WHEN THE SAINTS …

31ST MARCH JOHN DONNE

1ST APRIL F D MAURICE

JOHN DONNE [1571-2-1631] – In his purely literary setting John Donne is generally agreed to be the greatest of the so-called ‘metaphysical’ poets, a term first used by Samuel Johnson, referring to a few poets of C17, [including George Herbert] whose writings reflected a preoccupation with a broad philosophical and cosmological plane and a tendency to employ unusual and even ‘far-fetched’ imagery. Just as Herbert is honoured for his devotional poetry, Donne’s love poetry is his most popular today; but none of this was published until after his death. Several ‘occasional’ poems did receive publication, but Donne’s fame in his lifetime was as the illustrious Dean of St Paul’s, where he preached powerfully to the great and the good.

John Donne was born to a prosperous London ironmonger who died when his son was only 4 years old: He was the great-great grandson of Sir Thomas More’s sister, and the family had remained Catholic. His mother re-married to John Syminges, a doctor and ex-president of the Royal College of Physicians, but Syminges died in 1588. Loss and bereavement were very much a part of Donne’s life from this early age: by the time he was ten years old he had already lost three siblings, and in 1585, aged about 12, his uncle Jasper Heywood, head of the Jesuit Mission in England, was arrested, sentenced to death, and eventually banished to France. 1593 saw the death of his brother Henry of the plague in Newgate Prison, having been arrested for harbouring William Harrington, a Catholic priest, who was hung, drawn and quartered the following year.

Having graduated from Hart Hall, Oxford together with his brother Henry in 1584, he may have travelled abroad and attended Cambridge briefly before being signed up at the Inns of Court in 1591. At this time the Inns of Court functioned very much like an informal university, with anything up to a thousand young men of different ‘degrees’ in society studying and training in the law, which was the usual route by which to gain a remunerative position in secular life, and particularly at court. At this time London was the country’s commercial, administrative and cultural hub, and students could also easily acquire the ‘gentleman’s’ accomplishments necessary for courtly life. The image of ‘Jack Donne, man about town’ is what rather characterised him in the 90’s, having been chosen as ‘Master of Revels’ and ‘Steward of Christmas’ by his fellows, although he declined to act in the latter capacity. It was doubtless for this rather cliquish and macho milieu that Donne wrote the clever, complex and often world-weary productions of his early literary career; poems and satires that would have been read among friends and circulated in manuscript

What characterises his poetry, and his sermons later, is the depth and breadth of his learning in the fields of ‘natural philosophy,’ which is what we would term early scientific enquiry. The period of his lifetime – half Elizabethan and half Jacobean – represents the early phase of the transition from late mediaeval logical method to one of greater reliance on empirical enquiry characteristic of the later 17th century: it was perfectly possible at this time for people to hold contradictory opinions.

The first half of the century was also a time of adventure and expansion. During 1596-7 Donne had embarked with the Earl of Essex on several naval expeditions with varying degrees of success. In 1590’s a miniature portrait was painted of Donne, possibly by Nicholas Hilliard himself.

Once he was 21 Donne was able to receive his share of his father’s estate, but his prospects took a very definite turn for the better when in November 1598 he was appointed secretary to the Lord Keeper, Sir Thomas Egerton, and moved into his residence at York House in the Strand. 1601 Saw Donne sitting in parliament as member for a borough controlled by Egerton, so by now, at around 30 years old, we see him as a coming man.

Also resident at York House had been Lady Egerton’s niece Ann More, daughter of Sir George More, and a direct descendant of Sir Thomas, and it seems clear that they fell deeply in love, although Donne, in his early poetry, had boasted not only of his own, and women’s general inconstancy, but had hinted that he would never marry except for money. His subsequent relationship with Ann, however, illustrates the common saying that a cynic is only a romantic at heart, because in December 1602the couple were married in secret, and when, on 2nd of February 1602 the groom broke the news to Ann’s father Sir George More, Donne was briefly imprisoned in the fleet, and Egerton dismissed him from his service.

This begins the second phase of Donne’s life, when, for the next 13 years he lived with his wife and growing family in straitened financial circumstances, attempting to find a reputable position and being rebuffed at every turn. Had he been, in truth, as cynical and as worldly-wise as his early poetry makes him out to be, Donne would surely have behaved differently. That he fell passionately for Ann should be plain from the finest love poetry that probably arose from this relationship.

