his admission at Brasenose College, Oxford, on 1 March 1653. He was admitted BA on 13 October 1656, and in December 1657 he was sent back to Herefordshire to be the rector of Credenhill, just outside Hereford. He remained rector of Credenhill until his death in 1674, aged 37.

Traherne published a few things in his lifetime: a theological book called *Roman Forgeries*, which he dedicated to Sir Orlando Bridgeman, with whom he lived briefly in Teddington as his Domestic Chaplain in 1674. When Traherne died in 1674, he was also preparing his *Christian Ethicks* for the publication. Everything else we have of Traherne's writing has come down to us in manuscript form, via some amazing chance survivals: a book found on a London bookstall in 1896, one of 'a barrow of books about to be trashed' - first thought to be the work of Traherne's contemporary Henry Vaughan, it was later identified as Traherne's; another manuscript was rescued from a smouldering bonfire. Through the 20th century, more of Traherne's poetry and prose was found and identified, and we now have an amazing body of work from this lively thinker.

Traherne is famous for his writings on the ecstasy of childhood, and for his concept of 'felicity' (the happy coincidence of our need and God's grace). When our infinite need is met by God's infinite gift (as Traherne believed to be the case, however rarely we glimpse it), we enjoy felicity.

In Advent we think about expectation, exploring our want and need of God, waiting for the gift of the Incarnation. We also prepare to receive God as a child. Traherne gives us much to meditate on, on both these themes.

The key passages for each session are in red. The other readings are provided in case you wish to dive deeper with Traherne.

### **Further reading**

Denise Inge, *Thomas Traherne: Poetry and Prose* (2002, SPCK)

Graham Dowell, *Enjoying the World: The Rediscovery of Thomas Traherne* (1990, Mowbray)

Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditations* (The Faith Press, 1960)

<https://thomastraherneassociation.org/index.php>

<https://oxfordtraherne.web.ox.ac.uk/>

## Session 1: Enjoyment

*Traherne wrote vividly about memories of childhood: in particular, of a mystical sense of the goodness of the world, and of the joy of being in the world as a recipient and observer of God's creation.*

### Remembering childhood

**Centuries, 3.1** Will you see the infancy of this sublime and celestial greatness? Those pure and virgin apprehensions I had from the womb, and that divine light wherewith I was born are the best unto this day, wherein I can see the Universe. By the Gift of God they attended me into the world, and by His special favour I remember them till now. Verily they seem the greatest gifts His wisdom could bestow, for without them all other gifts had been dead and vain. They are unattainable by book, and therefore I will teach them by experience. Pray for them earnestly: for they will make you angelical, and wholly celestial. Certainly Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world, than I when I was a child.

**Centuries, 3.3** The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reaped, nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The dust and stones of the street were as precious as gold: the gates were at first the end of the world. The green trees when I saw them first through one of the gates transported and ravished me, their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things: The Men! O what venerable and reverend creatures did the aged seem! Immortal Cherubims! And young men glittering and sparkling Angels, and maids strange seraphic pieces of life and beauty! Boys and girls tumbling in the street, and playing, were moving jewels. I knew not that they were born or should die; But all things abided eternally as they were in their proper places. Eternity was manifest in the Light of the Day, and something infinite behind everything appeared which talked with my expectation and moved my desire. The city seemed to stand in Eden, or to be built in Heaven. The streets were mine, the temple was mine, the people were mine, their clothes and gold and silver were mine, as much as their sparkling eyes, fair skins and ruddy faces. The skies were mine, and so were the sun and moon and stars, and all the World was mine; and I the only spectator and enjoyer of it.

### Enjoying the world

**Centuries 1.28** Your enjoyment of the world is never right, till every morning you awake in Heaven; see yourself in your Father's Palace; and look upon the skies, the earth, and the air as Celestial Joys: having such a reverend esteem of all, as if you were among the Angels. The bride of a monarch, in her husband's chamber, hath too such causes of delight as you.

