
A Re-visit to the Feast of John Donne

An article for the *Cathedral Times* by the Very Rev. Sam Candler

March 31 is upon us again, and I take the opportunity to remember John Donne again. His feast day is March 31. I wrote about him two years ago, just as the COVID pandemic descended upon us, but I repeat some of that same material this year. John Donne is one 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.

Two years ago, on March 31, 2020, we were being introduced to a time of both disease and imprisonment. The COVID-19 illness had infected all of us, either with the virus itself or with the fear of it and the precautions against it. We, all of us, were affected by the disease. We were also affected by a kind of prison: our homes! We were stuck.

In that situation, I 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, this year, 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 year, on March 31, 2022, with the agony of Ukraine on our hearts, we realize again the same thing that John Donne knew: no person is an island. We are connected. Sorrow affects us all, and “any person’s death diminishes me because I am involved in humankind.” But love affects us all, too. In both those conditions, may God, our holy and passionate God, touch us wherever we are, in prison or in illness or in sorrow or in love. Batter my heart, three-person’d God!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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