After Ann’s death in childbirth in 1617 Donne is found addressing himself to two subsequent women patrons, both socially well out of his league; Lucy Countess of Bedford, and Magdalene [Lady] Danvers, mother of George Herbert and his brother and Donne’s friend, Sir Edward Lord Herbert of Cherbury so we are probably to assume these relationships to have been of a chivalric nature whatever Donne’s true feelings or aspirations.

We may well ask how such a character could ever have been ordained into the Anglican church but in 1615 that is what happened: remember Augustine’s ‘long and winding road’ to holiness. Men of learning formed quite a homogenous cohort based in London: each circle of friends would have connections with other circles, and Donne himself could boast a whole raft of friends and acquaintances that history has reckoned as celebrities; Ben Jonson, Isaac Walton, the Herbert brothers and Sir Henry Wotton, who seemed to know everyone worth knowing at the time.

By 1615 some of Donne’s occasional poems and prose productions had been published so he was not completely unknown. Kathleen Jones suggests that some influential friends may have been persuading Donne to enter the church for some time, and that he made his mind to go for it once he had at last settled his conscience. Perhaps it was more the case that by his early forties Donne had exhausted every career path to court or government office, and that ordination might offer him a chaplaincy or teaching position somewhere.

It is difficult to gauge the extent and nature of Donne’s early religious beliefs, though much easier to speculate as to what may have impelled him to grow away from his Catholic roots, but this is Donne’s considered account of his conversion taken from a treatise entitled ‘Pseudo-martyr:’

They who have descended so low as to take knowledge of me, and to admit me into their consideration, know well that I used no inordinate haste nor precipitation in binding my conscience to any local religion. I had a longer work to do than many other men, for I was first to blot out certain impressions of the Roman religion, and to wrestle both against the examples and against the reasons, by which some hold was taken, and some anticipations early laid upon my conscience, both by persons who by nature had a power and superiority over my will, and others who by their learning and good life seemed to me justly to claim an interest for the guiding and rectifying of mine understanding in these matters. And although I apprehended well enough that this irresolution not only retarded my fortune, but also bred some scandal, and endangered my spiritual reputation, by laying me open to many misinterpretations, yet all these respects did not transport me to any violent and sudden determination, till I had, to the measure of my poor wit and judgement, surveyed and digested the whole body of divinity controverted between ours and the Roman church, in which search and disquisition. That god which awakened me then, and had never forsaken me in that industry, as he is the author of that purpose, so is he a witness of this protestation, that I behaved myself and proceeded therein with humility and diffidence in myself, and by that which, by his grace, I took to be the ordinary means, which is frequent prayer and equal and indifferent affection …

He had acquired extensive secular learning, but it is easy to forget that the dichotomy between sacred and secular thought is our own and would not have made sense in Donne’s day except as ‘The nature of God and the works of God.’ By the time he commenced his preaching career he knew the bible and the Latin fathers. King James it was who procured Donne his DD from Cambridge by royal mandate, moving in the circles he did, and being no shrinking violet, Donne may well have been brought to the attention of people in very high places who may not have held his secret marriage against him any longer.

Despite the marked increase in book and pamphlet publications in the early 17th century there were still no newspapers, and the pulpit was one of principal means of disseminating news. Outward conformity was still church policy, although religious controversy took place in the universities and in private gatherings. King James had a genuine interest in scholarship and theological debate, and, having presented Rev Dr Donne with several livings, by the time of his appointment as Dean of St Paul’s Donne was already preaching at the Inns of Court and elsewhere.

As for his spirituality, by whatever worldly route he had entered the church by the broad gate, the evidence from his poetry is that he made it by the narrow gate in or before 1617, after his wife’s death in childbirth: Here is his Holy sonnet 17:

Since she whom I love hath paid her last debt

To nature, and to hers, and my good is dead,

And her soul early into heaven ravish’ed,

Wholly in heavenly things my mind is set.

Here the admiring her my mind did whet

To seek thee, God; so streams do show the head,

But though I have found thee and my thirst thou hast fed

A holy thirsty dropsy melts me yet.

But why should I beg more love, when as thou

Dost rule my soul for hers, offering all thine:

And dost not only fear that I allow

My love to saints and angels, things divine,

But in thy tender jealousy dost doubt

Lest the world, flesh, yea Devil, put thee out.

This surely speaks for itself. Pop psychology is usually inadvisable, but Donne experienced multiple bereavements as a child, and the fact that he was willing to risk his career prospects by marrying Ann and his subsequent attachment to her through his 13 years in the doldrums illustrates his emotional investment and attachment to her as the one point of security in his life. With the shock of losing his wife in this way, and still in his early years as a priest, he must have found himself thrown back on the only resource available to him; God.

