

The Analogy of Faith: The Anglican Character of John Donne's Sermons

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I

Nothing is more injurious to the just appreciation of an author than selective quotation from his works¹. The variety of topics of enduring aesthetic and thematic interest in Donne's sermons makes them peculiarly susceptible to this procedure. We may dilate on his use of the several methods of the *ars praedicandi* tradition of the Middle Ages, such as that of *merismus*, whereby the matter is divided into three parts followed by further division into sub-themes; while the reader familiar with his poetry, hearing echoes of his verse in these discourses, enriches his understanding of both by cross-reference - to phrases repeated, to the duplication of images and metaphors in different thematic contexts, and to the paraphrase in prose of subjects treated in the poetry. When Donne announces in a sermon that 'God will beat downe, and cut off, and blow up, and blow out at his pleasure' the sheer noise of the speech recalls the onomatopoeic plea of 'Batter my heart, three-personed God' - the imagery of the homily developing meteorologically, in the sonnet metallurgically, but to the same end of 'plentifull redemption'.²

Then for those appreciative of the beauties of English prose style, Donne's sermons provide delicious satisfaction to the aesthetic appetite: 'the Donne who is admired by most twentieth century readers is not the preacher known by the seventeenth century', Lancelot Andrewes' editor points out; 'he is the prose artist excerpted and arranged by the anthologist'.³ We note, for example, his genius for adapting his language not only to the spiritual tenor of the festival or occasion on which he is preaching and its liturgy and lections, but - of equal importance - to the preoccupations of his congregation and its level of sophistication. Addressing the nobility, he introduces an apt metaphor for his procedure:

1. My discussion is confined to the ten sermons collected in *John Donne's Sermons on the Psalms and Gospels*, ed. Evelyn M. Simpson, Berkeley, 1963.
2. Simpson, p.61 *Complete English Poems* ed. A.J. Smith Harmondsworth, (Penguin), 1971, p.314.
3. G.M. Story ed., *Lancelot Andrewes: Sermons*, Oxford, 1967, p.xxix.

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These words shall be fittest considered, like a goodly palace, if we rest a little, as in an outward Court, upon consideration of prayer in generall;

later reviving it with a courteous gesture attuned to the social proprieties of his auditory:

It were unmannerlinesse to hold you longer in the Entry. One turne in the inner Court, of this speciall prayer in generall, and so enter the Palace.⁴

Yet Donne, who had experienced at first hand the shortcomings of this domain, proceeds with the directness of a Raleigh sharply to differentiate temporal courts from Heaven's 'glorious Palace', where there is 'no passing of guards, nor ushers. No examination of thy degree or habit. The Prince is not asleep, nor private, nor weary of giving, nor refers to others'.⁵ His noble congregation, who had earlier been beguiled by the preacher's suave allusions, were surely discomfited by this *volte-face*.

In agreeable contrast to such refinement of reference - and indeed to the generally erudite disposition of his addresses with their patristic learning and theological explication - is Donne's occasional relaxation of style into a proverbial idiom. 'Do not thou make Gods Rheubarbe thy Ratsbane', he counsels a cathedral congregation with delectable alliteration, to urge the interpretation of the Father's corrections as cures.⁶ And the rhetorical monarch at St James's is as likely to be exposed to this disarming simplicity as Donne's unlettered country parishioners at Sevenoaks or Blunham. Preaching before Charles on the four 'houses' of the human condition - *Domus Ecclesia*, *Respublica Domus*, *Domus Domicilium* and *Domus Dominus* (the Church, the State, the Family and one's self) - Donne has recourse to homely admonition, proposing that 'every smoke does not argue the house to bee on fire', in a pragmatic discussion which exhales the judicious spirit of Elizabethan statecraft and ecclesiastical polity, both to be further endangered under Charles, and the innate commonsensicality of English morality. 'In a smoakie roome', Donne continues, returning to his humble imagery, 'it may bee enough to open a Windowe'.⁷

Then the biographical inquirer may turn to the sermons for their

4. Simpson, pp.115, 117
5. Simpson, p.118
6. Simpson, p.62
7. Simpson, pp.86, 91

documentation of Donne's sensibility and temperament - and his inclination will be to concentrate on the negative aspects of the preacher's self-revelation, compelling moments *in extremis*. Donne's analysis *de contemptu mundi* is relentlessly dark, even by seventeenth century standards, and we cannot fail to discern a *cri de coeur* in his presentation of the ages of man, where the repetitive and accumulative sequence speaks of harrowing experience:

