IZAAK WALTON

From The Life of Dr. John Donne

[DONNE TAKES HOLY ORDERS]

I return from my account of the vision to tell the reader that both before Mr. Donne’s going into France, at his being there, and after his return, many of the nobility and others that were powerful at court were watchful and solicitous to the king for some secular employment for him. The king had formerly both known and put a value upon his company, and had also given him some hopes of a state-employment; being always much pleased when Mr. Donne attended him, especially at his meals, where there were usually many deep discourses of general learning and very often friendly disputes or debates of religion betwixt His Majesty and those divines whose places required their attendance on him at those times: particularly the Dean of the Chapel, who then was Bishop Montague (the publisher of the learned and eloquent works of His Majesty) and the most Reverend Doctor Andrewes the late learned Bishop of Winchester, who then was the king’s almoner.

About this time there grew many disputes that concerned the Oath of Supremacy and Allegiance, in which the king had appeared, and engaged himself by his public writings now extant: and His Majesty discoursing with Mr. Donne concerning many of the reasons which are usually urged against the taking of those oaths, apprehended such a validity and clearness in his stating the questions, and his answers to them, that His Majesty commanded him to bestow some time in drawing the arguments into a method, and then to write his answers to them; and, having done that, not to send, but be his own messenger and bring them to him. To this he presently and diligently applied himself, and within six weeks brought them to him under his own handwriting, as they be now printed; the book bearing the name of Pseudo-Martyr, printed anno 1610.

When the king had read and considered that book, he persuaded Mr. Donne to enter into the ministry; to which, at that time, he was, and appeared, very unwilling, apprehending it (such was his mistaking modesty) to be too weighty for his abilities: and though His Majesty had promised him a favor, and many persons of worth mediated with His Majesty for some secular employment for him (to which his education had apted him), and particularly the Earl of

1. The present selection begins with Donne in middle life. Walton has broken his account of these middle years with a digression on second sight, occasioned by a vision which Donne is said to have had in France when his wife was ill at home. Izaak then picks up the thread of his narrative with Donne on the threshold of his career in the church. The text is from the fourth edition (1675): “Feb. 15, 1640,” the date at the end of the Life, is misleading.

2. Donne’s friends were Richard Montague, later Bishop of Chichester, and famous as an Anglican controversialist and historian; and Lancelot Andrewes, eminent divine, preacher, and translator of the Bible. Both were members of the High-Church, anti-Calvinist wing of the church; both were men of vast learning. As “king’s almoner,” Andrewes was his Majesty’s official almsgiver; Montague, as the king’s “publisher,” prepared for the press the literary works of which James was so proud.

3. A requirement that they swear unequivocal allegiance to the Crown, under pain of fines and imprisonment, was troubling to the Roman Catholics of England, who claimed that they were being persecuted for following their consciences in upholding Papal supremacy. The title of Donne’s book, Pseudo-Martyr, shows the line he took with this argument.

4. Fitted.
Somerset\(^5\) when in his greatest height of favor; who being then at Theobald’s with the king, where one of the clerks of the council died that night, the Earl posted a messenger for Mr. Donne to come to him immediately, and at Mr. Donne’s coming, said, “Mr. Donne, to testify the reality of my affection, and my purpose to prefer you, stay in this garden till I go up to the king, and bring you word that you are clerk of the council: doubt not my doing this, for I know the king loves you, and know the king will not deny me.” But the king gave a positive denial to all requests, and, having a discerning spirit, replied, “I know Mr. Donne is a learned man, has the abilities of a learned divine, and will prove a powerful preacher; and my desire is to prefer him that way, and in that way I will deny you nothing for him.” After that time, as he professeth, “the king descended to a persuasion, almost to a solicitation, of him to enter into sacred orders”;\(^6\) which, although he then denied not, yet he deferred it for almost three years. All which time he applied himself to an incessant study of textual divinity, and to the attainment of a great perfection in the learned languages, Greek and Hebrew.

In the first and most blessed times of Christianity, when the clergy were looked upon with reverence, and deserved it, when they overcame their opposers by high examples of virtue, by a blessed patience and long suffering, those only were then judged worthy the ministry whose quiet and meek spirits did make them look upon that sacred calling with an humble adoration and fear to undertake it; which indeed requires such great degrees of humility, and labor, and care, that none but such were then thought worthy of that celestial dignity. And such only were then sought out and solicited to undertake it. This I have mentioned because forwardness and inconsideration could not in Mr. Donne, as in many others, be an argument of insufficiency or unfitness;\(^7\) for he had considered long, and had many strifes within himself concerning the strictness of life and competency of learning required in such as enter into sacred orders; and doubtless, considering his own demerits, did humbly ask God with St. Paul, “Lord, who is sufficient for these things?” and with meek Moses, “Lord, who am I?”\(^8\) And sure, if he had consulted with flesh and blood, he had not for these reasons put his hand to that holy plow. But God, who is able to prevail, wrestled with him, as the angel did with Jacob, and marked him; marked him for his own; marked him with a blessing, a blessing of obedience to the motions of his blessed spirit. And then, as he had formerly asked God with Moses, “Who am I?” so now, being inspired with an apprehension of God’s particular mercy to him, in the king’s and other solicitations of him, he came to ask King David’s thankful question, “Lord, who am I, that thou art so mindful of me?”\(^9\) So mindful of me as to lead me for more than forty years through this wilderness of the many temptations and various turnings of a dangerous life; so merciful to me as to move the learnedest of kings to descend to move me to serve at the altar; so merciful to me as at last to move my heart to embrace this holy motion! Thy motions I will and do embrace: and I now say