**Centuries 1.29** You never enjoy the world aright, till the Sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars: and perceive yourself to be the sole heir of the whole world, and more than so, because men are in it who are every one sole heirs as well as you. Till you can sing and rejoice and delight in God, as misers do in gold, and Kings in sceptres, you never enjoy the world.

**Centuries 1.30** Till your spirit filleth the whole world, and the stars are your jewels; till you are as familiar with the ways of God in all Ages as with your walk and table: till you are intimately acquainted with that shady nothing out of which the world was made: till you love men so as to desire their happiness, with a thirst equal to the zeal of your own: till you delight in God for being good to all: you never enjoy the world. Till you more feel it than your private estate, and are more present in the hemisphere, considering the glories and the beauties there, than in your own house: Till you remember how lately you were made, and how wonderful it was when you came into it: and more rejoice in the palace of your glory, than if it had been made but to-day morning.

**Centuries 3.23** Another time in a lowering and sad evening, being alone in the field, when all things were dead and quiet, a certain want and horror fell upon me, beyond imagination. The unprofitableness and silence of the place dissatisfied me; its wideness terrified me; from the utmost ends of the earth fears surrounded me. How did I know but dangers might suddenly arise from the East, and invade me from the unknown regions beyond the seas? I was a weak and little child, and had forgotten there was a man alive in the earth. Yet something also of hope and expectation comforted me from every border. This taught me that I was concerned in all the world: and that in the remotest borders the causes of peace delight me, and the beauties of the earth when seen were made to entertain me: that I was made to hold a communion with the secrets of Divine Providence in all the world: that a remembrance of all the joys I had from my birth ought always to be with me: that the presence of Cities, Temples, and Kingdoms ought to sustain me, and that to be alone in the world was to be desolate and miserable. The comfort of houses and friends, the clear assurance of treasures everywhere, God's care and love, His goodness, wisdom, and power, His presence and watchfulness in all the ends of the earth, were my strength and assurance for ever: and that these things being absent to my eye, were my joys and consolations, as present to my understanding as the wideness and emptiness of the Universe which I saw before me.

**Centuries, 4.37** Tis not change of place, but glorious principles well practised that establish Heaven in the life and soul. An angel will be happy anywhere, and a devil miserable, because the principles of the one are always good, of the other, bad. From the centre to the utmost bounds of the everlasting hills all is Heaven before God, and full of treasure; and he that walks like God in the midst of them, blessed.

## Questions for discussion (I)

1. Traherne places huge importance on 'enjoying' the world. What might that mean for you?
2. 'I the only spectator and enjoyer of it'. Traherne remembers a sense that the world was there *for him*. How does that sit alongside his awareness that other people are also 'sole heirs' of God's gift?
3. Are there times or places that have given you glimpses, like Traherne's, of God's blessing?

## Session 2: Eternity and Infinity

*Traherne had some beautiful ideas about eternity (God's infinite time) and infinity (God's infinite space). He felt that being made in the image of God meant that our soul somehow shares in eternity and infinity - although habit and culture prevent us from paying attention to this.*

**Centuries 5.3** Creatures that are able to dart their thoughts into all spaces can brook no limit or restraint; they are infinitely indebted to this illimited extent, because were there no such infinity, there would be no room for their imaginations; their desires and affections would be cooped up, and their souls imprisoned. We see the heavens with our eyes, and know the world with our senses. But had we no eyes, nor senses, we should see infinity like the Holy Angels. The place wherein the world standeth, were it all annihilated would still remain, the endless extent of which we feel so really and palpably, that we do not more certainly know the distinctions and figures and bounds and distances of what we see, than the everlasting expansion of what we feel and behold within us. It is an object infinitely great and ravishing: as full of treasures as full of room, and as fraught with joy as capacity. To blind men it seemeth dark, but is all glorious within, as infinite is light and beauty as extent and treasure. Nothing is in vain, much less infinity. Every man is alone the centre and circumference of it. It is all his own, and so glorious, that it is the eternal and incomprehensible essence of the Deity, A cabinet of infinite value, equal in beauty, lustre, and perfection to all its treasures. It is the Bosom of God, the Soul and Security of every Creature.

**Centuries 5.5** Infinity of space is like a painter's table, prepared for the ground and field of those colours that are to be laid thereon. Look how great he intends the picture, so great doth he make the table. It would be an absurdity to leave it unfinished, or not to fill it. To leave any part of it naked and bare, and void of beauty, would render the whole ungrateful to the eye, and argue a defect of time or materials, or wit in the limner. As the table is infinite so are the pictures. God's Wisdom is the art, His Goodness the will, His Word the pencil, His Beauty and

Power the colours, His Pictures are all His Works and Creatures. Infinitely more real and more glorious, as well as more great and manifold than the shadows of a landscape. But the Life of all is, they are the spectator's own. He is in them as in his territories, and in all these views his own possessions.

**Centuries 5.6** One would think that besides infinite space there could be no more room for any treasure. Yet to show that God is infinitely infinite, there is infinite room besides, and perhaps a more wonderful region making this to be infinitely infinite. No man will believe besides the space from the centre of the earth to the utmost bounds of the everlasting hills, there should be any more. Beyond those bounds perhaps there may, but besides all that space that is illimited and present before us, and absolutely endless every way, where can there be any room for more? This is the space that is at this moment only present before our eye, the only space that was, or that will be, from everlasting to everlasting. **This moment exhibits infinite space, but there is a space also wherein all moments are infinitely exhibited, and the everlasting duration of infinite space is another region and room of joys. Wherein all ages appear together, all occurrences stand up at once, and the innumerable and endless myriads of years that were before the creation, and will be after the world is ended, are objected as a clear and stable object, whose several parts extended out at length, give an inward infinity to this moment, and compose an eternity that is seen by all comprehensors and enjoyers.**

**Centuries 5.7** Eternity is a mysterious absence of times and ages: an endless length of ages always present, and for ever perfect. For as there is an immovable space wherein all finite spaces are enclosed, and all motions carried on and performed; so is there an immovable duration, that contains and measures all moving durations. Without which first the last could not be; no more than finite places, and bodies moving without infinite space. All ages being but successions correspondent to those parts of the Eternity wherein they abide, and filling no more of it, than ages can do. Whether they are commensurate with it or no, is difficult to determine. But the infinite immovable duration is Eternity, the place and duration of all things, even of infinite space itself: the cause and end, the author and beautifier, the life and perfection of all.

**Select Meditations 1.94.** Eternity is a sphere into which we enter, all whose parts are at once standing round about us. How else could all its parts before and after be objects present to the understanding..... How happy are we that live in a world so glorious, where Eternity is on every side a standing object of divine enjoyments for evermore!

**Select Meditations 1.95.** Tis we who are successive: Eternity is not so. Trees in a walk are passed by, though themselves stand still, and to him that runs seem to run backward. The moments stand, we move by, and cry that time passeth away.

**Select Meditations 1.93** God really bottleth all our tears. For they abide in the places where they fall, and in those moments wherein they were shed... are not all the parts of all eternity present at once to God; are not all their contents present in them, Is not all eternity present to our understanding, if not in us! How then shall it otherwise be that Gods eternity is a bottle like the heavens wherein the tears of penitents glitter like the stars, scattered at a distance, yet all before us.... The very knowledge of that shall increase my tears, sweeten my sorrow, alleviate yet augment and complete my repentance.

**Select Meditations 2.72** Until custom and eduction had bred the difference, it was as obvious to me to see all within us, as all without. As easy and as natural to be infinitely wide on the inside, and to see all kingdoms, times and persons within my soul, as now to see them in the open world. .... My soul, being like Him, did first expect to find all things in itself, before it learned to see them without it.

