

31st July 2020

Mystery

"I love to lose myself in a mystery, to pursue my reason *O altitudo!*"

Sir Thomas Browne, Religio Medici

Sir Thomas Browne was a 17th century English writer and physician who wrote *Religio Medici* (The Religion of a Doctor) in 1643. This spiritual and psychological self-portrait became a best-seller throughout Europe and brought the author fame at home and abroad. Throughout *Religio Medici* Browne uses scientific imagery to illustrate religious truths as part of his discourse on the relationship of science to religion, a topic which has lost none of its relevance. Yet, despite his attempts at proofs and explanations, he was able to say that he loved to lose himself in mystery as he took his thinking to *O altitudo* – to the ultimate. In other words, however far he got with explanations, Sir Thomas Browne was always left with mystery.

Life is full of mysteries, like: Why does the dentist talk to you when it's obvious you can't respond? Why is "abbreviation" such a long word? Why do cartoon characters wear the same clothes in every episode? Why do we collect a round pizza in a square box and then eat it in triangles? Why are there five syllables in the word "monosyllabic"? Why are children wide awake when they go to bed and too tired in the morning to get up? The list is endless! Not all the mysteries of life are open to explanation.

I've always tried to find something which pins down the "why?" of life's searching questions, not just about round pizzas and what words mean, but about life and love, heaven and hell, fulfilment and purpose, God and ... whatever. As a parish minister I saw it as my job; as a hospice chaplain I was aware how short a time people had to find answers to their questions. But the older I get, and especially in our lockdown, I'm becoming another Thomas Browne, content with "not knowing", and willing to "lose myself in a mystery". Do I stop questioning, and searching and trying to explain things? Not at all. Have I learned to worry less about what I know and become more comfortable with mysteries? Absolutely.

And why? Well, that remains a mystery, *O altitudo*, doesn't it?

A prayer for today

"Ah, sweet mystery of life at last I've found you ..."

And in that very moment of mystery, might I be closer to the nature of God?

An original reflection by © Tom Gordon

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