

Address for the John Donne Service, 2025 at Lincoln's Inn Chapel

The Gate of Heaven

The extract we heard in the reading is from a sermon preached on Easter Monday 1622, rather than from one preached in Lent. We have many sermons by Donne from Lent (partly because of his obligation to preach at court during Lent every year). But I chose this passage because it looks back through Holy week, back into Lent, and it is the connection between Lent and Easter, between the life of this world and the contemplation of eternity, that makes Donne's sermons so continually useful.

'Look him in the face, as he look'd upon Friday last' we are told, 'when he whose face the Angels desire to look on, he who was fairer then the children of men, as the Prophet speaks, was so marr'd more then any man'.¹ But from Good Friday we are brought forward again, to Easter Sunday, 'look him in the face again, as he look'd yesterday, not lam'd upon the Cross, not putrifi'd in the Grave, not singed in Hell, rais'd, and raised by his own power, Victoriously, triumphantly, to the destruction of the last Enemy, death.' And by referencing the days, Good Friday to 'yesterday', which was Easter Sunday when the sermon was first delivered, Donne brings his hearers from their time to Christ's and back again. Good Friday, Lent and Easter, linked into one larger whole that spans from then to now.

Another Lent sermon by Donne, from February 1628, also takes us to Easter and the promise of Resurrection. It has now become familiar as adapted into the form of a prayer by Eric Milner-White, which we said after the Collects today.²

¹ John Donne, 'A sermon preached at the Spittle, Upon Easter-Munday, 1622', in *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds Potter and Simpson, vol IV (University of California Press, 1959), no. 3, pp. 129-30.

² John Donne, 'A sermon preached at White-hall. February 29.1627 [1627/8]', in *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds E. M. Simpson and G. R. Potter, 10 vols, vol. VIII (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956), no. 7, p.

It opens with a quotation from our Old Testament reading, where Jacob declares that the site of his vision of the ladder going up to Heaven is ‘none other but the house of God, and this *is* the gate of heaven’ (Gen. 28:17), and Heaven is then invoked as a place ‘where there shall be no darkness nor dazzling, but one equal light; no noise nor silence, but one equal music; no fears nor hopes, but one equal possession; no ends nor beginnings, but one equal eternity’. I am always intrigued by the series of comparisons offered here. They aren’t extremes reconciled in a golden mean, nor are the opposites (good and bad); rather, we are encouraged to look forward to something that extends beyond and includes familiar things: not noise *or* silence, but one equal music, not ends *or* beginnings, but one equal eternity. The ‘habitations’ of God’s glory and majesty extend, in Donne’s thought, to include where we are now. ‘The house and gate’ of heaven is a ladder that reaches down to earth. One of Donne’s favourite metaphors for the relationship between this life and the next is that they are parts of the same building: ‘This is the *Gallery*, and that the *Bed-chamber* of one, and the same Palace, which shall feele no ruine’, he said in another sermon from 1622.³

Donne does not leave his hearers in the contemplation of eternity, however beautifully he evokes it. The passage adapted as Milner-White’s prayer immediately precedes the prayer with which Donne finishes his sermon, and it begins ‘Keepe us Lord so awake in the duties of our Callings, that we may thus sleepe in thy Peace, and wake in thy glory’.⁴ Our work here and our glory there are connected as rooms in ‘the same Palace’. And in our Easter sermon too, Donne does not start at Good Friday, but asks his hearers to look further back,

191; *Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne*, vol. III, ed. David Colclough (Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 104.

³ John Donne, ‘A sermon upon the fifth of November 1622. being the Anniversary celebration of our Deliverance from the Powder Treason’, in *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds Potter and Simpson, vol IV (University of California Press, 1959), no. 9, p. 240.

