

John Donne on Being Finally Done
or, An Argument for Church Bells
by Ben Nelson

Perhaps you have noticed. All United States flags are at half staff—and will remain at half staff until January 24th, 2007. Why? Because it was so ordered by President Bush in response to the death of former President Gerald R. Ford on December 26th, 2006. But Bush did more than order the flying of flags at half-staff. Just before the turn of the year George W. Bush issued this proclamation:

As a further mark of respect to the memory of Gerald R. Ford, the thirty-eighth President of the United States, NOW, THEREFORE, I, GEORGE W. BUSH, President of the United States of America, by the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the United States, in honor and tribute to the memory of Gerald R. Ford, and as an expression of public sorrow, do appoint Tuesday, January 2, 2007, as a National Day of Mourning throughout the United States. I call on the American people to assemble on that day in their respective places of worship, there to pay homage to the memory of President Ford. I invite the people of the world who share our grief to join us in this solemn observance.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this twenty eighth day of December in the year of our Lord two thousand six, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and thirty-first.

What does this have to do with John Donne and metaphysical poetry, you might ask. I would answer, “Well, maybe nothing; but then, maybe everything.”

But if you did not notice the flags at half staff then maybe you took the occasion to watch the grisly execution video of Saddam Hussein posted on the internet. (I have not.) Or perhaps you heard most recently in the news that the number of Americans dying of cancer has declined. If you did my job, that of teaching teenagers to drive, you would be well aware of the fact that in 2006, 475 people were killed on Minnesota roads. And that is, according to the record keepers, the lowest since 1945 when there were only 449 deaths.

But what of it? I list these facts and figures only to illustrate that our culture is one that is curiously fascinated by (and at the same time also repulsed by) death. Go peruse any news website and you are sure to find stories and pictures of death all over. Why? Death sells. It's newsworthy. You and I are more likely to make the newspaper by our one act of dying, if I can call it that, than by any other thing we will do in our lives—unless, of course, you happen to be the president of a fundamentalist institution of higher learning in Wisconsin or South Carolina. But that is not new news to you.

What might be news to you is that a perusal of John Donne's poetry and prose would also turn up a good bit of musing about death and dying. Granted, the idea of death today and of that in Donne is not of the same quality or kind. But that is just the point. We have lost something. A lot of something. But such a thought is not original with me.

Listen with me to the words of T.S. Eliot:

“It is a postulate implicit in all metaphysical poetry that nothing is ineffable, [i.e., indescribable] that the most rarified feeling can be exact and exactly expressed. If you cease to be able to express feelings you cease to be able to have them, and sensibility is

replaced by sentiment, in the end by the vague expression of the vague, and poetry degenerates into a diversity of noises.”¹

I do not want to test this “implicit postulate” and argue about whether or not the realm of all our experience can be reduced to the domain of words. Perhaps that is a subject for our enthralling discussion of Eliot's work which is to take place later tonight. In any case, our agreement over whether all experience is expressible in or reducible to words is not necessary. What is relevant to us at this point is Eliot's second sentence. Let me repeat it. “If you cease to be able to express feelings you cease to be able to have them, and sensibility is replaced by sentiment, in the end by the vague expression of the vague, and poetry degenerates into a diversity of noises.”

“The vague expression of the vague.” A fitting summary for much of our 21st century, “enlightened” thought about death. But at this point you may object. You may say, “Sure, there is a vagueness about death in secular society, but we Christians know about the resurrection, we've got it straight when it comes to the idea of death.” I question if we really do.

What words do we use when we speak of death? What words do ministers use during a funeral? I can think of a couple. There's the talk of a person's *homegoing*, or of the deceased's *promotion*, or the ever popular, *passing away*. Now I do not wish to denigrate these terms nor belittle the people who use them. But it should make us pause. What do they mean? Consider the first word. *Homegoing*. What part of a person is going? Going home to where? What's the home like? *Promotion*. Promotion to what? Who's doing the promoting? What did he do to deserve it?

¹ T.S. Eliot, *The Varieties of Metaphysical Poetry*, 200.

Will everyone be promoted? Finally, take *Passing away*. Passing away into what? Where is “away”? Are these ideas even Christian? Of course, we as Christians fill in the blanks, right? But do these words bring death and the afterlife into focus or is the picture blurred?

What words, what word pictures shall we use? I am afraid that we are at a loss. It is sort of like visiting the Hallmark store. Remember the last time you did that—years and years ago? You traveled to the store with the occasion on your mind. You looked for the “perfect card”—the card that most exactly expressed your sentiment. And you poured through hundreds of cards and at the end, if your experience was like mine, found very little that expressed what you were thinking and feeling. (By the way, I have given up on card stores in general). What you find is the generic, the vague expression of the vague. And it seems to me to be an allegory of what you often find outside the church and, unfortunately, too many times inside the church. I think, and perhaps you do too, that in considering death and dying and the afterlife, we and our churches suffer from a sort of “Hallmark syndrome”—the unsatisfying vague expression of the vague.

