



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

No person is an island unto themselves

John Maindonald © 8 October 2023

John Donne (1572-1631), who wrote the words that I want to ponder today, lived in England in troubled times. He was born to a staunchly Roman Catholic family at a time when it was illegal to be a practicing Catholic.

In the five year reign of Mary that ended 13 years before Donne was born, Protestants who resisted her attempts to restore the supremacy of the Roman Catholic church were in serious danger. Around 300 were executed, with many more going into exile. Under Elizabeth who followed Mary, there was a complete break from the authority of the Roman church, and practice of the Catholic faith became illegal. All were expected to outwardly conform, and to attend Sunday service at their parish church. From the time when Donne was 13, any Catholic priest ordained abroad since the year following Elizabeth's accession and found on English soil, was automatically deemed a traitor and his lay host a felon, both punishable by death. Those who were imprisoned or executed included a number of John Donne's close relatives.

John Donne trained as a lawyer, was for a time an adventurer and soldier, became a Protestant, was ordained at age 43 as an Anglican priest, and appointed six years later as Dean of St Paul's cathedral. It is for good reason that the 2022 book on Donne by literary scholar Katherine Rundell has the title "Super-infinite : the transformations of John Donne." He transformed from committed Catholic to Protestant, to Anglican cleric and to Dean of St Paul's cathedral. In his youth he wrote and distributed to friends and contacts frank love poems, some of it to modern ears outdated or even offensive. Rundell comments that "for every poem that salutes the female body and adores it, there are poems which denigrate, and even degrade the idea of the female". From that brilliant and pleasure-seeking young-man-about-town he transformed to be the sober and serious Dean of St. Paul's, an Anglican reverend famed for his moving sermons and profound "Holy Sonnets." Several of his "Holy Sonnets" have a pre-

occupation with sinful deeds that suggest that he was sensitive to the contrast with the youthful John Donne.

Donne continues to attract interest today. Katherine Rundell's book has been popular with Wellington City Library readers — when I put my name down for it on the library some weeks ago I found myself number 13 on the reserve list for one of maybe three hardback copies. I was able to see an electronic copy.

It was as Dean of St. Paul's, while recovering from a serious illness, that Donne wrote the famous words:

“No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

Donne had a remarkable ability to pull together words and ideas in ways that forced important issues on the minds of his hearers, but without directly passing judgement on the issues raised. The death of his older brother Henry from plague in a prison, and the hanging and quartering of the priest that Henry sheltered, surely started bells ringing that tolled for John Donne also. A common humanity, and even commonalities in their religious traditions were, his words hint, far more important than the differences that had generated such violence and bloodshed. A private letter to a friend, written perhaps 5 years before he was ordained, makes exactly this point:

I never fettered nor imprisoned the word Religion; not . . . immuring it in *Rome*, or a *Wittemberg*, or a *Geneva*; they are all virtuall beams of one Sun, and wheresoever they finde clay hearts, they harden them, and moulder them unto dust . . . They are . . . [connected] pieces of one circle. Religion is Christianity, which being too spirituall to be seen by us, doth therefore taken an apparent body of good life and works . . . (Donne, c.1609)

Most of us here today are likely to want to move beyond Christianity, and perhaps beyond the trappings of one or other religious practice, to celebrate a common humanity. It is, as Donne says, good life and works that are of consequence.

Katherine Rundell, commenting on Donne's "No man is an island" words, writes:

"There's a characteristic bite in the passage, which stands as both promise and warning: death is coming for *you*. But they are glorious words. If we could believe them, they would upend the world. They cast our interconnectedness not as a burden but as a great project: our interwoven lives draw their meaning only from each other."

If we could believe those words, they would upend the debate on who should get our vote next Saturday. There is in these words an impassioned call to look after each other. Words of Mahatma Gandhi spring to mind: 'the true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members'. Pretty much, this is the message of the June 2023 Productivity Commission report "A Fair Chance for All."

[<https://www.productivity.govt.nz/publications/final-report-a-fair-chance-for-all/>]

In the words of the Maori proverb:

**He aha te mea nui o te ao
He tangata, he tangata, he
tangata**

What is the most important thing in the world?
It is the people, it is the people, it is the people

Or, in the words of Dame Whina Cooper

"**Take care of our children. Take care of** what they hear. **Take care of** what they see. For how the **children** grow, so will the shape of Aotearoa."

