

Address at Festal Evensong
for
The Celebration of the 400th Anniversary of the Chapel
Wednesday 18 October 2023
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'This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.' (Gen. 28: 17)

'St Basil, in a sermon upon the 114th Psalm, upon the like occasion as draws us together now (the consecration of a church) makes this the reason and the excuse of his late coming thither to do that service: that he stayed by the way to consecrate another church. I hope every person here hath done so — consecrated himself . . . before he came to assist, or to testify, the consecration of this place', [for] 'this festival belongs to us because it is the consecration of that place which is ours . . . but it is more properly our festival, because it is the consecration of ourselves to Gods service.'

Those were the first words that John Donne spoke in his sermon for the consecration of this place 400 years ago; I have no doubt that he would have said the same if he were back in this very same pulpit today. When Donne preached that sermon he had been a member or friend of this honourable society for almost 30 years: first as a rakish student, and, after ordination, for 5 years as its Preacher. In that latter capacity he was given rank in the Society's hierarchy equal to that of the Senior Barristers, along with the not insignificant salary of £60 a year, dining rights at the Benchers' table, and a study. In return he was expected to preach morning and evening every Sunday during the law terms, once on the Sundays before and after each term, and on the four feast days kept annually with special

solemnity by the Inn, as well as during two short learning vacations - all told, about 50 sermons a year, something not quite as nugatory as it might sound given the standard of learning expected in them, and the convention that any sermon, regardless of who it was for or where it was preached, was to last exactly one turn of the hourglass. Those hours spent in this pulpit fostered a mutual love between him and the Inn that made for affectionate parting when in 1621 he resigned the Readership to accept crown appointment to the deanery of St Paul's. Donne inscribed and presented to the Inn's library a fine 6-volume edition of the Vulgate Bible, and for their part the Benchers minuted that, though they were happy for his preferment to St Paul's, they were 'yet . . . loath wholly to part with him', and so granted Donne the continued use of his study, and all of the domestic privileges 'as the Masters of the Bench now have'.

Part of the Benchers' affection for Donne no doubt had much to do with what a foster-father he was to this building. In his own words from the consecration sermon: 'I . . . by your favours was no stranger to the beginning of this work, and an often refresher of it to your memories, and a poor assistant in laying the first stone (the material stone) as I am now a poore assistant again in this laying of this first formall Stone (the word & sacrament), and shall ever desire to be so in the service of this place'. The material cornerstone that Donne laid is still in place. Also surviving as testament to Donne's role as an 'assistant' to it are the consecration sermon, printed at the Benchers' command within weeks of its delivery, and an earlier sermon, printed only after his death with the title, 'Preached at Lincoln's Inn, preparing them to build their Chapel', delivered we assume at about the time of the order to clear the site that is printed in your service sheet. Both sermons took texts traditionally read at the dedications of churches: for the first, a part of the story of Jacob's Ladder, read this evening as our second lesson, and for the consecration sermon the short, and to us perhaps odd, John 10: 22: 'And it was at Jerusalem, the Feast of the Dedication; and it was Winter; and Jesus

walked in the Temple in Salomons Porch.' Neither of those sermons, it must be said, has ever been high on anyone's list of Donne's greatest. For those who appreciate his pulpit oratory for its great flights of metaphor and other emotionally heightened rhetorical flourishes they feel somewhat flat. For those who read Donne's sermons with more of an historical interest in their engagement with the religious politics and controversies of his day, they also come up a bit short, since Donne goes out of his way in them to avoid exactly those things. The reason for both characteristics is probably the same, and might strike us as rather odd four-hundred years later. And that was the deep anxiety in the Jacobean Church of the England about how, and even whether, to consecrate churches. That story is a long and complex one, but suffice it to say that ritually consecrating material things looked to Protestants far too much like Roman Catholic superstition. The authors of the *Book of Common Prayer* had avoided the issue entirely by including no mention, much less any liturgy, for consecrations, and, since no new parish churches had been built in England in Elizabeth's long reign, it was left to later bishops to feel their way, indeed to invent ways to meet the desire of the nobility to have chapels consecrated in their new great houses, and of flourishing private institutions like the Inns and Oxbridge colleges to have bigger, newer ones. As with any pre-Reformation Catholic ritual practice scrutinised by Protestants for possible retention of it, the litmus test for legitimate church consecrations was Scriptural authority; so, not for nothing did Donne choose as his texts for his two chapel-building sermons the two biblical passages that for Protestants provided the necessary biblical precedent: Jacob erecting a stone to mark the 'house of God' and 'gate of heaven', and, from the New Testament, that almost incidental observation in John's Gospel about Christ walking in the Temple on the feast of its dedication, which was interpreted as a crucial endorsement by Christ himself of not just dedications, but also of feasts in honour of their anniversaries.

