

Good Friday with John Donne

- [Isaiah 52:13-53:12](#)
- [Hebrews 10:16-25](#)
- [John 18:1-19:42](#)
- [Psalm 22](#)

This morning I want to share with you a poem by one of the early Anglican poets, John Donne. He wrote it about Good Friday in 1613, when he was riding west to Wales. It was on this ride that he decided to take holy orders.

Although it was a holy day, Donne was travelling on business and so the poem begins with the push-pull of the soul's sphere and the other spheres of human life. I know that many of us experience that conflict – we may want to be mystics, or at least have time for prayer and contemplation but there always seems to be one thing more to do. I know that's true of myself. Even when I go on retreat to intentionally take time away, things crowd in that seem urgent. Donne describes this by saying that our souls are whirled by the constant pressure of our outer lives. Somehow I find it comforting that that was as true in the 17th century as it is today.

Because of the demands on him, Donne is travelling west when he thinks he should be turning toward the East – toward the Holy Land and contemplation of the Cross. But he's almost glad that he doesn't have to see the crucifixion – it would be too much weight to bear. We don't, here at St Ben's, place as much emphasis on the horrors of the crucifixion as some other Christians do. But today is the day to open our eyes, to spend a brief time looking clearly at the love of God suspended on the cross, in agony. Suspended because that is what needed to happen so that we might be reconciled with God and given the gift of new life.

I don't think that God demanded the death of his son. I do think that it was the inevitable result if God becoming human – that we could not stand it and tried to kill him. And that we continue to do that in so many ways today. Not necessarily as individuals but in the way our collective works, the sin matrix brings oppression and suffering. Jesus told us that as we do it for one of the least of these so we do it to him – and that applies to oppression and corruption as much as it does to the good stuff we try to do. Seeing how African-Americans and First Nation peoples are being devastated by the coronavirus at a much faster rate than privileged white Americans, we see the results of the sin matrix at work today.

But Donne focuses on the glory of God expressed through the cross – if it is impossible to see God's face then how much more difficult to see his death? Dare we look on the death of God? Donne thinks it is too much to bear. But instead of abandoning the effort of Good Friday, he asks that God will use this experience to sanctify him – to restore him in the original image of God.

And that I truly believe is the purpose of Good Friday – that we all may be made new, made perfect in Christ, by grace be restored to the image of God which was our original blessing.

As we mature in our faith so God opens our eyes not just to the beauty of creation but also to the agony of creation. They are both one and somehow the same – together they make a whole. This is difficult stuff. Good Friday is both terrible and glorious. There is the beauty of the sunrise and there are bodies lying in the streets. And somehow God's grace and God's love embraces it all.

Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward

BY JOHN DONNE

Let mans Soule be a Spheare, and then, in this,
The intelligence that moves, devotion is,
And as the other Spheares, by being growne
Subject to forraigne motion, lose their owne,
And being by others hurried every day,
Scarce in a yeare their naturall forme obey:
Pleasure or businesse, so, our Soules admit
For their first mover, and are whirld by it.
Hence is't, that I am carryed towards the West
This day, when my Soules forme bends toward the East.
There I should see a Sunne, by rising set,
And by that setting endlesse day beget;
But that Christ on this Crosse, did rise and fall,
Sinne had eternally benighted all.
Yet dare I almost be glad, I do not see
That spectacle of too much weight for mee.
Who sees Gods face, that is selfe life, must dye;
What a death were it then to see God dye?
It made his owne Lieutenant Nature shrinke,
It made his footstoole crack, and the Sunne winke.
Could I behold those hands which span the Poles,
And tune all spheares at once peirc'd with those holes?
Could I behold that endlesse height which is
Zenith to us, and our Antipodes,
Humbled below us? or that blood which is
The seat of all our Soules, if not of his,
Made durt of dust, or that flesh which was worne
By God, for his apparell, rag'd, and torne?
If on these things I durst not looke, durst I
Upon his miserable mother cast mine eye,
Who was Gods partner here, and furnish'd thus
Halfe of that Sacrifice, which ransom'd us?
Though these things, as I ride, be from mine eye,
They'are present yet unto my memory,
For that looks towards them; and thou look'st towards mee,
O Saviour, as thou hang'st upon the tree;
I turne my backe to thee, but to receive

Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave.
O thinke mee worth thine anger, punish mee,
Burne off my rusts, and my deformity,
Restore thine Image, so much, by thy grace,
That thou may'st know mee, and I'll turne my face.