

Part II

Towards the Kingdom



SAMPLE

Chapter Three

Repentance and *Kenosis*

There was a familiar word that Donne would come across again and again on the Byzantine parchment: *metanoia*, with all its derivatives. Romanos accepted his request to comment and expand on its rich and varied meaning. ‘Since we are all in quest of our only-begotten soul that we have lost one way or another,’ he said, ‘repentance is to regain back our soul. Or, even more than a return, repentance is a second baptism that signifies the birth of a new self, when we cast away the vain lethargy of restlessness and idolatry and become new, accepting the new creation offered by Christ.’

In this sense, *metanoia* carries with it a hint of the Last Things; it makes us breath the air of the kingdom. Its initial and radical step is a total turn of one’s existence to God. ‘I’ll turn my face,’ Donne has written, signifying a whole metamorphosis. When I turn my face, that He may know me, I change my perspective totally. The old self and the old world are overthrown. ‘Is it not a paradox that an overthrow makes us rise and stand as a new creation? That He may raise, the Lord throws down.’

‘This is witnessed by the prophecy of Symeon the Venerable at the presentation of the newborn Christ to the Temple,’ said Romanos. ‘The elder prophesies that Christ, the life and redemption and resurrection of all, is destined for the fall and rise of many. Not that some might fall and others rise, nor that those who are upright shall stumble, God forbid, He is not pleased with humanity’s fall; rather, the Lord has come to raise up the fallen through another, redemptive fall.’

Those who stand in sin shall fall from the state of sin and appear dead; then, they shall rise in righteousness and faith, living in grace.'

Everywhere you can see the antithesis, the radical change, the total transformation of the sinners who repent and are illuminated by Christ. Repentance is a radical act, as the divine poems of Donne imply again and again. It entails destruction and regeneration. Our poets share a plea for the annihilation of the old world of the self. Man's sinful condition is to be taken seriously, for even reason is ensnared, feeble and untrue. Hence God is summoned to take dramatic action by 'overthrowing'.

Falling and rising, paradise and Calvary, Christ's cross and Adam's tree of knowledge all exist in one place. This place, where the two Adams (Christ and the first human) dwell, is the inner setting of salvation. Sickness and the imminence of death are divine economy for the final rising. They prompt Donne in his total turning to God. So, death does touch the Resurrection. It is a paradox that death and resurrection, like east and west, clash and merge and reveal themselves as one.¹⁶

Beholding the end as the crown of all things creates eyes that are acute, concentrated and introspective. Beholding the heavenly 'end' has a great transforming power. Could it be otherwise? Christ invites us to a personal response and deliberate change. It is a doctrine not cloudy but manifest to all, that prophecy, the prediction of a future judgement, should induce a present repentance. The vision of the last day propels us to change our perspective from stage managers or spectators to penitents, and we beg God to help us in this process. 'Tis time.' 'Here', not 'there', is the time and place for thorough change. The imperative is given by the eschatological perspective.

'This is why I exhort my audience to rush to the infirmary of repentance before the Day of Judgement, for the medicine of repentance swiftly heals the wound of sin, and I entreat Christ to grant me time to repent,' said Romanos. 'Such contrition opens heaven and I, the repentant, am *revealed* to the Saviour, so that He may know me.'

So 'that thou may'st know me', Donne recalled.

Repentance is far from being a legal act that seeks for God's satisfaction. Along with the entirety of Eastern tradition, Romanos diverges from the Western judicial concept of justice, which demands retribution for the offence of sin. Repentance unfolds in an environment of intimacy. It is cultivated either in medical healing or paternal or marital context. Definitely, outside the context of love there may be remorse, or even acts of self-punishment, but no true

and firm change. Like the city of Nineveh, the penitent finds profound and sincere change when he or she returns to the primeval Spouse and embraces the divine Groom.

Yes, though ‘satisfaction’ lies at the foundations of his tradition, Donne thought that eventually repentance is pursued not for the sake of God’s satisfaction. He pointed, instead, to ‘an everlasting Marriage’ and the restoration of a lost image. In other words, love, overthrowing and raising, forms an unbreakable circle, in which metanoia finds its true meaning and power.

It is fitting – however bizarre might seem – that Romanos should describe in stunning erotic language the conversion of the sinful woman and her deeply transforming relationship with Christ. He could have equally used the verses of Donne:

Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain ...
Take me to you, imprison me, for I
Except you enthrall me never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste except you ravish me.