Reading the sermons, the unavoidable impression is of Donne’s powers of rhetoric and imagination, and it is these virtues in them that make them compelling reading, and people flocked to hear him, not only at the cathedral, but more publicly round the corner at St Paul’s Cross. When, in 1623 he preached at the dedication of the chapel at the Inns of Court the crowds were so dense that one or two people were ‘taken dead.’

What might easily put off a modern reader of Donne’s sermons is their occasional meanness of spirit. As preacher and theologian, Donne was a child of his time, and the pulpit was an important instrument of control both in church and state. During a perfectly crafted sermon on charity, we find a paragraph concluding that ‘as there are sins we are not bid to pray for, so there are beggars we are not bid to give to … ‘ there was an increasing problem of ‘sturdy beggars’ and ‘masterless men’ in country parishes, where the local parson in partnership with the local gentry, administered whatever there was in the way of social services, and the still comparatively recent Elizabethan poor laws were extremely harsh.

By contrast, In another context altogether, ‘Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions’ we find the passage made famous by Earnest Hemingway’s novel ‘For Whom the Bell Tolls,’ in which he concludes that ‘No man is an island …everyman’s death diminishes me …’

The established church veered towards reformed theology and pre-destination, although Donne is very clear that a merciful God would not predestine any of his beloved creatures to damnation. After the accession of Charles I, however, there was an increasing move in the direction of ceremony and sacramental worship. Charles’ queen, Henrietta Maria was a Catholic, and despite royal discouragement, quite a few courtiers and other important people had converted, so that when we read Donne’s often quite tedious vituperations against Rome this may also have reflected state policy, although he could not always be relied upon to keep a straight face: during a sermon preached to the Earl of Carlisle in 1622 Donne returns to his favourite Aunt Sally, indulgences, and claims that if David had been on the earth, and the persecuting angel drawing his sword, he could have appealed to Rome for an inhibition against the angel, [and let God get on with it!]; and had the angel been ready to fire Sodom, the inhabitants could have purchased a charter from Rome for ‘that sin.’

This same sermon provides a splendid instance of Donne’s rhetorical power: he has moved onto the subject of Hell, and suggests that how we envision the state physically is not a matter of doctrine, and he goes on to speak of how fearful it is to fall into the hands of the living God; but immediately asks rhetorically how much more fearful to fall out of his hands! In a sentence of no less than 36 lines of print Donne builds on the extent of God’s love and care, and to what lengths he has gone to bring a soul back into the fold, only to let it fall into a bottomless pit and never remember it again: to quote the passage in full will create an unnecessary length to an already long article.

It is in the late religious poetry of Donne that we finally dig out the well-hidden treasure. There is no Christian writing as compressed and powerful as some of the Holy Sonnets until we get to the last ones of Gerard Manley Hopkins in the late nineteenth century. Both sets of poems can support and assure any Christian in danger of shipwreck from self-doubt or depression that, truly, we are not on an untrodden path.

There is little or nothing of original theology in Donne’s sermons, but very great power, and often even greater beauty, but the vast majority of the religious poetry, and in particular the Holy Sonnets, encapsulate the struggles many – most of us – undergo in trying to deal with our disordered love of God and setting and maintaining him in his rightful place in our lives, and for this reason alone it is worth the effort to understand and contemplate their meaning. The church is blessed eternally blessed to have gained such a priceless treasure to share with the world.

To be able to comprehend Donne and his work requires a life-time of scholarship, and what you read here is only one very imperfect path a little way up the mountain; it is not THE TRUTH.

A good introduction to John Donne is to be found in the Oxford authors series.

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F D MAURICE [1805-72] – Frederick Denison Maurice is associated with the Christian Socialist Movement, which he and others, including Charles Kingsley, helped pioneer.

He was born in Lowestoft, the son of the local Unitarian minister, for which reason he was unable to receive a degree from Cambridge, where he studied. He went to London and for a while entered the publishing business, where he probably met Samuel Taylor Coleridge who persuaded him to convert to Anglicanism. He was now able to re-enter university to be ordained. He returned to London as Chaplain of Guy’s Hospital, and later of Lincoln’s Inn.