### Questions for discussion (2)

4. During Advent we think of beginnings and endings, Alpha and Omega, and eternity breaking into time. What do you make of Traherne's idea of eternity as 'a clear and stable object'?
5. 'God really bottleth all our tears.' What difference would it make to our experience of suffering, to believe that nothing is lost in God?
6. '... infinitely wide on the inside'. Do Traherne's ideas about the soul connect with your experience of prayer or meditation?

### Session 3: Wanting

*One of Traherne's distinctive ideas is that our neediness is not a bad thing, but rather the beginning of joy: to have a need, and have that need met, might be better than not having need in the first place. Our infinite need brings us closer to our infinite God.*

**Centuries 1.2** Do not wonder that I promise to fill it with those Truths you love but know not; for though it be a maxim in the schools *that there is no Love of a thing unknown*, yet I have found that things unknown have a secret influence on the soul, and like the centre of the earth unseen violently attract it. We love we know not what, and therefore everything allures us. As iron at a distance is drawn by the loadstone, there being some invisible communications between them, so is there in us a world of Love to somewhat, though we know not what in the world that should be. There are invisible ways of conveyance by which some great thing doth touch our souls, and by which we tend to it. Do you not feel yourself drawn by the expectation and desire of some Great Thing?

#### **Poem: Desire** (extracts)

v.1 For giving me desire,  
An eager thirst, a burning ardent fire,  
A virgin infant flame,  
A love with which into the world I came,  
An inward hidden heavenly love,  
Which in my soul did work and move,  
And ever, ever me inflame  
With restless longing, heavenly avarice,  
That never could be satisfied,  
That did incessantly a paradise  
Unknown suggest, and something undescribed  
Discern, and bear me to it; be  
Thy name forever praised by me.

v.5 This soaring, sacred thirst,  
Ambassador of bliss, approached first,  
Making a place in me  
That made me apt to prize, and taste, and see.  
For not the objects but the sense  
Of things doth bliss to our souls dispense,  
And make it, Lord, like Thee.  
Sense, feeling, taste, complacency, and sight,  
These are the true and real joys,



The living, flowing, inward, melting, bright,  
And heavenly pleasures; all the rest are toys;  
All which are founded in desire,  
As light in flame and heat in fire.

**Select Meditations 3.78** Man's humility and Gods highness are wedded objects to eachother. Let me see the nothing out of which I was taken and I shall see the glory to which I am exalted. ... While I contemplate the nothing out of which I was made, in the bottom of my being I see his glory. ... I more obliged to love his goodness for making me out of nothing: and he more exalted, while I obliged. He more pleased by how much the more I am delighted, and I more blessed, while he is pleased.

**Select Meditations 3.79** He that will happy be must see his wants, that he might see his treasures for his treasures. .... Our wants and treasures shall be forever present, casting a sweet reflection upon eachother... O, the abysses of endless eternity! O, the riches and depths that are in it. Where even wants themselves glitter in a fulness of eternal treasures. And are all present, though all supplied, that they might be the more seen.

**Commentaries of Heaven: Covetousness:** the Soul is naturally infinitely covetous, and fitly so. When it has lost its true treasures, it most greedily followeth the treasure of darkness.

**Centuries I.42** This is very strange that God should want. For in Him is the fulness of all Blessedness: He overfloweth eternally. His wants are as glorious as infinite: perfective needs that are in His nature, and ever Blessed, because always satisfied. He is from eternity full of want, or else He would not be full of Treasure. Infinite want is the very ground and cause of infinite treasure. It is incredible, yet very plain Want is the fountain of all His fulness. Want in God is treasure to us. For had there been no need He would not have created the World, nor made us, nor manifested His wisdom, nor exercised His power, nor beautified Eternity, nor prepared the Joys of Heaven. But he wanted Angels and Men, Images, Companions: And these He had from all Eternity.

**Centuries I.47** To have blessings and to prize them is to be in Heaven; to have them and not to prize them is to be in Hell, I would say upon Earth: To prize them and not to have them, is to be in Hell. Which is evident by the effects. To prize blessings while we have them is to enjoy them, and the effect thereof is contentation, pleasure, thanksgiving, happiness. To prize them when they are gone, envy, covetousness, repining, ingratitude, vexation, misery. But it was no great mistake to say, that to have blessings and not to prize them is to be in Hell. For it maketh them ineffectual, as if they were absent. Yea, in some respect it is worse than to be in Hell. It is more vicious, and more irrational.