Thankfully, this vagueness is in sharp contrast to the writing of John Donne. In addition to writing about love and fleas and the inconstancy of females—things that he is often well-known for, John Donne wrote many elegies for funerals, lengthy letters to surviving family members, and sermons about the horrors of death and the joys of heaven for the people under his care. He was in his own way a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. And not only his own personal grief, but that of others. He wrote in 1623, while recovering from a long and severe illness which nearly cost him his life, these words:

Another man may be sicke too, and sick to death, and this affliction may lie in his bowels, as gold in a Mine, and be of no use to him; but this bell, that tells me of this affliction, digs out, and applies that gold to mee; if by this consideration of anothers danger,

I take mine owne into contemplation, and so secure my selfe, by making my recourse to God,
who is our onely securitie.²

The words seem to echo those of the psalmist where he prays that we would be taught to number our days in order to apply our hearts to wisdom. So, let us with John Donne's help, learn to know our end and to be the wiser for it. But, where should we start?

One of John Donne's most popular works on the subject of death is his triumphant challenge to Death found in his Holy Sonnet X, "Death Be Not Proud." But I have chosen not to start there. Instead, I would like to begin our survey by reading the first 34 lines from his "Elegie on Mistris Boulstred." In contrast to the triumphal stance Donne seems to take over Death which is portrayed as soon to die in "Death Be Not Proud," his lines from this elegy present an entirely different image of death which he alludes to elsewhere—namely, Death as a wanton and ravenous glutton who sits at his table, capriciously devouring all living creatures at will.

Death I recant, and say, unsaid by mee
What ere hath slip'd, that might diminish thee.
Spirituell treason, atheisme 'tis, to say,
That any can thy summons disobey.
Th' earths face is but thy Table; there are set 5
Plants, cattell, men, dishes for Death to eate.
In a rude hunger now hee millions drawes
Into his bloody, or plaguy, or sterv'd jawes.

² Taken from Meditation XVII.

Now hee will seeme, to spare, and doth more wast,
Eathing the best first, well preserv'd to last. 10
Now wantonly he spoiles, and eates us not,
But breakes off friends, and lets us peecemeale rot.
Nor will this earth serve him; he sinkes the deepe
Where harmlesse fish monastique silence keepe,
Who (were Death dead) by Roes of living sand, 15
Might sponge that element, and make it land.
He rounds the aire, and breakes the hymnique notes
In birds (Heavens choristers,) organique throats,
Which (if they did not dye) might seem to bee
a tenth ranke in the heavenly hierarchie. 20
O strong and long-liv'd death, how cam'st thou in?
And how without Creation didst begin?
Thou hast, and shalt see dead, before thou dyest,
All the foure Monarchies, and Antichrist.
How could I think thee nothing, that see now 25
In all this All, noting else, but thou.
Our births and lives, vices, and vertues bee
Wastfull consumptions, and degrees of thee.

For, wee to live, our bellowes weare, and breath,
Nor are wee mortall, dying, dead, but death. 30
And though thou beest, O mighty bird of prey,
so much reclaim'd by God, that thou must lay
All that thou kill'st as his feet, yet doth hee
reserve but few, and leaves the most to thee. 34

In lines 1-4 Death is presented as a ruler who issues summons to his table that none can disobey. Those summoned—plants, cattle and men—find that they have been set as dinner dishes for Death. Death gorges himself, devouring all, but in no particular order. It is a ghastly image, that of Death crunching and munching away on millions of creatures. Lines 11-12 express the tragic, ironic feeling we have all felt as we have watched others be devoured by death:

Now wantonly he spoiles, and eates us not,
But breakes off friends, and lets us peecemeale rot.

But if that is not enough for ravenous, insatiable Death, he plunges down into the ocean and above into the heavens, devouring fish and birds. In lines 21-22 Donne ponders how it was that uncreated Death ever had his beginning. He exclaims that life is not really life at all, but merely a degree of Death. Yet in all this Death, that mighty bird of prey is not without limits, and must lay his bloody catch at God's feet.

It is a gruesome image, but one that I think effectively presents the universal experience of death. In another work Donne also alludes to Death as a glutton. Here are the first 6 lines from his Holy Sonnet VI:

This is my playes last scene, here heavens appoint

My pilgrimages last mile; and my race

Idly, yet quickly runne, that hath this last pace,

My spans last inch, my minutes latest point,

And gluttonous death, will instantly unjoynt

My body, and soule, and I shall sleepe a space. . .