⁴ Donne, ‘A sermon preached at White-hall. February 29.1627 [1627/8]’, p. 191.

to look at Christ ‘as he lay in the Manger, poor, and then murmur not at temporal wants; suddainly enrich’d by the Tributes of Kings, and doubt not but that God hath large and strange ways to supply thee. Look him in the face, in the Temple, disputing there at twelve years; and then apply thy self to God, to the contemplation of him, to the meditation upon him, to a conversation with him betimes. Look him in the face in his Fathers house; a Carpenter, and but a Carpenter. Take a Calling, and contain thy self in that Calling.’ The life of Christ here is, Donne says, our example for the ordinary things of our lives: temporal wants, religious obligations, working for a living: ‘Take a Calling, and contain thy self in that Calling.’

We think of Donne as a rather abstract and speculative writer, a ‘metaphysical’ poet, but the quotation by which he is best known is about the connections that make up our ordinary lives: ‘no man is an island’ he says, and so ‘every man’s death diminishes me because I am *involved* in mankind’. ‘Involved’ here means both ‘included in, and ‘wrapped up, enveloped in’.⁵ The phrase that Donne uses to capture our involvement in mankind, one he uses several times in sermons over the course of his career, is the ‘offices of mutual society’ (‘offices’ here meaning duties or obligations). In a sermon from 1617, he writes:

Every man hath a *Politick life*, as well as a *natural life*; and he may no more take himself away from the world, then he may make himself away out of the world. For he that dies so, by withdrawing himself from his calling, from the labours of mutual society in this life, that man *kills himself*, and God calls him not.⁶

⁵ John Donne, ‘17. Meditation’, *Devotions upon emergent occasions*, ed. Anthony Raspa (Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 87. “Involve, V.” Oxford English Dictionary, Oxford UP, September 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9303879832>; Lat. *involvere*, ‘to roll into or upon, to wrap up, envelop, surround, entangle’, *OED*.

⁶ John Donne, ‘A Sermon preached at Pauls Cross to the Lords of the Council, and other Honourable Persons, 24 Mart. 1616 [1616/17]’, in *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds Potter and Simpson, vol I (University of California Press, 1953), no. 3, pp. 209-10.

This always reminds me of the plaintive letter that Donne wrote to his friend Sir Henry Goodyer before his ordination in which he declares that he would ‘fain do something’, because ‘to be no part of any body, is to be nothing’ Even ‘men of wit and delightfull conversation’ are not more than ‘moales for ornament, except they be so incorporated into the body of the world that they contribute something to the sustentation of the whole’.⁷

To be ‘incorporated into the world’ is to ‘contribute to the sustentation of the whole’, to be *useful*, to fulfil the ‘offices of mutual society’. But how can one’s obligation to be ‘incorporated into the world’ have a bearing on salvation? That is the question that occupies much of our Easter Monday sermon. Donne begins with our first ‘vocation’, our first ‘calling’ by God: God has ‘shined’ on his hearers by bringing them to be baptised in a true Church; this, we are told, creates an obligation to let God’s light ‘shine in our hands also, in our actions, in the example of our life’.⁸ Our actions matter for our souls not least because they have an effect on others. Donne is intensely interested in the moral implications, both positive and negative, of our actions on the spiritual lives of others: we can give a good example, or we can cause scandal. This points us to something significant, I think, in Donne’s ecclesiology. Donne insists on public prayer and the sacraments of the church as God’s ‘ordinances’, his chosen arrangements, his ‘orders’ by which salvation is ‘brought closer’ to us, in Donne’s phrase; and those things happen in public, in company. In a Christmas sermon preached at St Paul’s in 1627, he says: ‘God loves a compassion and fellow-feeling of others miseries, that is Sympathy, and God loves Harmony, and fellow-beleeving of others Doctrines, that is Symphony: No one man alone makes a Church’.⁹ Donne’s participatory model of salvation does not merely put

⁷ John Donne, *Letters to severall persons of honour* (1651), pp. 50-51.

⁸ Donne, ‘A sermon preached at the Spittle’, PS IV.3, pp. 104-7, 111-3.