In interpreting those two biblical texts, Donne, to be sure, ticked all of the boxes necessary to defend the emerging consensus on the proper - which is to say not superstitious - dedication of churches and chapels. But very noticeable in both of Donne's chapel-building sermons is his clear desire not to say very much about the material building itself, but instead to address the individuals who would build and worship in it. He does this, I think, not because he was shy of controversy or not committed to the dedication of material churches, but because he knew that they were for naught without the edification first of every believer's soul — which is why, after allowing for some differences between our age and his in the ways of expressing it, the core message of Donne's sermons in preparing the Inn to build, and then to consecrate this beautiful place, would - and surely should - be the same as we mark its 400th anniversary.

The 1618 sermon 'in preparing' for building the chapel is in some ways, as you might expect, an early example of a fund-raising sermon. At its opening Donne drily observed about Jacob's little construction project that "though such a house as *Jacob* built then, require no contribution, yet because such *Churches*, as we build now do, we shall first say a little, of that great virtue of *Charity*'. But, being Donne, he then came at his charitable pitch obliquely, indeed awkwardly, with the startling observation (citing St Augustine) that the poor exist 'only to present rich men exercise of their charity, and occasions of testifying their love to Christ'. He even goes on to argue that there is a way for the rich to exercise charity if they are 'not sensible of other men's poverties, and distresses.' But listen to how Donne says that someone can be charitable without thinking of others:

have mercy on thine own soule; thou hast a poor guest, an inmate, a sojourner, within these mud walls, this corrupt body of thine; be merciful and compassionate to that soule; clothe that soul, which is stripped and left naked of all her original righteousness; feed that soul which thou hast starved; purge that soul which thou hast infected; warm, and thaw that soul which thou hast frozen with indevotion; cool, and quench that soul which thou hast inflamed with licentiousness [B]egin with thine own soul; be charitable to thy self first, and thou

wilt remember, that God hath made of one blood all Mankind, and thou wilt find out thy self in every other poor man, and thou wilt find Christ Jesus himself in them all.

In a typically Donneian paradox, proper love of self roots out selfishness, and yields selflessness.

And he applied the same moral logic of charity to building God a house. Donne the *preacher* was obliged by his position as Reader to drum up support for the building project, but Donne the *pastor* knew that if he ministered to individuals' souls properly first, the charitable giving would happen without coercion, indeed without him or anyone else even asking. Or, as he put it, 'when there is a free preaching of the Gospel, there should be a free, and liberal disposition to [Gods] house'. This even emboldened him to quote Psalm 127 - 'unless the Lord doe build the house, in vain do the labourers work' - only to assert its inversion: 'unless thou build a house for the Lord, in vain dost thou go about any other buildings'. But, yet again, just when one might think he would apply that to the Inn's efforts in stone and mortar, Donne pulls back again to the individual: 'I speak not merely literally of building materiall chapels . . . but I speak principally of building such a church, as every man may build in himself: for whensoever we present our prayers, and devotions deliberately, and advisedly to God, there we consecrate that place, there we build a church.' But not content with just elaborating the old adage that charity begins at home, Donne pursues the hyperbole that even church-building and church-consecrating begins there too, in a series of vivid vignettes which, if we think about them carefully, needn't be dismissed as quaint things relevant only to wealthy men in 1618 who at home observed the convention of kneeling at the table for family prayers before meals:

beloved, since every master of a family . . . should call his family together, to humble, and pour out their souls to God, let him consider, that when he comes to kneel at the side of his table, to pray, he comes to build a church there; and therefore should sanctify that place, with a due, and penitent consideration how . . . he hath formerly abused Gods blessings at that

[table], how . . . he hath flatter'd and humour'd some great and useful guests invited by him to that place; how expensively he hath served his own ostentation . . . by excessive feasts at that place — whilst *Lazarus* hath lien panting and gasping at the gate — and let him consider what a dangerous mockery this is to Christ Jesus, if he pretend by kneeling at that table . . . to build Christ a church by that solemnity at the table side, and then crucify Christ again by these sins when he is sat at the table.