This is a lovely sonnet, rich in figures. Life is compared to a play, a race, a span, and a minute. And all of them, in quick succession, remind me of James referring to our lives as a vapor. Death, of course, gluttonously unjoints body and soul, but will be experienced as sleep—an image Donne uses many, many times throughout his works—and to which we would return if we had time. But in Donne's thought Death did not merely divorce body and soul. Death for John Donne was also the great leveler. One of the most sobering passages, I think, from Donne on death as a leveler comes from his sermon on the first Friday of Lent in either 1621 or 1622.

It [death] comes equally to us all, and makes us all equall when it comes. The ashes of an Oake in the Chimney, are no Epitaph of that Oak, to tell me how high or how large it was; it tels me not what flocks it sheltered while it stood, nor what men it hurt when it

fell. The dust of great persons graves is speechlesse too, it sayes nothing, it distinguishes nothing: As soon as the dust of a wretch whom thou wouldest not, as of a Prince whom thou couldest not look upon, will trouble thine eyes, if the winde blow it thither; and when a whirle-winde hath blowne the dust of the Church-yard into the Church, and the man sweeps out the dust of the Church into the Church-yard, who will undertake to sift those dusts again, and to pronounce, This is the Patrician, this is the noble flower, and this the yeomanly, this the Plebian bran.

The equality of all people in having their bodies reduced to ashes by death is also aptly expressed in this selection from Donne's final sermon (which some said was his own funeral sermon), *Death's Duell*:

. . . When my mouth shall be filled with dust, and the worme shall feed, and feed sweetely upon me, when the ambitious man shall have no satisfaction, if the poorest alive tread upon him, nor the poorest receive any contentment in being made equall to Princes, for they shall bee equall but in dust. One dyeth at his full strength, being wholly at ease and in quiet, and another dies in the bitterness of his soul, and never eates with pleasure, but they lye down alike in dust, and the worme covers them. . . Even those bodies that were the temple of the holy Ghost, come to this dilapidation, to ruine, to rubbidge, to dust. . . Truly the consideration. . . that that Monarch, who spred over many nations alive, must in his dust lie in a corner of that sheete of lead. . . and that privat and retir'd man, that thought himself his own for ever, and never came forth, must in his dust of the grave bee published, and (such are the revolutions of the graves) be mingled with the dust of every high way, and of every dunghill, and be swallowed in every puddle and pond:

This is the most inglorious and contemptible vilification, the most deadly and peremptory nullification of man that we can consider.

But being made into dust and ashes was not the end for Donne. He was no annihilationist! The human soul—what Donne called his “everwaking part” would go to some place. He spoke these words at the funeral of Sir William Cokayne of London in December of 1626:

Though the soule be at the Table of the Lambe, in Glory, and the body but at the table of the Serpent, in dust; though the soule be in that bed which is always green, in an everlasting spring, in Abrahams bosome; And the body but in that green-bed, whose covering is but a yard and a halfe of turfe, and a Rugge of Grasse, and the sheet but a winding sheet, yet they are not divorced; they shall returne to one another againe, in an inseparable reunion in the resurrection.

Of course, it goes without saying not all were to experience the bliss of the resurrection. And Donne did not mince words when it came to describing the death of the wicked. He wrote less than five years away from his own death a sermon contrasting the two ways of dying.

He [the wicked] shall die, and die, die twice over; so in sicknesse he shall be sick, twice sick, body sick and soul-sick too, sense-sick and conscience-sick together; when, as the sinnes of his body have caste sicknesses and death upon his Soule, so the inordinate sadnesse of his Soule, shall aggravate and actuate the sicknesse of his body. . . . Loose not, O blessed apostle, thy question upon this Man, *O Death where is thy Sting? O Grave where is thy victory?* for the sting of Death is in every limb of his body. . . . Truly, if the death of the wicked ended in Death, yet to

scape that manner of death were worthy a Religious life. To see the house fall, and yet be afraid to goe out of it; To leave an injur'd world, and meet an incensed God. . . To begin to see thy sins but then, and finde every sin (at first sight) in the proportion of a Gyant, able to crush thee into despair.

Does such precise writing need any explanation? I doubt it. And though John Donne doesn't always write like this about the subject of death, death was ever on his mind. In fact, I would argue, Donne labored to be reminded of his frailty. But he did not do it on his own. He had help from a member of the church that we have seemingly excommunicated by virtue of our horrid, modern architecture. I, for one, wish we would readmit this precious members who exhorts us to love and good works by reminding us that our day is fast approaching. Who is this one? I'll let Donne tell you in his own words.

