

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Morning.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Welcome to morning prayers here in the Appleton Chapel of the Memorial Church. I invite you please to rise and join in our responsorial Psalm, which is number 150 in your black psalter.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Hallelujah. Praise God in the holy temple. Praise God in the firmament of power.

Congregation:

Praise God for every mighty act; praise God with lyre and harp.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Praise God with the blast of the ram's horn, praise God with lyre and harp.

Congregation:

Praise God with the timbrel and dance, praise God with strings and pipe.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Praise God with resounding cymbals, praise God with loud clanging cymbals.

Congregation:

Let everything that hath breath praise the God. Hallelujah.

Choir:

(Singing)

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

This is a reading from the fifth chapter of the gospel of John beginning at the 19th verse.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

"Jesus said to them very truly. I tell you, the son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the father doing, for whatever the father does the son does likewise. The father loves the son and shows him all that he himself is doing and he will show him greater works than these so that you will be astonished. Indeed, just as the father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the son gives life to whomsoever he wishes. The father judges no one, but is given all judgment to the son so that all may honor the son just as they honor the father. Anyone who does not honor the son does not honor the father who sent him. Very truly I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life."

Here endeth the lesson.

Tomorrow's saint is more fun than today's so we're going to talk about tomorrow's saint. Tomorrow's the feast day of John Donne, the 17th century English poet. There will be some in this chapel who disagree with me, but to my mind, one of the most important poets in English, or at least one of my favorites, you won't disagree with that. He's probably well known to many of you. Even if he's not well known to you, he's probably more well known to you than you know. So many of his phrases from his poetry and his sermons have entered our common speech, our common idiom death be not proud, the most famous poem. It's the reason why I think we have this sort of circuitous passage from John assigned for him, this sort of challenge to death. But also no, man is an island entire unto itself, or do not ask for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee.

John Donne lived a life of immense suffering. I didn't know that before I read about him in preparation for this. I knew a little, but not the degree of it. He came from a recusant Roman Catholic family, that is a Roman Catholic family that refused to go to church to attend religious services in the Church of England and they suffered for it. His mother was widowed with six children. He studied for three years at Oxford and three years at Cambridge each, but received no degree because he was Roman Catholic. His brother died of plague, of bubonic plague, in prison for harboring a priest.

After this, John converted. He became a lawyer and a soldier and a diplomat and spent several sort of prodigal years on the continent of Europe, gathering evidence for what became many of his erotic poems later on in his life.

One of the really interest things about Donne is that in a way that fashion, I think that he inherits from some of the Medieval mystics, sometimes the line between his devotional and his erotic poetry is very blurry indeed. In 1601, he married his boss's niece and his boss didn't like this. So he and the priest who performed the ceremony and his brother Christopher who stood for him at the wedding were all thrown into prison. Though he was released from prison shortly after he lost his job and spent many of the next years and all the years of his marriage in poverty. This was not helped by the fact that Anne gave birth to 12 children in 16 years, two were stillbirths, three died before they were 10 years old, and Anne died a few days after giving birth to the 12th, who was also stillborn. Donne mourned them all deeply.

He did not want to become a priest, but King James I asked him to and the request of a king is not a request. He did become a priest and became Dean of St. Paul's the cathedral in London, where he became famous for his preaching, especially at Paul's Cross, which was outside the walls of the church. Interestingly, if you go online North Carolina State has a reconstruction of Paul's Cross, where you can hear Donne preaching.

He became deathly ill from plague during a big plague in London. I was reading some of his devotions from his sick bed during the beginning of the pandemic. A few years later, he rose from his deathbed to preach his last and most famous sermon "Death's Duel" to the king at Whitehall. In his life he was well known for his sermons, but his poems were not published. There were personal devotions. He wrote them for himself.

I have to tell you, I struggled more with this morning prayers talk than I have with any this year because I'm not sure quite what to say about Donne. I love his poetry so much and it honestly makes me sad that he suffered so greatly and more sad somehow that he composed these beautiful poems, poems which in so many cases, exhort us towards faith and confidence in God, that he wrote them for himself. The audience he was trying to convince was himself.

The "Death's Duel" sermon when he was dying speaks towards the end about how we humans don't like to think about our own deaths, don't like to talk about death. This is a thing that Donne did so much in his poems. He even takes the example of the wills of ancient Romans, who would not write, "When I die," but they would write, "If nature takes its course." He compared this to how easily and often we speak about the death of Christ. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. We speak so easily about Christ's death and not our own. In the sermon done says, "We therefore must speak of our own deaths also because to neglect to say it of ourselves but to say it of Christ would be to diminish how deeply and completely we are bound to Jesus." He said this having risen from his sickbed and having gone back to it to die.

Makes me think about what faith is. What faith is and what it does. Traditionally, faith has been understood, at least in the Western Christian tradition as sort of a ticket into paradise. You believe the right thing and then that certainty will purchase you salvation. I don't believe that. It seems crassly transactional to me and unbecoming of the dignity of both God and us. But then I considered John Donne, dying and doubting and feeling in the midst of all that dying and doubting so deeply bound to Christ who also died and who also doubted. I think of Donne being convinced that he was dying, but convinced of one thing more, that he was deeply bound and tied to Jesus. When I think about that, a different sort of faith emerges, one I can perhaps believe in.

There's a prayer assigned for the feast of John Donne, but I'm going to read one of his poems instead. Please rise for the Holy Sonnet 14.

Batter my heart, three-personed 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. I, like an usurped town, to another due, labor to admit you, but oh, to no end. Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend, but is captive, and proves weak or untrue. Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain, but am betrothed 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.

And now that it pray to words, our Lord Jesus taught us saying Our Father who are to heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Please join and singing our concluding him number 191.

Choir/Congregation:
(singing)

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Now may the peace of God which passes all our understanding, keep your hearts and minds and the knowledge and love of God and of God's son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the son, and the Holy Spirit be among you all and remain with you always. Amen. Let us bless the Lord.

Congregation:

Thanks be to God.