⁹ John Donne, ‘Preached at Pauls, upon Christmas Day, 1627’, in *The Sermons of John Donne*, eds Potter and Simpson, vol VIII (University of California Press, 1953), no. 5, p. 155.

individual Christians together in the church building; he obliges them to work together, fulfilling the ‘offices of mutual society’. As Donne’s Litanie, set in Richard Allain’s anthem, tell us, we are children in this life, ‘wards’ (under the guardianship) of the angels, and to reach Heaven’s ‘fair palaces’ we must study that our actions ‘be worthy [of] their sight’.

Of course, Donne was notoriously slow to arrive at his own ‘calling’: in that same letter to Goodyer in which he laments being ‘nothing’ he recounts his career failings; he began well, and ‘early, when I understood the study of our laws’ but was diverted by an ‘immoderate desire of humane learning and languages’, which was impractical for someone without a private income. Then, when he took a job that might use ‘those poor advantages, which I have’ (as secretary to Lord Keeper Egerton), he ‘stumbled too’, in his imprudent secret marriage.¹⁰ Thereafter, from 1602 until his ordination in 1615, Donne lived a rather hand-to-mouth existence. We think some of this time was spent acting as a kind of research assistant for Bishop Thomas Morton. I think that Donne treated this reading as his means to meet the ‘offices of mutual society’. The evidence for this is the motto that he chose to inscribe on his books, sometimes with and sometimes in place of his signature: ‘Per Rachel ho servito & no per Lea’ (‘for Rachel I have served and not for Leah’). There is a surprising amount to unpack here: it is a quotation from Francesco Petrarch that quotes Gen. 29 (when Jacob discovers, after seven year’s service, that he is married to Leah and not his beloved Rachel) as expounded by Augustine (in *Contra Faustum*). It was Percy Simpson who worked out that Donne made reference here to a medieval convention (derived from Augustine) of reading Leah and Rachel allegorically to mean the active and contemplative lives.¹¹ In his lengthy and

¹⁰ *Letters to severall persons of honour*, p. 51.

¹¹ See Geoffrey Keynes, ‘Books from Donne’s library’, *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 1 (1949), pp. 64-68, p. 65; David Lyle Jeffrey, *A Dictionary of Biblical tradition in English literature* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1992), pp. 651- 2.

intricate argument, Augustine insists that duties in this world cannot be abandoned for heavenly contemplation. Jacob's fourteen years of service are likened to the seven commandments of the second table and the seven works of corporal mercy: all the ways in which we love our neighbour. That reading sits behind Petrarch's use of it in *Canzoniere* 206,¹² a poem whose final stanza (which Donne's motto quotes) insists that years of service in love are not to be regretted. Pains-taking in this world is the only means to achieve knowledge of God for both these authors.

And those are the ideas that Donne's motto rehearsed in every book he inscribed. We do the work assigned to us here, in the Lent of our eternal existence, and it is work that we do for and with each other: we have 'offices' of mutual society to fulfil. Our quotation from Easter Monday 1622 sent us to consider Christ as a student in the temple and as a carpenter, and on that basis we are told to work in a calling: whether like Donne as a lawyer, or a preacher, or (like me) as someone who reads books for a living. We find the 'house of God and the gate of heaven' by starting on the bottom rung of Jacob's ladder, because this life is also a room in that 'same Palace, which shall feele no ruine'. That is how God has ordered things in his church: that is the route that he has mapped out for us. We go through Lent to Easter, and what we do for each other here determines our journey.

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¹² 'Per Rachel ò servito e non per Lia, / né con altra saprei / viver; e sosterrei, / quando 'l ciel ne rappella, / girmen con ella in sul carro de Elia' ('For Rachel I have served and not for Leah, / nor with another could / I live; and I'd endure, / if Heaven calls us back, / to go with her in Elijah's chariot'): Petrarch, *The Canzoniere*, trans. Mark Musa (Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 300-1.