

**The Poem: *Good Friday 1613. Riding Westward*** By John Donne

Let mans Soule be a Spheare, and then, in this,  
The intelligence that moves, devotion is,  
And as the other Spheares, by being growne  
Subject to forraigne motion, lose their owne,  
And being by others hurried every day,  
Scarce in a yeare their naturall forme obey:  
Pleasure or businesse, so, our Soules admit  
For their first mover, and are whirld by it.  
Hence is't, that I am carryed towards the West  
This day, when my Soules forme bends toward the East.  
There I should see a Sunne, by rising set,  
And by that setting endlesse day beget;  
But that Christ on this Crosse, did rise and fall,  
Sinne had eternally benighted all.  
Yet dare I'almost be glad, I do not see  
That spectacle of too much weight for mee.  
Who sees Gods face, that is selfe life, must dye;  
What a death were it then to see God dye?  
It made his owne Lieutenant Nature shrinke,  
It made his footstoole crack, and the Sunne winke.  
Could I behold those hands which span the Poles,  
And tune all spheares at once peirc'd with those holes?  
Could I behold that endlesse height which is  
Zenith to us, and our Antipodes,  
Humbled below us? or that blood which is  
The seat of all our Soules, if not of his,  
Made durt of dust, or that flesh which was worne  
By God, for his apparell, rag'd, and torne?  
If on these things I durst not looke, durst I  
Upon his miserable mother cast mine eye,  
Who was Gods partner here, and furnish'd thus  
Halfe of that Sacrifice, which ransom'd us?  
Though these things, as I ride, be from mine eye,  
They'are present yet unto my memory,  
For that looks towards them; and thou look'st towards mee,  
O Saviour, as thou hang'st upon the tree;  
I turne my backe to thee, but to receive  
Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave.  
O thinke mee worth thine anger, punish mee,  
Burne off my rusts, and my deformity,  
Restore thine Image, so much, by thy grace,  
That thou may'st know mee, and I'll turne my face.

Commentary:

Donne may be travelling westward in this Easter poem (he was riding from Warwickshire to Wales), but the day of his journey – Good Friday – reminds him of the East, and the place where Jesus Christ was sacrificed on a Good Friday long ago. The title of Donne’s poem, ‘Good Friday 1613. Riding Westward’ not only gives us the exact date of the setting of the poem, but also tells us what Donne is doing, and this is important because it hints at one of the most important themes of the poem: the fact that Donne is having to get on with day-to-day business on an important religious festival – perhaps the most important Christian festival in Donne’s time, and more venerated than Christmas – when he would rather be contemplating the sacrifice made by Jesus Christ on the Cross:

Hence is’t, that I am carryed towards the West  
This day, when my Soules forme bends toward the East.

Donne begins his poem with a typical metaphysical conceit: the human soul is made visual and physical by being pictured as a sphere, not unlike the earth, in space, surrounded by other spheres. Whether Donne had recent Copernican theories about the arrangement of the solar system in mind when he wrote ‘Good Friday 1613. Riding Westward’ is difficult to say, or whether the arrangement of the spheres belongs to an older, Ptolemaic and geocentric understanding of the universe. But Donne’s metaphor of the soul as a sphere immediately renders the abstract and spiritual as physical, one of many planets in space. And just as these planets are not free to move where they will, but must instead obey the laws of the universe and move in sync with each other, so Donne, like everyone, must carry on with his daily life, his individual will less important than that of others. His body is travelling west but his soul and thoughts turn to the east:

There I should see a Sunne, by rising set,  
And by that setting endlesse day beget;

An ‘endlesse day’ because the Crucifixion and Resurrection atoned for all human sins, past and future: Jesus died, as Christian teaching has it, so that others might live.

Indeed, the most substantial middle part of ‘Good Friday 1613. Riding Westward’ is a meditation on this event, which Donne is at once sorry and glad he does not have time to think about too much as he rides: sorry because it is an important sacrifice that deserves witness, but glad because it would overwhelm him.

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### **About John Donne Priest, 1631**

Feast Date: March 31 from Holy Women, Holy Men: Celebrating the Saints 2010, CPF 298.

“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.” These words are familiar to many; their author, John Donne, though less well known, is one of the greatest of English poets. In his own time, he was the best-known preacher in the Church of England. He came to that eminence by a tortuous path. Born into a wealthy and pious Roman Catholic family in 1573, he was educated at both Oxford and Cambridge, and studied law at Lincoln’s Inn. Some time later he conformed to the Established Church

and embarked upon a promising political career of service to the State. The revelation of his secret marriage in 1601 to the niece of his employer, the Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, brought his public career to an end. In 1615, he was persuaded by King James I and others to receive ordination. Following several brief cures, Donne rose rapidly in popularity as Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, London, from 1622 until his death. He drew great throngs to the Cathedral and to Paul's Cross, a nearby open-air pulpit. His sermons reflect the wide learning of the scholar, the passionate intensity of the poet, and the profound devotion of one struggling in his own life to relate the freedom and demands of the Gospel to the concerns of a common humanity, on every level, and in all its complexities. In one of his poems, he wrote:

We thinke that Paradise and Calvarie,  
Christs Crosse, and Adams tree, stood in one place;  
Looke, Lord, and finde both Adams met in me;  
As the first Adams sweat surrounds my face  
May the last Adams blood my soule embrace.  
So, in his purple wrapp'd receive mee Lord,  
By these his thornes give me his other Crowne;  
And as to others soules I preach'd thy word,  
Be this my Text, my Sermon to my owne.  
Therefore that he may raise the Lord throws down

#### Collects

##### Rite I

Almighty God, the root and fountain of all being: Open our eyes to see, with thy servant John Donne, that whatsoever hath any being is a mirror in which we may behold thee; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

##### Rite II

Almighty God, the root and fountain of all being: Open our eyes to see, with your servant John Donne, that whatever has any being is a mirror in which we may behold you; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen. Psalm  
Lessons 27:5–11 Wisdom 7:24–8:11 Corinthians 15:20–28 John 5:19–2