During this time, of course, the universities and the church generally were in the throes of bitter controversies between Evangelicals and Tractarians: Maurice wanted nothing to do with any of this and, in consequence, attracted criticism from both extremes. His growing advocacy of education for the working man, and of the early Co-operative Movement, grew from an entirely theological base. Here is an excerpt from a sermon:

‘What was the name of this demon? Our Lord gives him his name … Mammon. The name is familiar to the Jews. They knew that Mammon meant the money-god, and they knew, probably, that those in different lands who worshipped the god of money, whether by this title or any other, applied to him because they hoped he would make them rich, and that he would enable them to find hordes of gold which other people could not find, or to compass some end which would give them an advantage over their fellow men, and help them to rise by their fall. They knew as much as this about the idol of which our Lord spoke … Christ did not come saying, ‘it’s very humiliating, to be serving this money-god. It lowers you in the scale of creatures; it hinders you from being really men.’ All this is true, and all this had been said again and again. But what good had come of it? Are men able to shake off a yoke because they are told it is a shame to wear it? Generally the effort to do so rivets the chain more tightly. Here it certainly would ... Our Lord went straight to the root. He said boldly, to poor men and rich men, to young and old, to Pharisees and publicans, “Mammon is not the god: I come to tell you who is …”’.

Maurice’s best-known book was ‘the Kingdom of God,’ [1838] but he wrote extensively, and in 1846 was appointed Professor of English Literature, History and Theology at King’s College. It is puzzling, therefore, to learn that he was criticised by opponents for the breadth rather than the depth of his knowledge, to which he responded that in order to educate the working man such a broad approach was a priority.

In 1848, the year of European revolutions, and the publication of The Communist Manifesto, Maurice and Charles Kingsley supported the Chartist Movement, and founded a newspaper entitled ‘The Christian Socialist. Their Tracts for Priests and People were widely circulated, and Maurice became the first President of the Society for the Promotion of Working Men’s Associations.

Maurice interested himself not only in education but also in the incipient Co-operative Movement among producers, from the standpoint that the pursuit of money by capitalist producers of goods was destroying the lives of their employees, and in so doing bringing about the inexorable destruction of family life, in that if the rent was constantly in arrears, there were tallies at the bake’s and other providers of essential goods, and several families compelled by necessity to share the space of one room, each family member would grow up to view everybody else as being in their own way.

In modern times the reputation of the Co-op has been tarnished by gross mismanagement, but Maurice did not promote the movement as a panacea, but simply as an alternative to the laissez-faire capitalism of his time. He saw that the idolatrous worship of money devalues everybody concerned; that the producer sees his staff merely as objects who are always going to want more money than he is willing to give, and, on the other side, the workers view management merely as enemies who wish to exploit them, and that this whole ethos reduces the quality of human life to its very minimum. He was aware that the mediaeval guilds with their ethos of brotherhood and sharing, had become stultified by restrictive practises and exclusions:

‘… and yet I believe it is an older principle than that of the feudal aristocracy, or that of the middle age companies, [guilds] or that of the free traders, for which we are contending. I believe that men were taught, long before any of these came into existence, that they were meant to live and work together, and how they might live and work together. The doctrine that men should call nothing their own was proclaimed by Galilean fishermen before it was adopted into the English constitution … It is working in that way in England at the present time. Everywhere there are attempts to do great works of mercy which are based upon the doctrine that men are brothers and that they can act as if they were, because there is an influence strong enough to overpower the tendencies to rivalry and division that exist among them.’

Unsurprisingly these entirely prophetic proclamations encountered opposition from many quarters and on various grounds: that his views were unscientific; that his work undermined the sacred bond between master and servant; that they would tend to destroy family life; that they would bring disorder, and that he and Kingsley supported the Communists.

Maurice’s ideas were by no means radical: he whole-heartedly supported JS Mill, although he wanted no truck with democracy: his principles were based on what Thatcher termed ‘Family values,’ and apart from helping to found Queens College we hear nothing about the rights of women.

With this in mind it becomes almost impossible to comprehend the pall of moral blindness within which he had to contend, and perhaps worst of all is that while he and Kingsley were proclaiming their truth; individual clergy were doing their best working on the ‘coal face’ in deprived areas, and our finest novelists were making the public aware of the conditions in which most of their countrymen were existing, the church and the universities could do no more than criticise Maurice for his total lack of interest in their doctrinal squabbles.

In 1853 Maurice was dismissed from his professorship at Kings because it was felt that his doctrine of Hell was unsatisfactory: his position was that:

‘I am obliged to believe in an abyss of love that is deeper than the abyss of death: I dare not lose faith in that love. I sink into death, eternal death, if I do.’

The following year he founded and became the first Principal of the Working Men’s College. Around this time, he also helped his sister together with the rest of those who were founding Queens College for women which opened in 1854.

In 1866 Maurice was appointed to the Chair of Moral Theology at Cambridge, a position he retained until his death in 1872.

Nowadays Kings College host a set of ‘Maurice Lectures!’