

Mortality and sin. Two huge themes of Ash Wednesday. And I want to come at them today through the lens of John Donne.

John Donne was a fairly famous English poet from the early 1600's.

That means he's writing just after the time of Shakespeare and the King James Bible. Technically, John Donne writes in modern English, just as Shakespeare does. But it's such an old form of modern English that it often sounds antiquated to us. And yet, Donne's words are powerful and worth the effort to try to understand, even if they are not in the modern vernacular that we tend to speak.

Ironically, in spite of Donne's reputation as a poet, his most famous words are not from a poem but from a prose meditation. Meditation XVII would later provide the title for a famous Ernest Hemmingway novel. Donne writes,

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... 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.

John Donne was also the Very Rev. John Donne, an ordained priest in our mother church, the Church of England. And he was eventually the dean of the famous St. Paul's Cathedral in London. And if you don't speak advanced Episcopalian, dean is simply the title for the senior priest in charge of a cathedral. And parenthetically, Donne predated Christopher Wren—so the St. Paul's Cathedral that Donne knew is the one that would eventually burn down and be rebuilt by Wren.

Since John Donne was a priest and a cathedral dean, it should be no surprise that Donne's works are heavily religious in theme.

In the aforementioned excerpt from Meditation XVII, Donne reminds us of the interconnectedness of human life and society. The death of any human has an effect on all of us, whether we realize it or not. If a clod of dirt is washed off of the coast, he says, the continent has been diminished ever so slightly. And when another human dies, we are diminished.

And Donne also tells us that every death of someone else is also a reminder of our own mortality. Therefore, if you hear the death knell ringing from church steeple signaling that someone has just died, Donne says, "never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

Every death you hear of is a reminder that you too are dust, and to dust you also shall return.

And yet, as a Christian, Donne is very clear that our mortality is not the end of the story. In a famous sonnet,¹ he says,

*Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so.*

Death may appear to be powerful. But the sonnet goes on to proclaim that death is not something ultimately to be feared. For a Christian, death is an interim, and not an ultimate state.

Donne's last two lines of this sonnet say that after we die,
*One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.*

John Donne proclaims the good news. After death we can look forward to resurrection. And even on Ash Wednesday when we mark ourselves with ashes as a sign of our mortality, we will later celebrate the Holy Eucharist, the sacred meal which is the continuing sign of Christ's death and resurrection. Even on this day that we remember that we are dust and to dust we shall return, we nevertheless also celebrate the hope of eternal life that Jesus brings us.

Yes, we will all die. But after that, the Good News of Jesus Christ tells us that we will also be raised, and Death itself shall be no more. Sorrow and crying and pain shall be no more. "Death, thou shalt die."

So we live with the reality of our mortality. But we do so in the light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Which brings us to our second Ash Wednesday theme. It's also a Lenten theme: sin.

Today we remember and are asked to repent of the myriad ways we sin, the myriad ways we fall short of being the people God created us to be, and the ways we fall short of making the choices God would have us make.

In a little while we'll go through a whole litany of our sins, literally. In the Litany of Penitence, we will confess the myriad ways that we fall short of loving God, and loving our neighbors as ourselves. Our self-indulgence. Our unfaithfulness. Our pride.

Another of John Donne's great poems is a meditation on the nature of our sin. We just sang this text as our sequence hymn.

This hymn is an extensive reflection on our sin. Donne writes:
*Wilt thou forgive that sin, where I begun,
which is my sin, though it were done before?*

¹ Holy Sonnet 10

Donne is asking if God will forgive his sins, the sins he is steeped in as part of his human nature.

Then Donne asks,
*Wilt thou forgive those sins through which I run,
 and do run still, though still I do deplore?*

He is asking if God will forgive the sins that he himself despises, and yet is trapped in.

And he is confident that will forgive those sins. And yet, Donne adds with brutal honesty,

*When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
 for I have more.*

God, when you've forgiven me, you're not done yet. Because I will undoubtedly have more sins to forgive.

Then Donne asks,
*Wilt thou forgive that sin, by which I won
 others to sin, and made my sin their door?*

That's a reminder that our sin is contagious. Our behavior can often lure others into sin themselves. And then he asks,

*Wilt thou forgive that sin which I did shun
 a year or two, but wallowed in a score?*

I love this. Donne is saying some sins I may be able to push back against for a couple of years, only to wallow in them for a couple of decades. This is a marvelously realistic depiction of the nature of our sinful state. And again Donne tells God,

*When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
 for I have more.*

What's also implied here is that we will undoubtedly keep sinning. But when we repent, God will keep forgiving

But then Donne mentions a specific fear:
*I have a sin of fear that when I've spun
 my last thread, I shall perish on the shore*

Donne for the first time names a particular sin—in this case the sin of fear. What kind of fear? Fear of eternal death.

And so he asks this of God:
*Swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son
 shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore.*

In some ways, Donne is acknowledging his fear to be unreasonable. Donne proclaims his belief that Jesus' life and light and mercy and grace shine now, and have shone up until this point in Donne's life, and even before Donne's life. But being human, Donne knows he fears, though he knows it is unreasonable given God's constant and consistent lovingkindness. But Donne wants to make sure that God's love will still be operative for him at his death.

Thus he makes that request,
*Swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son
shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore.*

And in response to God's assurance, we have a wonderful conclusion:
*And having done that, thou hast done,
I fear no more.*

When forgiving Donne's sins, God is never quite done, for Donne has more.

But when Donne dies, and is bathed in God's perfect light and love and forgiveness and new life through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, God is done.

In fact there may be a double meaning. "Thou hast done," D-O-N-E means God's work is accomplished. But given the author's name, God also has D-O-N-N-E. God is holding John Donne in the palm of his hand. He has Donne.

Donne is thus called to repent and seek God's forgiveness.
Donne is also called to have faith and trust God's goodness.

On Ash Wednesday, we emphasize in our service something I will say in just a few moments: "the need which all Christians continually have to renew their repentance and faith."

We remember our mortality. Yet we celebrate the new life God offers.

We repent of our sins. And yet we celebrate God's forgiveness.

We will go through a whole litany of our sins in just a bit. But we will end with this request of faith.

"By the cross and passion of your Son our Lord,
Bring us with all your saints to the joy of his resurrection."

*And having done that, thou hast done,
I fear no more.*