### Questions for discussion (3)

7. 'This soaring, sacred thirst'. Does Advent help us to focus on this feeling of thirsting for God? When else do you feel it?
8. 'That he might see his treasures for his treasures'. What gets in the way of us 'counting our blessings'? Are there routines, practices or ideas that help you to be grateful?
9. 'You must want like a God that you may be satisfied like God. Were you not made in His Image?' Centuries I.44. Is this surprising - to see our neediness as part of our Godlikeness?

### Session 4: Returning

*Traherne's memory of his childhood is not melancholic or nostalgic: he believed that childhood showed him his truest self, and that this self is still accessible throughout life, in gratitude, in humility, and in 'felicity'.*

**Christian Ethicks**, 32.160. Thus when I see myself infinitely beloved, I conceive a Gratitude as infinite in me as all its causes.

#### **Poem: The Circulation** (extract)

All things do first receive, that give:  
Only 'tis God above,  
That from and in Himself doth live;  
Whose all-sufficient love  
Without original can flow  
And all the joys and glories shew  
Which mortal man can take delight to know.  
He is the primitive eternal spring  
The endless ocean of each glorious thing.  
The soul a vessel is,  
A spacious bosom, to contain  
All the fair treasures of His bliss,  
Which run like rivers from, into the main,  
And all it doth receive returns again.

**Poem: The Return**

To infancy, O Lord again I come  
That I my manhood may improve:  
My early tutor is the womb;  
I still my cradle love.  
Tis strange that I should wisest be  
When least I could in error see.

Till I gain strength against temptation, I  
Perceive it safest to abide  
An infant still: and therefore fly  
(A lowly state may hide  
A man from danger) to the womb,  
That I may yet new-born become.

My God, the bounty then did ravish me!  
Before I learned to be poor,  
I always did thy riches see,  
And thankfully adore:  
Thy glory and thy goodness were  
My sweet companions all the year.

**Poem: For man to act as if his soul did see**

For Man to Act as if his Soul did see  
The very Brightness of Eternity;  
For Man to Act as if his Love did burn  
Above the Spheres, even while it's in its Urne;  
For Man to Act even in the Wilderness,  
As if he did those Sovereign Joys possess,  
Which do at once confirm, stir up, enflame,  
And perfect Angels; having not the same!  
It doth increase the value of his Deeds,  
In this a Man a Seraphim exceeds.  
To Act on Obligations yet unknown,  
To Act upon Rewards as yet unshewn,  
To keep Commands whose Beauty's yet unseen,  
To Cherish and retain a Zeal between  
Sleeping and waking; shews a constant care,  
And that a deeper Love, a Love so rare,

That no Eye Service may with it compare.  
The Angels, who are faithful while they view  
His Glory, know not what themselves would do,  
Were they in our Estate! A Dimmer Light  
Perhaps would make them erre as well as We  
And in the Coldness of a darker Night  
Forgetful and Lukewarm Themselves might be.  
Our very Rust shall cover us with Gold,  
Our Dust shall sprinkle while their Eyes behold  
The Glory Springing from a feeble State,  
Where meer Belief doth, if not conquer Fate  
Surmount and pass what it doth Antedate.

#### Questions for discussion (4)

10. 'My early tutor is the womb; I still my cradle love.' With Traherne, we journey back to infancy. What might this add to the ways we think of Jesus' birth and infancy?
11. 'A Gratitude as infinite in me as all its causes'. Traherne seems to suggest that gratitude completes the circle of God's love. Is it always so easy?
12. 'Our very Rust shall cover us with Gold'. Traherne finds something beautiful in the way that humans are frail and fallen and yet (sometimes) act in faith and love. Is this the Incarnation - rust turning out to be gold?