WE have a *Convenient Author*, who writ a *Discourse of Bells*, when hee was prisoner in *Turky*. How would hee have enlarged himselfe if he had beene my *fellow-prisoner* in this *sicke bed*, so neere to that *Steeple*, which never ceases, no more than the *harmony of the spheres*, but is more heard. When the *Turkes* took *Constantinople*, they melted the *Bells* into *Ordnance*; I have heard both *Bells* and *Ordnance*, but never been so much affected with those, as with these *Bells*. I have *lien* near a *Steeple*, in which there are said to be more than *thirty Bells*; And neere another, where there is one so bigge, as that the *Clapper* is said to weigh more than *six hundred pound*, yet never so affected as here. Here the *Bells* can scarce solemnise the funerall of any person, but that I knew him, or knew that he was my *Neighbour*: we dwelt in houses neere to one another before, but now hee is gone into that house, into which I must follow him. There is a way of correcting the *Children* of great persons, that other *Children* are corrected in their *behalfe*, and in their *names*, and this workes upon them, who indeed had more deserved it. And when these *Bells*

tell me, that now one, and now another is buried, must not I acknowledge, that they have the *correction* due to me, and paid the *debt* that I owe? There is a story of a *Bell* in a *Monastery* which, when any of the house was sicke to death, rung alwaies *voluntarily*, and they knew the inevitableness of the danger by that. It rung once, when no man was sick; but the next day one of the house, fell from the *steeple*, and died, and the *Bell* held the reputation of a *Prophet* still. If these *Bells* that warne to a *Funerall* now, were appropriated to none, may not I, by the houre of the *Funerall*, supply? How many men that stand at an *execution*, if they would aske, for what dies that man, should heare their owne faults condemned, and see themselves executed, by *Attorney*? We scarce heare of any man *preferred*, but wee thinke of our selves, that wee might very well have beene that *Man*; Why might not I have beene that *Man*, that is carried to his grave now? Could I fit my selfe, to *stand*, or sit in any mans *place*, and not to lie in any mans *grave*? I may lacke much of the *good parts* of the meanest, but I lacke nothing of the *mortality* of the weakest. . . .³

PERCHANCE he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill as that he knows not it tolls for him.

And perchance I may think myself so much better than I am, as that they who are about me, and see my state, may have caused it to toll for me, and I know not that. The church is catholic, universal, so are all her actions; all that she does, belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that head 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,

³ Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions. XVI Meditation.

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; as therefore the bell that rings to a sermon, calls not upon the preacher only, but upon the congregation to come; so this bell calls us all: but how much more me, who am brought so near the door by this sickness.

There was a contention as far as a suit (in which, piety and dignity, religion and estimation, were mingled) which of the religious orders should ring to prayers first in the morning; and it was determined, that they should ring first that rose earliest. If we understand aright the dignity of this bell, that tolls for our evening prayer, we would be glad to make it ours, by rising early, in that application, that it might be ours as well as his, whose indeed it is. The bell doth toll for him, that thinks it doth; and though it intermit again, yet from that minute, that that occasion wrought upon him, he is united to God. Who casts not up his eye to the sun when it rises? But who takes off his eye from a comet, when that breaks out? who bends not his ear to any bell, which upon any occasion rings? But who can remove it from that bell, which is passing a piece of himself out of this world?

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, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were; 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.

Neither can we call this a begging of misery, or a borrowing of misery, as though we were not miserable enough of ourselves, but must fetch in more from the next house, in taking upon us the

misery of our neighbors. Truly it were an excusable covetousness if we did; for affliction is a treasure, and scarce any man hath enough of it. No man hath affliction enough, that is not matured and ripened by it, and made fit for God by that affliction. If a man carry treasure in bullion or in a wedge of gold, and have none coined into current moneys, his treasure will not defray him as he travels. Tribulation is treasure in the nature of it, but it is not current money in the use of it, except we get nearer and nearer our home, heaven, by it. Another may be sick too, and sick to death, and this affliction may lie in his bowels, as gold in a mine, and be of no use to him; but this bell that tells me of his affliction, digs out, and applies that gold to me: if by this consideration of another's danger, I take mine own into contemplation, and so secure myself, by making my recourse to my God, who is our only security.⁴

What equivalent do we have to this? Are we to say something like this?

“Ask not, my friends, for whom does this flag stay at half mast. It is there for thee as a token of thy mortality. And as the body of man is lowered into the grave for a time, so in time and on that great day he will once again be raised, not to the sky as a flag, but into the heavens themselves.”

It will never do. So let us stick with Donne, and with him muse a while on death, until we too are undone for a short sleep.

⁴ Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions. XVII Meditation.