Our life is a warfare, our whole life; It is not onely with lusts in our youth, and ambitions in our middle yeares, and indevotions in our age, but with agonies in our body, and tentations in our spirit upon our death-bed, that we are to fight; and he cannot be said to overcome, that fights not out the whole battell. ⁸

The inescapable Last Things are the ultimate focus of Donne's understanding of the Christian pilgrimage, and, as in his poetry, he invests this conventional subject for meditation in his sermons with peculiar intensity. Bereft of God's saving power, 'we are waighed down, we swallowed up, irreparably, irrevocably, irrecoverably, irremediably'. ⁹

But as there is a temptation in the description of the sermons in terms of conventions of preaching then current to fail to recognise that these structures are frameworks only; or, in the cataloguing of their reflections and anticipations of the thought and artistry in the poetry, to omit to say that such similarities occur only sporadically; or, in the elucidation of Donne's brilliance as a *prosateur*, to overlook the fact that these pieces were designed finally to fulfil a spiritual rather than an aesthetic function; so, a concentration on Donne's breast-beating may overpower the observation of his interludes of exultation:

The contemplation of God, and heaven, is a kind of buriall, and Sepulchre, and rest of the soule [he reflected in an Easter address], and in his death of rapture, and extasie, in this death of the Contemplation of my interest in my Saviour, I shall find my self, and all my sins enterred, and entombed in his wounds, and like a Lily in Paradise, out of red earth, I shall see my soule rise out of his blade, in a candor, and in an innocence, contracted there, acceptable in the sight of his Father. ¹⁰

8. Simpson, p.58

9. Simpson, p.100

10. Simpson, pp.42-3

A rhetorical ploy, the use of the first person pronoun - unusually prevalent here - also reiterates a genuinely personal note in the midst of a lyrical mysticism. Throughout the sermons, mortal despair is roundly defeated by Christian hope.

II

The allure of the kinds of partial readings I have suggested is obvious. But the comprehensive appreciation of the sermons depends essentially on their interpretation as documents of Anglican ecclesiology, theology and spirituality as mediated by this most renowned of deans of St Paul's. Unique amongst his writings, the sermons are not public utterances designed only for emergent occasions (like *Pseudo-Martyr* and *Ignatius his Conclave*), or testimonies to personal faith (like the Hymns); but as components of the liturgy of a Church which Donne envisaged as confessing a creed 'Universall, Catholique, believed by all'.¹¹ they strive deliverately to subordinate ephemeral concerns and the individuality of the preacher's intimations to the mind of the Church and the perennial themes of Christian living. With an admirable sensitivity to the classical function of the sermon, Donne modulates from the idiosyncrasies of a powerful personality - never entirely conquered - to conformity with the public obligations conferred upon the priest in the pulpit, where he envisaged himself 'not as a *Judge*, but as an *Assistant* to your Consciences, and *Amicus Curiae*'.¹² The eloquence is distinctively his own, but it is discovered in a context constantly aspiring to catholicity.

The 'shadow of the impure motive' which T.S. Eliot famously perceived in the sermons¹³ is in fact expressive of that tension between individuality and authority which they embody and which is endemic to Anglicanism. Eliot was not the first Anglo-Catholic to be impatient with the compromises which are Anglicanism's genuine expression, and his schoolmasterly censure of Donne - that his 'experience was not perfectly controlled, and that he lacked spiritual discipline'¹⁴ - is a distortion which says less about the preacher's alleged deficiencies than it does about Eliot's own desire to retreat from the vagaries of personal experience (as in the grotesque failure of his first marriage), to abolish painful self-obsession in the impersonality of Catholic faith and practice. In commending Lancelot Andrewes' cerebral sermons, Eliot was seeking - at the time of his baptism and confirmation in 1927 - to interpret

11. Simpson, p.225

12. Simpson, p.155

13. 'Lancelot Andrewes', in *For Lancelot Andrewes*, London, 1928 (1970), p.16

14. *Ibid.*

Caroline divinity and Anglo-Catholicism as repositories of objective, super-human truth. Having overcome a decade of hysteria with this apotheosis, Eliot was in no mind to be sympathetic to what he presents, with admitted exaggeration, as Donne's 'emotional orgy'.¹⁵ He quotes the moving passage on imperfect prayer:

A memory of yesterday's pleasures, a feare of tomorrow's dangers, a straw under my knee, a noise in mine ear, a light in mine eye, an anything, a nothing, a fancy, a Chimera in my braine, troubles me in my prayer. So certainly is there nothing, nothing in spiritual things, perfect in this world

- and is relieved to note that 'these are thoughts which would never have come to Andrewes'.¹⁶ Anxious to uncover a 'personality' to support his perverse thesis that Donne is 'constantly finding an object which shall be adequate to his feelings'.¹⁷ Eliot - in citing this anthology piece - gladly succumbs to the error of selective quotation.

