
The Feast of John Donne in the Year 2020

An article for the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler

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It was good, so good, this week that on March 31, 2020, we keep the feast of John Donne! John Donne is one of my personal heroes, because he was what I aspire to be: a strong poet and a devoted dean (though he was a *brilliant* poet!). He died as dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, in London, in 1631.

Here is a quick review: Brought up a Roman Catholic just after the English Reformation, John Donne (born 1573) did not intend to become a priest or a theologian. He studied law and apparently had a way with women. His early poetry surely reflected that tendency, and his is still held as an example of superb love poetry! (Read the bawdy "To His Mistress On Going to Bed"!.) When he fell in love with (the young) Anne More, her family did not give consent to a marriage, and so he eloped with her. Her father, therefore, threw Donne into prison. (He wrote, from prison, the short epigram: "John Donne, Anne Donne, undone.".)

It was only later that their marriage was declared valid. Still later, a friend urged ordination, and so he was ordained in 1615. Sadly, in 1617, his beloved wife died, five days after the birth of their twelfth child together. Donne would go on, however, to become dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, London, and write some of the most sublime poetry of England.

Well, on this March 31, 2020, we are living in a time of both disease and imprisonment. The COVID-19 illness has infected all of us, either with the virus itself or with the fear of it and the precautions against it. We, all of us, are affected by the disease. We are also affected by a kind of prison: our homes! Most of us are confined to our homes voluntarily, but still our homes can seem like prisons to us. We are stuck.

In this situation, read John Donne! John Donne knew of love and prison and illness. And he wrote deeply and powerfully about the presence of God in all those conditions. When he lay ill in his older years, he wrote (in *Hymn to God, My God, In My Sickness*):

I joy that in these straits I see my west;
For though their currents yield return to none,
What shall my west hurt me? As west and east
In all flat maps (and I am one) are one,
So death doth touch the resurrection.

But Donne may be most well known by words which ring true, so true, today, from his Meditation 17, *NUNC LENTO SONITU DICUNT, MORIERIS* [Now this bell tolling softly for another, says to me, Thou must die.]

Perchance he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill as that he know not it tolls for him; and perchance I may think myself so much better than I am, as that they who are about me and see my state may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that.

The church is catholic, universal, so are all her actions; all that she does, belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that body which is my head too, and ingrafted into that body whereof I am a member. And when she buries a man, that action concerns me.

... As therefore the bell that rings to a sermon calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come, so this bell calls us all; but how much more me, who am brought so near the door by this sickness.

... No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

This week, on March 31, 2020, we know again the same thing that John Donne knew: no person is an island. We are connected. Sorrow and joy affect us all. Love affects us all. In all those conditions, God, our holy and passionate God, ravishes us wherever we are, in prison or in illness or in joy or in love. Batter my heart, three-person'd God!

AMEN.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Sam Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip