



Wretched man that I am!

Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Romans 7:24

Sunday 18 May 2025

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Isaiah 55: 7–11 Romans 7: 15–25a

In the large mythology of Trinity College it is stretching matters to say that John Donne was a pupil here, but I like to think of it as a possibility. It is known that he studied at Hart Hall, Oxford, but that he then came to Cambridge. He spent three years here, in the mid-1580s.

If not the certainty, we have the image: to my right is Donne in the stained glass window, beside George Herbert, a documented pupil of Trinity. Herbert, twenty years younger than Donne, died only two years after him. They both thought that preferment at Court would lead to their life's work, but poetry and preaching both flowed out of the abandonment of that early desire. The strong tie between Donne and Herbert is George's mother, the learned Magdalen Herbert. She became a patron of Donne; he gave her funeral oration in 1627.

I'd like to try to set up some echoes for you today in this meditation on influence--- John Donne's words, influenced by Paul's words---to pay tribute to their incalculable beauty and force, the effect reverberating through the world. Why these words have mattered.

There are marked parallels in the lives of the Apostle Paul and of John Donne:

They both underwent conversions, one more dramatic than the other: Paul's on the road to Damascus, in a blaze of light, and Donne's more gradual but nevertheless certain conversion and embrace of his vocation in the Church of England, culminating in his appointment as Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in 1621.

They both suffered extended periods of affliction, when bodily pain almost consumed them. The experience of suffering left an indelible mark upon their words.

Paul did not marry, but Donne did, at great cost: into prison and poverty, the loss of six children over the course of his life, and his wife, herself, dying at the age of 33, through the exhausted continual bearing of twelve children, altogether. Donne was also scarred by his family's persecution as recusants. His younger brother Henry died of the plague in prison at the age of 19, arrested for sheltering a Jesuit priest. Donne himself barely survived the waves of plague that swept over London; he thought that he was dying at least three times.

Paul faced, every day, the stark possibility of failure. Donne was haunted by the spectre of failure, and humiliated at the necessity to plead for suitable employment with possible benefactors in order to escape poverty.

Both had trained in the law. Paul was highly educated in the Classical sense, in rhetoric and the art of persuasion, Donne in the language of law at Lincoln's Inn.

Both were passionate preachers. Paul's words, as those you heard in the reading from Romans, were fiery and life-changing; Donne's words became known throughout London and beyond for their eloquence and transforming power.

Both used the word, *love*, again and again throughout their works.

Paul's great themes were the Love of Christ, and rescue from the travails of life--- indeed, victory over death---through Faith in Christ. Donne's great themes were Love, and Death, and Faith in Christ--- in the end, Faith subsumed both the others.

They both longed for God. They both threw themselves passionately into their shared vocation: of using words to win the souls of others, to draw them closer to the living, saving Christ. They both held passionately to the hope, and assurance, of Redemption, of Resurrection.

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Donne quotes this same exclamation of Paul in what came to be known as his own funeral sermon, *Death's Duell*, preached before King James in March of 1631, two weeks before his death. He could barely whisper the hour-long delivery of it.

But this is how that sermon continues, and this is how it ends:

Our critical day is not the very day of our death, but the whole course of our life. I thank him that prays for me when the bell tolls, but I thank him much more that catechises me, or preaches to me, or instructs me how to live.

...so doth a good life here flow into an eternal life, without any consideration what manner of death we die. But whether the gate of my prison be opened with an oiled key (by a gentle and preparing sickness), or the gate be hewn down by a violent death, or the gate be burnt down by a raging and frantic fever, a gate into heaven I shall have, for from the Lord is the cause of my life, and with God the Lord are the issues of death.

Death is enclosed in Faith. But why this first agonised appeal?

At the heart of what Paul and John Donne believed and preached was a shared understanding of the word *sin*, a word unused by us moderns.

We cannot hear the words of Paul or Donne without grasping the sense they had that we human beings are profoundly incapable of the perfection of God. We cannot fully realise our own destiny without acknowledging in profound sorrow and contrition our tendency to fall short, to fail God, which is what sin is. We fail in the transcendent vocation God has intended for each of us, which is to honour our Creator through loving service to our fellow creatures. We separate ourselves from God by our own self-love. We cannot be brought back to God except by God's own loving desire to reclaim us, even as we are.

The true tone of anguish, longing, and passion in the words of Paul and John Donne cannot be caught by us until we understand their sense of the sin we share.

As Paul pours out his heart to the Galatians:

For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

The sin that lies deep in our human nature Donne pleads with all passion for God to obliterate:

Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend, That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee,'and bend Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new I, like an usurpt towne, to'another due, Labour to'admit you, but Oh, to no end, Reason your viceroy in mee, mee should defend, But is captiv'd, and proves weake or untrue. Yet dearely'I love you,'and would be loved faine, But am bethroth'd unto your enemy: Divorce mee,'untie or breake that knot againe, Take mee to you, imprison mee, for I Except you'enthrall mee, never shall be free, Nor ever chast, except you ravish mee.

Benjamin Britten twice set this poem---Holy Sonnet XIV---fittingly, to music: Donne said that his hope of heaven was *to be made (God's) music*. Let me here address a misconception first propagated by Izaak Walton, Donne's first biographer, that Donne's life divided itself neatly between a *Part One: Jack Donne the Rake* and *Part Two: John Donne the Divine*. Walton compared Donne to the Apostle Paul, writing that "where [Donne] had been a Saul... in his irregular youth," he became "a Paul, and preach[ed] salvation to his brethren."

But there was, in reality, an underlying unity of Donne's longing for God, a unity that underlay all his life. Here is a beautiful set of lines from his love-poem, *The Ecstasy*:

Love's mysteries in souls do grow, But yet the body is his book.

Paul and Donne each contemplated body and soul. Body and soul, interknit and indivisible: in Paul's words to the Corinthians:

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? ...God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Here is Donne's lighter, playful, love-poem, *Air and Angels*:

Twice or thrice had I lov'd thee, Before I knew thy face or name; So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame Angels affect us oft, and worshipp'd be; Still when, to where thou wert, I came, Some lovely glorious nothing I did see. But since my soul, whose child love is, Takes limbs of flesh, and else could nothing do, More subtle than the parent is Love must not be, but take a body too; And therefore what thou wert, and who, I bid Love ask, and now That it assume thy body, I allow, And fix itself in thy lip, eye, and brow.

As long as we live, our souls cannot be separated from our bodies, and only through our bodies can we express our love for one another, and for God.

In his elaborate complexity of verse and meter, extraordinary in its intensity of paradox and dislocation, Donne celebrated the vitality of this intertwining, this blessed soul-infused physicality: capable of harbouring disease unto death, yes, but capable also, of expressing a sacramental fullness of life.

Love is Paul's overarching theme, no less than Donne's: Paul declares

For in Christ Jesus...the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

And the famous lines:

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

In the end, even death can be met by Love that Faith pours out, and so, can be faced down.

Here is the re-echo from Donne's funeral sermon, of Paul's own words to the Romans:

We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.

And here is Donne's *Devotion upon Emergent Occasions, XVII*:

The church is Catholic, universal, so are all her actions; all that she does belongs to all....When she baptises 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: all mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated; God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another....

Words matter: what we read, what we write, what we proclaim.

The words of Paul, echoed 1500 years later in the words of John Donne, were alike deeply personal, deeply felt. Their words were, alike, passionately proclaimed---they have resounded in all parts of our world. Born alike out of both anguish and longing, their words continue to bear witness to the faith of Christ they embraced, both body and soul.

May we be able to catch such echoes as transform us, also! *Amen*