

THE PARISH CHURCH OF
ALL SAINTS
MARGARET STREET, LONDON



THE POETRY OF JOHN DONNE
HOLY WEEK ADDRESSES 2023

BY

THE RIGHT REVEREND THE BISHOP OF FULHAM

John Donne - an Introduction

John Donne was born in Bread Street (the street giving its name to the ward) in the City of London in 1572. His family were recusant Roman Catholics: his mother, Elizabeth Heywood, was the great-niece of St Thomas More. His father, also called John Donne, was a warden of the Worshipful Company of Ironmongers. The family had once been landed, owning extensive and magnificent estates; but these had all been confiscated by the Crown during successive persecutions by the Tudor monarchy of landowners who persisted in the old faith.

Donne was educated in London, then at Hart Hall - now Hertford College - in Oxford, and finally at Thavies Inn (which stood then opposite St Andrew's, Holborn to the south) before being admitted as a member of Lincoln's Inn on the 6th May 1592. A year later, in 1593, his brother Henry was arrested for harbouring a catholic priest: he died shortly afterwards in Newgate Prison.

Despite his Roman Catholicism, Donne's career progressed well. By the age of 25 he had been appointed as chief secretary to the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, Sir Thomas Egerton, whose London home was York House on the strand, close to the Palace of Whitehall, then the centre of the Queen's government and the hub of political life in London.

All of this fell apart very quickly. Donne fell in love with Egerton's niece, Ann More, and they were secretly married just before Christmas in 1601, in the teeth of opposition from both Anne's uncle and her father George More, who was the Lieutenant of the Tower of London. When the marriage was discovered, Donne was dismissed by Egerton and incarcerated in the Fleet prison (along with the Church of England priest who had conducted the marriage service.)

On his release, Donne went to live, with Ann, in a small country house in Pyford (near Woking in Surrey.) They moved to Mitcham in 1605. Ann bore him 12 children, though two were stillborn, and three more died before the age of 10.

After various political, diplomatic and other appointments in the service of the aristocracy and the Crown, Donne, very much at the King's prompting, accepted ordination to the priesthood in the Church of England: he had been moving steadily away from the Roman Catholicism of his family and upbringing to embrace the faith and practice of the established Church for some years, whether for pragmatic or principled reasons or, most likely, a combination of both, remains a matter of enduring interest and debate. In 1621, Donne was made Dean of St Paul's: the story, quite possibly apocryphal, relates that King James invited him to dinner, kept Donne standing and saying to him 'knowing you love London' awarded him the Deanery. The King then sent him away with the parting words, 'and much good may it do you.' In 1624, in addition to holding office as Dean of St Paul's, Donne was made Vicar of St Dunstan-in-the-West on Fleet Street, the church standing just a few hundred yards from the prison in which he had once been incarcerated.

Donne died in his own home on 31 March, 1631, and was buried in St Paul's. His stone effigy, in which he is depicted with eyes closed in death and wrapped in a shroud, is one of the very few monuments which survives from the old St Paul's destroyed in the Great Fire and which can be found in the Cathedral today.

The dazzling, witty, exuberant and erotic love poetry of Donne's early life remains popular and well-loved to this day. His sermons ('no man is an island entire of itself...therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee') are known about, but little read. His Divine Poems too, with one or two exceptions, are probably not much read nowadays. But it seemed to me that, drawing from among them, Donne - this poet and priest of London - could become for us a very suitable companion for our pilgrimage through Holy Week. As one of the greatest of scholars in field of Donne studies, Dame Helen Gardner, wrote: 'The image which dominates his divine poetry is the image of Christ as Saviour, the victor over sin and death.' And that is what Holy Week is all about.

For Palm Sunday

From Holy Sonnets (1633) – Divine Meditations no 7

Spit in my face you Jews, and pierce my side,
Buffet, and scoff, scourge, and crucify me,
For I have sinned, and sinned, and only he
Who could do no iniquity hath died:
But by my death can not be satisfied
My sins, which pass the Jews' impiety:
They killed once an inglorious man, but I
Crucify him daily, being now glorified.
Oh let me, then, his strange love still admire:
Kings pardon, but he bore our punishment.
And Jacob came clothed in vile harsh attire
But to supplant, and with gainful intent:
God clothed himself in vile man's flesh, that so
He might be weak enough to suffer woe.