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5. Robert Carr, a handsome young page about court, had been raised by King James’s favor to the rank of Earl of Somerset; and thus had reason to think the king would deny him nothing. He was later disgraced by the scandal surrounding the mysterious death of Sir Thomas Overbury. “Theobald’s” was Lord Burghley’s country house in Herts, acquired by James as a royal recreation-spot.
6. A quotation from Donne himself, in the Devotions upon Emergent Occasions.
7. I.e., in many men, the fact that they sought a job eagerly might be evidence of their unfitness for it; but not in Donne, for he did not seek it.
8. 2 Corinthians 2.16 and Exodus 3.11.
9. A paraphrase of Psalm 8.4. Donne’s “soliloquy” is, naturally, the work of Walton’s imagination—an effort to render vividly the character in conflict.
with the blessed Virgin, “Be it with thy servant as seemeth best in thy sight”; and so, blessed Jesus, I do take the cup of salvation and will call upon thy name and will preach thy gospel.

Such strifes as these St. Austin had, when St. Ambrose endeavored his conversion to Christianity; with which he confesseth he acquainted his friend Alpinus. Our learned author (a man fit to write after no mean copy) did the like. And declaring his intentions to his dear friend Dr. King, then Bishop of London, a man famous in his generation and no stranger to Mr. Donne's abilities (for he had been chaplain to the Lord Chancellor at the time of Mr. Donne's being his lordship's secretary), that reverend man did receive the news with much gladness; and, after some expressions of joy, and a persuasion to be constant in his pious purpose, he proceeded with all convenient speed to ordain him first deacon, and then priest not long after.

Now the English Church had gained a second St. Austin; for I think none was so like him before his conversion, none so like St. Ambrose after it: and if his youth had the infirmities of the one, his age had the excellencies of the other; the learning and holiness of both.

And now all his studies, which had been occasionally diffused, were all centered in divinity. Now he had a new calling, new thoughts, and a new employment for his wit and eloquence. Now, all his earthly affections were changed into divine love; and all the faculties of his own soul were engaged in the conversion of others: in preaching the glad tidings of remission to repenting sinners and peace to each troubled soul. To these he applied himself with all care and diligence: and now such a change was wrought in him that he could say with David, “O how amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord God of Hosts!” Now he declared openly, “That when he required a temporal, God gave him a spiritual blessing.” And that “he was now gladder to be a doorkeeper in the House of God, than he could be to enjoy the noblest of all temporal employments.”

Presently after he entered into his holy profession, the king sent for him, and made him his Chaplain in Ordinary, and promised to take a particular care for his preferment.

And though his long familiarity with scholars and persons of greatest quality was such as might have given some men boldness enough to have preached to any eminent auditory; yet his modesty in this employment was such that he could not be persuaded to it, but went, usually accompanied with some one friend, to preach privately in some village not far from London; his first sermon being preached at Paddington. This he did till His Majesty sent and appointed him a day to preach to him at Whitehall; and, though much were expected from him, both by His Majesty and others, yet he was so happy (which few are) as to satisfy and exceed their expectations: preaching the Word so, as showed his own heart was possessed with those very thoughts and joys that he labored to distill into others: a preacher in earnest; weeping sometimes for his auditory,
sometimes with them; always preaching to himself, like an angel from a cloud, but in none; carrying some, as St. Paul was, to heaven in holy raptures, and enticing others by a sacred art and courtship to amend their lives: here picturing a vice so as to make it ugly to those that practiced it; and a virtue so as to make it be beloved, even by those that loved it not; and all this with a most particular grace and an unexpressible addition of comeliness.  

Thus richer than untempted kings are we,  
That asking nothing, nothing need:  
Though lord of all that seas embrace, yet he  
That wants himself is poor indeed.

8. Having described Donne’s decision to take holy orders, Walton proceeds to represent him as a perfect priest—eloquent, laborious, patient, and cheerful. At last, however, he sickened and grew ill; the stage is set for a protracted deathbed scene, such as Donne, Walton, and the 17th century relished enthusiastically.