But such intimate excursions - exceptional in the sermons, although the anthologists have rendered them typical - are in fact a device for bringing the preacher into conformity with the purpose of all sermons, including Andrewes'. For the presence of Donne's 'personality' serves to diminish rather than to endorse that indulgence of his sensibility alleged by Eliot: it initiates a process of depersonalisation which vigorously enacts the Christian conquest of self-will - the essential spiritual discipline. If Donne appeals to 'those capable of a certain wantonness of the spirit'¹⁸ - scarcely an exclusive sect - it is to encourage them to correct their waywardness as he has done.

In his defence of Anglicanism, the golden mean of the *via media* is assiduously pursued - in matters theological, liturgical and moral. The spirit of reasonableness is pervasive. Concluding a sermon in St Paul's, Donne exhorts his congregation to 'returne to God, with a joyfull thankfulness that he hath placed you in a Church, which withholdeth nothing from you, that is necessary to salvation'. He distinguishes the Church of England from those of Geneva and Rome: 'in another Church they lack a great part of the Word, and halfe the Sacrament' (allowing only the literalist reading of Scripture and the memorialist theory of the

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid., p.24

17. Ibid., p.25

18. Ibid., p.26

eucharist), while at Rome 'the Additionall things exceed the Fundamentall: the Occasionall, the Originall; the Collaterall, the Direct; and the Traditions of men, the Commandements of God',¹⁹ Confronted by the fanaticism of Jesuits (which he had known at first hand in his recusant childhood) and of Calvinists, Donne seeks a temperate faith based on the cardinal tenets of Christianity, tolerant of liberality in matters of secondary importance and soberly acquiescent in the presence of indefinable mystery. He is not backward in entering the fray against outlandish heretics: 'I lament the growth, and insinuation of that pestilent Heresie of Socinianisme', he declares;²⁰ but more often he is found affirming the apostolic teachings of Catholic Christianity against the hair-splitting of the Schoolmen, the Reformers and the Counter-Reformation divines. The Tridentine theologians have made salvation expensive, he opines:

Threescore yeares agoe, a man might have been sav'd at halfe
the price hee can now; Threescore yeares ago, he might have
been saved for beleeving the *Apostles Creed*; now it will cost
him the *Trent Creed* too.²¹

And in several places he rejects the narrowness of the Calvinistic doctrines of election and double predestination by insisting upon the generosity of the Lord's redemptive mercy. Preaching to the Court, he asserts that all men are Christ's 'from all eternity' - both the sinful and the pure in heart:

For in the Book of Life, the name of *Mary Magdalen* was as
soon recorded, for all her incontinency, as the name of the
blessed Virgin, for all her integrity; and the name of *St. Paul*
who drew his sword against Christ, as soon as *St. Peter*, who
drew his in defence of him: for the Book of life was not written
successively, word after word, line after line, but delivered as a
Print, all together.²²

The optimistic persuasion of Donne's soteriology here contrasts so markedly with his private apprehension, as in the *Divine Meditations*, of the precariousness of his eternal destiny.

Eschewing a precise interpretation of the irresistibility of grace, he concedes that 'there is some truth in the thing, soberly understood: for the

19. Simpson, pp.71-2

20. Simpson, p.228

21. Simpson, p.81

22. Simpson, p.208

grace of God is more powerful than any resistance of any man or devil'. But he counsels against putting the doctrine into daily practice. Rather,

Christ beats his Drum, but he does not Press men; Christ is served with Voluntaries.

An Augustinian balance is struck between necessity and free will - the injunction to compel men was 'an extraordinary commission, and in a case of Necessity', for 'men that are forced to come hither, they are not much the better in themselves, nor we much the better assur'd of their Religion, for that: Force and violence, pecuniary and bloody Laws are not the right way to bring men to Religion'.²³ The more compelling teaching, indeed, was '*Venit vocare, He came to call*'.²⁴

