

fully his, then, in this sphere also, he must use force, that of a lover intent to gain his end:

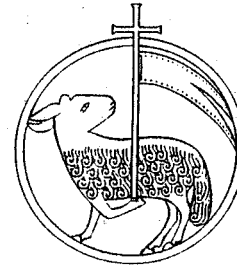
*Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,
But I am betroth'd unto your enemy:
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again.
Take me to you, imprison me, for I
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.*

Only a brave soul could make such a prayer to God and bear the consequences, since God usually takes us at our word. All the same, nothing can be too costly to the one who truly seeks that holiness without which no one shall see God.

Nevertheless, Donne is also gently realistic, and kind to himself and to us. In another of his sonnets: *At the round earth's imagined corners*, he begins by depicting the final judgement, when, as St Paul puts it, the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised, while the bodies of those still alive are caught up into the air to meet the Lord.

Be that as it may, however, Donne looks to the present. He is still earth-bound and burdened with his sins. He asks for time and for grace to repent, quietly trusting in the redeeming work of Christ for salvation. In the last analysis that is the least, and the most, *we* need to do too:

*But let them sleep, Lord, and me mourn a space,
For, if above all these, my sins abound,
'Tis late to ask abundance of thy grace
When we are there; here on this lowly ground,
Teach me how to repent; for that's as good
As if thou had'st seal'd my pardon, with thy blood.*



FAITH praying and believing ON THE EARTH

SIN'S AMENDMENT

a poet's plea

If personal sin and a sense of accountability tend to be swept under the carpet today, it has not always been so. Neither would it seem, incidentally, to be the wisest policy. Far better in fact to recognize and accept wrongdoing in ourselves and deal with it in the God-given ways provided, than to try and suppress everything, with all the dire consequences for ourselves and society which that entails. Our Christian forbears generally had a vivid awareness of sin and of their own involvement in it, which, when not carried to morbid extremes, proved a healthy antidote. John Donne, the seventeenth century Anglican priest, poet and preacher (1571/2-1631) is a case in point. His well-known poem: *A Hymn to God the Father* merits close study.

"*Wilt thou forgive . . . ?*" is the writer's constant plea to God, as he analyses aspects of sin in himself. After all, in his early years he had led a dissolute life, and only later came to a truly living faith and pursued a priestly vocation. Worldly temptations had a consistently strong pull and he knew it, and battled on. But Donne was also a brilliant preacher and gifted poet, with a profound grasp of the truths of the Christian faith as evidenced in his writings. He begins his *Hymn to God the Father* where the Church often begins when talking about sin, ie with original sin:

*Wilt thou forgive that sin where I begun,
which was my sin, though it were done before?*

This is both an important statement and a vital question. Donne, like the rest

of us, recognises that he had been off to a bad start. Sinful tendencies and a proneness to do the wrong thing were there from his very beginnings. Is God then, willing to forgive our implication in that inherited condition of human sinfulness which Donne at least seems willing enough to recognise in himself and to take personal responsibility for, though it might well seem to be not exactly his own fault? And then, following on from there, Donne questions in his poem:

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

“What”, he seems to be saying, “of that host of wrong things I know are wrong, don’t really find attractive, but all the same go on doing? Any chance of forgiveness there?” And there is even more to come:

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

So he tells God.

Yes, there are all those awful things that have been said and done and which have led others astray, caused *them* to sin as well, either by doing the same themselves or perhaps by reacting in some sort of sinful way.

Is that forgivable?

And yet again:

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

We know all about that as well - the gallant efforts to amend, the hard struggles . . . but then the letting slip and the giving up until we lapse maybe into a state worse and more persistent than before; or conversely, long years of dissipation with a last minute attempt to get things right before the end. Which will count in the long run, the long years of licence or the sudden spurt?

But even after all that there is still the worst thing of all; God certainly can’t yet say that he is done (note the poet’s consistent punning on his own name, by the way.) What if, in the end, after death and in the judgement, there actually should be *no* forgiveness? Donne fears the sin of despair, now, and - in conse-

quence - maybe the actuality of damnation afterwards:

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

His remedy, though, now, while there is time, is to beg God’s mercy in prayer, pleading the saving work of Christ:

*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.*

God will indeed then truly *have Donne*, as his own, when his sins are washed away by the blood of Christ. Likewise, we too can have confidence in the redeeming death and resurrection of Jesus, however overwhelming our sense of sin might be.

All the same, this does not imply inert passivity. Donne knew he had a share in the work. His repentance must show itself in an ongoing battle with sin and he must truly be purged and cleansed. Since he was prone to fall back again and again, like all of us, into his worldly ways, he knew also that God would have to force his hand. This concept is graphically depicted in one of Donne’s best known sonnets: *Batter my heart, three person’d God*. Here he makes brilliant use of imagery from the very passions themselves from which he seeks to extricate himself, even applying them to God’s action on himself.

Gentle persuasion is not enough. Donne is like a beleaguered city in the hands of the devil and his minions. His own puny prayers cannot penetrate heaven. Instead God must come in with full force and of his own accord, to budge sin and to conquer. That is the poet’s prayer.

Never mind the cost to himself:

*Batter my heart, three person’d God; for, you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn and make me new.*

Though Donne feels himself to be weak and totally given over to the other side, he nevertheless goes on to plead his love for God. If God wants him to be