A very obvious area of failure has been failure to provide healthy homes for all members of society. At a forum in Wellington organized by Renters United and Generation Zero, National Party spokesperson Chris Bishop commented:

"It's not one government's problem, left or right, it's a 30-year disaster. We have to get it right, starting from tomorrow for the future of our kids — the 4000 kids who live in motels, the 500 families who live in cars, the 25,000 on the [social housing] waitlist, but most importantly the people that rent and pay far too much and scandalously high rent for shit housing."

[<https://www.newshub.co.nz/home/new-zealand/2023/09/boos-and-strong-language-mark-forum-on-housing.html>]

The comments are spot on, but Bishop would not commit to increasing enforcement of the Healthy Homes standards and look at setting up a rental warrant of fitness. Human Rights Commission data released in September 2022 estimated that more than 100,000 people faced severe housing deprivation, while 17 percent of people with a physical impairment have unmet housing modification needs. And still, far too many children are growing up in poverty and/or not getting the help that they need to grow up to be responsible citizens. It should be no surprise that so many of them turn to crime. The devil does indeed find deeds for idle hands to do.

The sympathies to which Donne challenges us extend, in one of his poems, to the world of domesticated animals:

Why are we by all creatures waited on?
Why do the prodigal elements supply
Life and food to me, being more pure than I,
Simpler and further from corruption?
Why brook'st thou, ignorant horse, subjection?
Why dost thou, bull and boar, so sillily
Dissemble weakness, and by one man's stroke die,
Whose whole kind you might swallow and feed upon?
Weaker I am, woe's me, and worse than you;
You have not sinn'd, nor need be timorous.
[Holy Sonnet 12 - Why are we by all creatures waited on?]
[<https://mypoeticside.com/show-classic-poem-8956>]

Given the times in which it was written, when there was scant regard for the life of humans who dissented from the norm, I think this regard for animal life astonishing. We are not islands from other humans, and we are not islands from the world of nature.

“Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee”. Bells have tolled, also, as storms and floods and fires that have in the past several years done unprecedented damage, in other parts of the world and to a lesser extent in New Zealand. Those same natural events are coming for us. Ed Simon, in a review of Katherine Rundell’s book on the Poetry Foundation website, writes:

“Despite our material comforts being greater, our technology being superior, our knowledge being deeper, we confront a far more

horrific future than Donne did, in the form of rising seas, acidified oceans, and collapsing biospheres. Donne's blunt wisdom understood that all of us are always ascending the scaffold; the reality is that today many more of us are already climbing its steps."

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/158435/a-little-world-made-cunningly>

The challenge is for all of us, for our communities, and for the world — to grow, to undergo transformation, and to rethink the path on which we are set. We are set in ways that minister to our self-interests, notwithstanding the damage they are doing to wider community and to the planet. In that spirit, we would do well to ponder the title of another of Rundell's books: "Why you should read children's books, even though you are so old and wise." The best children's fiction takes us back to a time when we were not so set in our damaging ways, when "new discoveries came daily . . . , before the imagination was trimmed and neatened . . ."

We know far more than previous generations, but desperately lack the collective wisdom needed to underpin effective action.

Last week, Professor Peter Lineham spoke about the importance of community. We need communities that bring us together. In John Donne's day, there were strong competing religious communities — Anglican, Catholic, and Puritan — that were pulling the country apart. In our day, we are steadily losing the forms of community that religious groups have in the past, for good or ill, provided. Socio-economic differences, political differences, and extremes of opinion such as are represented by the Freedom and Rights Coalition, have become major forces driving us apart.

In contrast to those damaging sorts of communities stand communities where people care for each other and for those outside, and seek for a better world for all. Start by thinking of what they offer to those who will be the citizens of tomorrow. It does indeed take a village to raise a child. Where parents are at their wits end to provide the basic necessities of life, the support of others in the village becomes even more important. Prime Minister, whoever you may be following election day, do you accept the right of all children, irrespective of their parents' circumstances, to a decent start in life?

Meditation / Discussion Question:

In the *World Happiness Report* to the UN in 2022, we read:
“education must include: Reconsidering, rethinking and rebuilding education for a more humane and happier society for our newer generations. “

What can we, individually and as a church, do to contribute to that rebuilding?
