

Thought for the Day

Thought for the day is based on one of the day's lectionary readings.

For the Bible online, go to: <http://bible.oremus.org/>

Choose your version (we use NRSV in church)

Copy and paste the reference into the search box and the passage will be displayed.

Tuesday 31 March

No man is an island, entire of itself...

Each man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind.

Therefore, send not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.

Today the church commemorates John Donne, metaphysical poet, priest and Dean of St Paul's, London, who lived 1571-1631. You may know some of his poetry, and like me, you may have studied some of it in school. Probably his best-known religious words are from his Meditation about the tolling of a bell when a person died, tolling out the years of their life: "Send not to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee". This was not just a reminder of our own mortality, that we too will one day pass away; it was also a sense of solidarity with the whole human race. 'Each man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind (sic).'

Perhaps we could do with more of that sense of solidarity today. In our culture we are very individualistic; we focus on individual human rights, and more on our rights than our responsibilities. That's probably one of the reasons why the lockdown has been so hard for us. We are not used to curtailing our freedom for the benefit of others, and even when we are told that it's for our own benefit too, we are not keen.

Donne wrote a lot of love poetry in his youth and pretty erotic it often was. He later became an Anglican priest and after he lost his wife in his 40s, his writing was mainly focussed on religious subjects. I will leave you with two of his poems, contemplating the meaning of death through the eyes of faith.

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou'art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate
men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy'or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

At the round earth's imagined corners, blow
Your trumpets, angels, and arise, arise
From death, you numberless infinities
Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go,
All whom the flood did, and fire shall, o'erthrow,
All whom war, dearth, age, agues, tyrannies,
Despair, law, chance, hath slain, and you whose eyes,
Shall behold God, and never taste death's woe.
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'hadst seal'd my pardon with thy blood.

*Keep us, good Lord, under the shadow of your mercy in this time of uncertainty and distress.
Sustain and support the anxious and fearful, and lift up all who are brought low;
that we may rejoice in your comfort,
knowing that nothing can separate us from your love
in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.*