

Nearly four hundred years ago, in this same dark time of year, the great poet and preacher John Donne fell gravely ill. In the long, solitary hours, he meditated feverishly on his life and the passing of it, and listened to the sound of the bells from the neighbouring church, the slow, soft, rhythmic tolling that told him that a man of some years had passed out of this life. In the tiny parishes of crowded London, the bell sounding nearest his house must toll for someone he knew, or knew to be a neighbour. Somehow it was this stark fact of another's passing that brought home to Donne the truth that he too must die. Even in that time when death was omnipresent, even as Donne's own doctors were predicting the grave progress of his illness, still death came as a surprise. How can it be, he wondered, that 'the parts [of the body] built vp, and knit' into a beautiful dwelling house 'by a louely *soule*', are now 'but a *handfull of sand*, so much *dust*, and but a *pecke of Rubbidge*, so much *bone*'?

Anyone who has ever said goodbye to a loved one after death has felt the same, even if we could not express it so eloquently. The person who was here one minute, joining in the dance of life, even if only by the faintest pulse of breath, is somehow the next minute just a body of dust and bone, and no longer the lively soul that touched and changed us, for better or for worse. That abrupt finality is nearly impossible to contemplate when it comes to those who are nearest and dearest to us; when we apply it to ourselves, it is almost more than the human brain can comprehend. One minute I will be here, and the next I will not.

In the depths of his sickness, it was this revelation that led Donne to his famous insight that 'Any Mans *death* diminishes *me*'. The bell always tolls for me, even when I am risen up from my sickbed, in health and safety. Donne's words continue to be so popular because we are even more distant from this truth than he was; our culture has tidied death away into hospitals and crematoria. We can now go well past the mid-point of our lives without ever confronting the reality of death in the form of a loved one's body. That may or may not diminish our ability to grieve; it may be that nothing can prepare us for the loss of someone dear. But, as Donne knew, it does diminish *us*, this failure to confront death; it weakens our humanity and our involvement in one another, the profound connection that forms us in this life, and that we are promised will continue in the next.

For Donne this was not a melancholy fact, but a profound comfort; when we steel ourselves to look death in the face we gain a precious glimpse of what it means to be human and alive, to be bound up with all humankind as the several leaves of a book, our stories born of one creator and joined together with all who have gone before and all who will come after. 'When one Man dies,' Donne affirms, 'one *Chapter* is not *torne* out of the *booke*, but *translated* into a better *language*...and *Gods* hand is in euery *translation*'.

Those we remember tonight are gone out of this earth, but we gather together around God's table in the sure and certain hope that they are not torn out of the book of life. The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, and the Son who is the living embodiment of God's love will raise us up on the last day, when 'his hand shall binde vp all our scattered leaues againe, for that *Librarie* where euery *booke* shall lie open to one another' and we will know one another fully, even as we are fully known.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Extracts from John Donne's *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, 1624, quoted in the homily:

From *Meditation 16*:

Here the *Bells* can scarce solemnise the funerall of any person, but that I knew him, or knew that hee was my *Neighbour*: we dwelt in houses neere to one another before, but now hee is gone into that house, into which I must follow him.

...

We scarce heare of any man *preferred*, but wee thinke of our selues, that wee might very well have beene that *Man*; Why might not I have beene that *Man*, that is carried to his *grave* now? Could fit my selfe, to *stand*, or *sit* in any Mans *place*, & not to lie in any mans *grave*? I may lacke much of the *good parts* of the meanest, but I lacke nothing of the *mortality* of the weakest; They may have acquired better *abilities* than I, but I was borne to as many *infirmities* as they.

From *Meditation 17*:

All *mankinde* is of one *Author*; and is one *volume*; when one Man dies, one *Chapter* is not *torne* out of the *booke*, but *translated* into a better *language*; and euery *Chapter* must be so *translated*; *God* emploies severall *translators*; some peeces are translated by *Age*, some by *sickness*, some by *warre*, some by *justice*; but *Gods* hand is in euery *translation*; and his hand shall binde up all our scattered leaves againe, for that *Librarie* where euery *booke* shall lie open to one another: As therefore the *Bell* that rings to a *Sermon*, calls not upon the *Preacher* onely, but upon the *Congregation* to come; so this *Bell* calls us all: but how much more *mee*, who am brought so neere the *doore* by this *sickness*. There was a *contention* as farre as a *suite*, (in which both *pietie* and *dignitie*, *religion*, and *estimation*, were mingled) which of the religious *Orders* should ring to *praiers* first in the *Morning*; and it was *determined*, that *they should ring first that rose earliest*. If we vnderstand aright the *dignitie* of this *Bell*, that rolls for our *euening prayer*, wee would bee glad to make it ours, by rising early, in that *application*, that it might bee ours, as wel as his, whose indeed it is. The *Bell* doth toll for him that *thinkes* it doth; and though it *intermit* againe, yet from that *minute*, that that occasion wrought upon him, hee is vnited to *God*. Who casts not up his *Eie* to the *Sunne* when it rises? but who takes off his *Eie* from a *Comet*, when that breakes out? who bends not his *eare* to any *bell*, which upon any occasion rings? but who can remoue it from that *bell*, which is passing a *peece of himselfe* out of this *world*? No Man is an *Iland*, intire of it selfe; euery man is a peece of the *Continent*, a part of the *maine*; if a *Clod* bee washed away by the *Sea*, *Europe* is the lesse, as well as if a *Promontorie* were, as well as if a *Mannor* of thy *friends*, or of *thine owne* were; Any Mans *death* diminishes *me*, because I am inuolued in *Mankinde*; And therefore neuer send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; It tolls for *thee*.

From *Meditation 18*:

But for the *body*, How poore a wretched thing is *that*? wee cannot expresse it *so fast*, as it growes *worse* and *worse*. That *body* which scarce *three minutes* since was such a *house*, as that that *soule*, which made but one step from thence to *Heaven*, was scarce thorowly content, to leave that for *Heaven*: that *body* hath lost the *name* of a *dwelling house*, because none dwels in it, and is making haste to lose the name of a *body*, and dissolue to *putrefaction*. Who would not bee affected to see a cleere & sweet *Riuer* in the *Morning*, grow a *kennell* of muddy land water by *noone*, and condemned to the saltnesse of the *Sea* by *night*? And how lame a *Picture*, how faint a *representation*, is that, of the precipitation of mans body to *dissolution*? *Now* all the parts built up, and knit by a louely *soule*, *now* but a *statue* of *clay*, and *now*, these limbs melted off, as if that *clay* were but *snowe* and now, the whole *house* is but a *handfull of sand*, so much *dust*, and but a *pecke of Rubbidge*, so much *bone*. If he, who, as this *Bell* tells mee, is gone now, were some *excellent Artificer*, who comes to him for a

*clocke*, or for a *garment* now? or for *counsaile*, if hee were a *Lanyer*? If a *Magistrate*, for *iustice*? Man before hee hath his *immortall soule*, hath a *soule* of *sense*, and a *soule* of *vegitation* before that: This *immortall soule* did not forbid other *soules*, to be in us before, but when this *soule* departs, it carries all with it; no more *vegetation*, no more *sense*: such a *Mother in law* is the *Earth* in respect of our *naturall Mother*; in her *wombe* we *grew*; and when she was deliuered of us, wee were planted in some *place*, in some *calling* in the *world*; In the *wombe* of the *Earth*, wee *diminish*, and when shee is *deliuered* of us, our *grave* opened for another, wee are not *transplanted*, but *transported*, our *dust* blowne away with *prophane dust*, with euery wind.