

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH ASH WEDNESDAY 1 MARCH 2017

Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
Which is my sin, though it were done before?

These are the first two lines of a poem by John Donne, published in the 1630s, when Charles I was on the throne. He wrote a great deal of poetry, not just religious, and some of it is quite racy. He was born a Roman Catholic, converted to the Church of England, and became Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Before that he had been a Member of Parliament. He writes perceptively of what it means to be human. It is easy to identify with the thoughts and feelings he expresses.

In these opening lines he talks of something being his sin, though it were done before. There's deliberate wordplay on his name, though it's spelt with a double N: D-O-double N-E. A sin 'done before': in traditional Christian doctrine this is called original sin. The idea is that the disobedience of Adam and Eve changed the world into which all subsequent humans are born. They were expelled from paradise, the garden of Eden, and all humans now inhabit the fallen world they brought into existence. Even if we don't take the story of serpents and apples literally, we can't deny there is evil in the world we live in, and that affects us. John Donne is asking if the sin he shares purely because he is human can be forgiven.

Then he goes on to the sin for which he is personally responsible, though he knows it is wrong:

Wilt thou forgive that sin, through which I run,
And do run still, though still I do deplore?

We might expect God to forgive us when we don't know what is right or wrong, but will he forgive us when we deliberately sin, or sin through our weakness? The poet continues,

When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

In other words, even if God does forgive the sins we commit (rather than inherit), he hasn't finished, he hasn't done, with our need for his forgiveness. John Donne wonders if we can be forgiven the sin which is especially evil because it affects not just our own moral standing, but that of other people:

Wilt thou forgive that sin by which I won
Others to sin, and made my sin their door?

It may be that other people join us in sinful acts that we initiate, or it may be that we set a bad example that they follow. The world is more connected now than ever. For example, posting something offensive on Facebook invites others to share and approve what has been expressed.

Then the poet thinks of how difficult it is to give up sins, which perhaps we enjoy:

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

That seems to include sins we resisted for a little while, but are now committing, as well as sins we have recently given up. Even if these are forgiven,

When thou hast done, thou hast not done,
For I have more.

John Donne's final sin is a lack of trust that God's forgiveness will be complete: he fears that he will not be brought into God's presence when he dies.

I have a sin of fear, that when I've spun
My last thread, I shall perish on the shore;

Fear is not necessarily sinful, but doubting that God will do what he has promised is sinful. The poet quickly pulls himself back to the healing light of Christ. Here again there is wordplay, between S-U-N, the sun that shines in the sky, and S-O-N, the Son of God:

But swear by thyself, that at my death thy Son
Shall shine as he shines now, and heretofore;
And, having done that, thou hast done;
I fear no more.

On Ash Wednesday we focus on the seriousness of sin, in the words and the actions of our liturgy, particularly in the ceremony of receiving the ashes. We reflect on our human condition, our mortality. One of the sentences that may be said by the priest imposing the ashes is, 'Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return.' This connects us to Adam, formed from the dust of the earth. God breathed into him the breath of life, the Holy Spirit, and it is by God's power that all of us are held in being. Adam and Eve sinned, as we all have, and though our original communion with God was damaged, he did not take away his sustaining power. John Donne's fear of perishing at the death of his body is therefore a doubting of God's ability and will to keep us in life.

If sin is serious, then repentance cannot be easy. The poet is longing to repent, and implies that God will forgive human sinfulness in its various aspects, even if our repentance seems superficial, having little effect in our lives. Our foreheads are marked with the sign of the cross. The death of Jesus is the culmination of the sin of the world, sins before and sins after. At the heart of the Christian faith is a glorious reversal, a transformation. The tree of death became the tree of life. Paradise, Eden, is restored to mankind, and mankind is reconciled to God. This is where the season of Lent takes us. Listen to the poem again.

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