Footnote: The mention of Jacob in line 11 refers to the story in Genesis chapter 27, in which Rebekah disguises her younger son Jacob so that they may deceive Isaac into thinking that it is Esau, Jacob's elder brother

For Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday in Holy Week

A Litanie – Sections I – III

I.

THE FATHER

FATHER of Heaven, and Him, by whom
It, and us for it, and all else for us,
Thou madest and govern'st ever, come
And re-create me, now grown ruinous.
My heart is by dejection, clay,
And by self-murder, red.
From this red earth, O Father, purge away
All vicious tinctures, that new-fashioned
I may rise up from death, before I'm dead.

II.

THE SON

O Son of God, who, seeing two things,
Sin and Death, crept in, which were never made,
By bearing one, tried'st with what stings
The other could Thine heritage invade;
O be Thou nail'd unto my heart,
And crucified again;
Part not from it, though it from Thee would part,
But let it be by applying so Thy pain,
Drown'd in Thy blood, and in Thy passion slain.

III.
THE HOLY GHOST

O Holy Ghost, whose temple I
Am, but of mud walls, and condensèd dust,
And being sacrilegiously
Half wasted with youth's fires of pride and lust,
Must with new storms be weather-beat,
Double in my heart Thy flame,
Which let devout sad tears intend, and let—
Though this glass lanthorn, flesh, do suffer maim—
Fire, sacrifice, priest, altar be the same.

Footnote: lanthorn is an archaic spelling for lantern.

For Maundy Thursday

From Holy Sonnets (1633 – Divine Meditations no 2

Oh my black soul! now art thou summoned
By sickness, death's herald, and champion;
Thou art like a pilgrim, which abroad hath done
Treason, and durst not turn to whence he is fled;
Or like a thief, which till death's doom be read,
Wisheth himself delivered from prison,
But damned and haled to execution,
Wisheth that still he might be imprisoned.
Yet grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lack;
But who shall give thee that grace to begin?
Oh make thy self with holy mourning black,
And red with blushing, as thou art with sin;
Or wash thee in Christ's blood, which hath this might
That being red, it dyes red souls to white.

Footnotes:

'durst' (line 4) means 'dares'

'haled' (line 7) means 'hauled' or 'dragged'

For Good Friday

From La Corona: 5 – Crucifying

By miracles exceeding power of man,
He faith in some, envy in some begat,
For, what weak spirits admire, ambitious hate :
In both affections many to Him ran.
But O ! the worst are most, they will and can,
Alas ! and do, unto th' Immaculate,
Whose creature Fate is, now prescribe a fate,
Measuring self-life's infinity to span,
Nay to an inch. Lo ! where condemned He
Bears His own cross, with pain, yet by and by
When it bears him, He must bear more and die.
Now Thou art lifted up, draw me to Thee,
And at Thy death giving such liberal dole,
Moist with one drop of Thy blood my dry soul.

Footnote:

'liberal' in line 13 means 'plentiful' and 'dole' means a portion or share of food or money given to a poor person; but it can also mean someone's lot or destiny in life

For the Easter Vigil and First Mass of Easter

From La Corona: 6 – Resurrection

Moist with one drop of thy blood, my dry soul
Shall (though she now be in extreme degree
Too stony hard, and yet too fleshly,) be
Freed by that drop, from being starved, hard, or foul,
And life, by this death abled, shall control
Death, whom thy death slew; nor shall to me
Fear of first or last death, bring misery,
If in thy little book my name thou enrol,
Flesh in that long sleep is not putrefied,
But made that there, of which, and for which 'twas;
Nor can by other means be glorified.
May then sin's sleep, and death's soon from me pass,
That waked from both, I again risen may
Salute the last, and everlasting day.

For Easter Day

From Holy Sonnets (1633) - Divine Meditations no 6

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate
men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