As the worship of Christians expresses their theological convictions, so Donne's discussion of liturgical matters in the sermons complements the Anglicanism of his doctrine. Contrasting the public worship of the Established Church with sectarian observances, he nonetheless admits a 'large Latitude' in its performance: 'much may bee admitted, and yet no *Foundations destroyed*', he states, adapting his text - 'and till *Foundations be destroyed, the righteous should bee quiet*'.²⁵ Catching precisely the spirit of the statement 'Of Ceremonies' introduced in the first Prayer Book of 1549, Donne counsels circumspect tolerance in declaring that 'wee must not too jealously suspect, not too bitterly condemn, not too peremptorily conclude, that what so ever is not done, as wee would have it done, or as wee have seene it done in former times, is not well done'.²⁶ The *leitmotiv* of his liturgiology, as of his theology, is that the caprices of individual religion should be subjected to the consensus of the community of faith. Appropriately, he focuses on the 'publique preaching of the Gospel', encouraging both himself and his congregation to 'rejoyce in it, by frequenting it, and by instituting our lives according unto it'. Christians should be zealous about the Church's liturgy lest they 'come to an indifferency, whether the service of God be private or publique, sordid or glorious'.²⁷ In the Puritans' rejection of set forms of prayer, of ecclesiastical and ministerial ornaments and vesture and of distinctive actions and posture at divine service, Donne astutely discerns the evacuation of transcendental significance from all their Christian

23. Simpson, p.211

24. Simpson, p.212

25. Simpson, p.75

26. Ibid.

27. Simpson, p.66

observances on earth (which must necessarily partake of spatio-temporality): 'he that undervalues *outward things*, in the religious service of God, though he begin at *ceremoniall* and *rituall* things, will come quickly to call *Sacraments* but outward things...in contempt'. The doctrine of the Incarnation was, for Donne, the final validation of the liturgical order and beauty of the Laudian Church: 'Beloved, outward things apparell God; and since God was content to take *a body*, let us not leave him naked, nor ragged'.²⁸

Donne's references to the sacraments, extensions of the Incarnation, exemplify the Anglican combination of reverence at their administration and reticence in their interpretation. His rejection of Zwinglianism (and probably of Calvin's Virtualism also) - where bread and wine is admitted to every function except to be 'the very body, and the very blood of Christ' - and of Transubstantiation, which would 'destroy and contradict even the nature of the miracle, to make miracles ordinary, and fixed, constant and certain' (closely reflecting the language of the twenty-eighth of the Thirty-Nine Articles),²⁹ is inspired by his general conviction that a 'mysterie is not so well celebrated, with our words, and discourse, as with a holy silence, and meditation'.³⁰

Then it is not surprising that one so conscious of sin should turn his attention to the disputed sacrament of confession. Yet the Dean of St Paul's calmly expounds the Anglican position on this point. 'For Confession', he says, 'we require publicke confession in the Congregation' -but, while recalling the modification in the more Protestant Prayer Book of 1552 of the exhortation in 1549 (where auricular confession was regarded as more usual than it came to be), he notes that 'in time of Sicknes, upon the death-bed, we enjoyn private and particular Confession, if the conscience be oppressed'. Nonetheless, as he warms to this provision, we sense again that captivating self-involvement of the preacher in his subject:

if any man do think, that that which is necessary for him, upon his death-bed, is necessary, every time he comes to the Communion, and so come to such a confession, if anything lie upon him, as often as he comes to the Communion, we blame not, we dissuade not, we dis-counsel not that tenderness of conscience, and that safe proceeding in that good soul.³¹

28. Simpson, p.149

29. Simpson, p.151

30. Simpson, p.189

31. Simpson, p.218

The Anglican temperateness of Donne's theology and liturgiology is plainly intertwined in the moral teaching of the sermons where his first pastoral concern is to allay the distress of his people. While he is persistently alerting them to the evil of the world and their participation in it - from which only the sacrifice of Christ can release them - he is quick to affirm the goodness of creation and to urge them to its celebration. Calvary dominates his theological landscape, but Bethlehem humanises it. 'All our life is a continuall burden', he admits, 'yet we must not groane; A continuall squeasing yet we must not pant'.³² The righteous, belonging to Christ, belong also to the world which he adorned with his presence, and they participate in its fulness of life:

Civil recreations, offices of society and mutal entertainment,
and cheerful conversation; and such a use of Gods creatures,
as may testifie him to be a God, not of the valleys onely, but of
the mountains too, not a God of necessity onely, but of plenty
too.³³

Donne's sermons are not ignorant of his extraordinary personality, either in substance or in style - and we would not have them otherwise. But we should also recognise that they are statements larger than an individual's utterances. We hear Donne's voice in these addresses and we sense how often he is addressing himself; however his words are also those of the Church, directed to its members. 'If God ask me an Idea of my Sermons', he mused, 'shall I not be able to say, It is that which the Analogy of Faith, the edification of the Congregation, the zeale of thy worke, the meditations of my heart have imprinted in me?'³⁴

32. Simpson, p.97

33. Simpson, p.201

34. Simpson, p.104