The point no doubt hit home fairly easily. But Donne is never content with easy morality, nor is he content to shield himself from scrutiny or discomfort in the quest to expose failings - or to admit, or even embrace, the pain of rooting them out. The famous sonnet set as this evening's anthem extends its quest for sanctification to a plea for divine aid that destroys, divorces, imprisons, even rapes. So having warmed the Benchers up with the little picture of fathers keeping their tables as undefiled churches, he must have shocked them when he turned from prayers at the table-side to prayers at the bed-side: 'When thou kneelest down at thy bed side, to shut up the day at night, or to begin it in the morning, thy servants, thy children, thy little flock about thee, there thou buildest a church too. And therefore sanctify that place; wash it with thy tears and with a repentant consideration that in that bed thy children were conceived in sin, that in that bed thou hast turned marriage (which God afforded thee for remedy) . . . to . . . licentiousness'. In quoting that passage I have some explaining to do. It of course retails a view of original sin harsher than we may agree with; but even less comfortable, even for most of Donne's contemporaries, is his adherence to St Augustine's belief that sexual desire is far from God-given, but rather a result of the Fall, fundamentally disordered, and for which even marital relations is only a palliative 'remedy'. That might have been just within the bounds of acceptable in 1618, but startling even then would have been Donne's uncomfortable twist that the immoderate application of that 'remedy' even within marriage is culpable 'licentiousness'. Why drop that in, of all things? It's certainly an attention-getter, another example of that Donneian strategy to break through the

boundaries and defences of our decorums, as in a sonnet that ends with the words 'ravish me'. But Donne will also have slipped in that exemplum about licentiousness knowing that many of those listening would not only have remembered him as the student who spent most of his time writing libertine verse ('License my roving hands, and let them go / Behind, before, above, between, below! / O my America! My new-found land, / My kingdom, safest when with one man manned!'), but also knowing that this was the man whose much-loved wife, Anne More, in fifteen years of marriage bore twelve children and died from the delivery of the last. To raise the possibility that Donne himself may have been guilty of 'licentiousness' even behind the curtains of the marital bed, though startling, is so for a reason - not just to prompt his listeners into a deeper degree of self-scrutiny, but also to feel that the true pastor, as Donne was, never excludes him or herself from the scrutiny and confession urged upon others. But what does this have to do with consecrating churches? Everything, Donne said: 'continue in this building of churches — that is, in drawing your families to pray and praise God — and sanctify those several places of bed, and board, with a right use of them'.

And so may we glimpse what Donne could see: that there is in the story of Jacob's Ladder not only a vision of rungs with angels going up and down between heaven and earth, but also steps on a ladder set out for us that stretches from our own hearts and souls, then to those in need around us, and only then to this glorious building — steps which, when followed, consecrate both us and it to God's service.

'Now', Donne said, 'whosoever a man is proceeded so far with *Jacob*, first to sleep (to be at peace with God), and then to wake (to do something for the good of others), and then to speak (to make profession, to publish his sense of God's presence), and then to attribute all this only to the light of God himself, by which light he grows from faith to faith, and from grace to grace — whosoever is in this disposition, he may say in all places, and in all his actions, *This is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.*'

AMEN

Quotations from Donne's 'Sermon Preached at Lincolns Inne, preparing them to build their Chappell', are from Emma Rhatigan, ed., *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne, Volume IV. Sermons Preached at the Inns of Court, c. 1615—1620* (forthcoming), spelling and punctuation modernised. For Donne's 'Encænia. The Feast of Dedication. Celebrated at Lincolnes Inne, in a Sermon there vpon Ascension day, 1623.', see Katrin Ettenhuber, ed., *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne, Volume V. Sermons Preached at Lincoln's Inn, 1620—1623* (Oxford, 2015), sermon no. 10. Donne's 'To his Mistress Going to Bed' is quoted from Robin Robbins, ed., *The Complete Poems of John Donne*, rev. ed. (Harlow, 2010).