With its startling imagery, this poem is an *ekphrasis* of a living relationship, where repentance, love and faith interlace. At the turning point, behind the dramatic scenery, appears the gist of the poem. This was Donne’s conclusion. The deep, reciprocal love forbids any betrothal to adverse powers. However, only God’s manic love is capable of accomplishing the seemingly impossible.

Romanos acknowledged that, although love knits this redeeming relationship as a mutual movement, it is God’s will and activity that initiates and completes everything. What moves God to embrace the prodigal son? A love that is unknown to us. Because of this love, God cannot bear to see His divine image, that is, the human being, stripped off, defaced, disgraced. So, the melodist prays, ‘Beckon, command, O Lord, speak, show your will to save us, for you do not lose those who long for you.’ Now, we have a modest share in this bond and, therefore, love – divine and human – is the fiery element that makes repentance a chariot of fire instead of a peat bog. Otherwise, regretful memory, if not linked to divine love, turns to remorse and despair. The memory of sin as such can be murky and gloomy. But the balm of divine love, Christ’s blood, merged with human tears, makes a ‘heavenly Lethean flood’ that drowns in it the ‘black memory’, Donne concurred.¹⁷

Thus, rather than leading to painful recollections, tears moved by the Spirit of God usher in an entirely new world, a preview of the everlasting kingdom. And if, truly, the fibre of the world is a holy fire, repentance is nothing less than a flame that ignites a total transformation. As such, it is akin to the most potent element of creation. In one of his *Holy Sonnets*, Donne addressed the theme of fire with its ontological, ascetic and eschatological connotations. It encompassed three types of fire – the fire of the Last Judgement, the fire of lust and envy, which makes us fouler, and the fire of zeal, which heals in a paradoxical fashion. This fiery zeal underlies Donne's parallelism between the inner world and the worlds of the astronomers, where the newly discovered element is the seas of contrite tears. Repentance is humane, expansive and creative. It is not a sentimental state. Its tears, like sudden drops of a divine collyrium, dilate and broaden man's sight in space and time, making the eyes as large as the vastness of newly discovered spheres. Because of the immense power within, we may speak of a new baptism in tears rather than water. And a new self is made up of this second baptism and of that wind that blows wherever it pleases, namely the Holy Spirit.

'We might even speak of a new flood that brings renewal,' added Romanos. 'And returning to the Last Things, it is repentance that makes us realise that what we are experiencing within is a part of what shall be at the conclusion of history. Here we prepare our eternal being. The kingdom is not independent of our personal response to it. It is already among and inside us in some inexplicable way, insofar as we accept it and take the mystery seriously.'

Thus, repentance becomes an arrow through and above time and space, or even a spiritual Big Bang. It is repentance that helps us to connect the interiorised kingdom with the end of history.

Donne understands that, although the kingdom is imminent, our deliberate distance expels it from the here and now. But it 'comes, when He finds us willing to be subjects to that kingdom'. In one of his sonnets, his vision of universal resurrection and theodicy is suddenly – and I would say abruptly – transferred onto the 'lowly ground' of humanity to emphasise repentance and contrition. Death, to be followed by judgement, functions as a summoner to the everlasting reality and, by extension, to a fundamental change of life. 'Oh, my black Soul! Now thou art summoned by sickness, death's herald, and champion; before the future Tribunal and the day of judgement.'

'Your summons echoes my bidding, a cry to the slumberous soul,' remarked Romanos.

The melodist also refers to the Second Coming, connecting it to repentance. His startling portrayal of the final consummation ended with the assurance of salvation, 'if at least we wish it'; because the Lord rushes to the desperate to avert the proclaimed doom. Thus, the believers are urged to rush and accept the divine salve 'beyond all expectations'. The only fee is the lucent tears of contrition, 'tears that flow from the spirit, from our hearts'.¹⁸

'The opening up of the heart and its transparency are requested for the acceptance of the kingdom,' Romanos pointed out. This means standing naked before God, without considering anything our own, without investing on whatever we think to be our own, whether material or spiritual. This leads to a second step. 'We come to our transfiguration, to have those garments of Christ communicated to us which were as white, as the light,' said Donne. Repentance culminates in a 'true transubstantiation, a new sacrament'; a transformation to a higher and transparent existence, to Christ Himself. An excellent example of a transfigured life was Saint Paul, a man called to repentance and transformed by the 'real presence of Christ'. Paul had become Christ. However, you may only be transformed and consecrated through a descent into nothingness, for there is a good nullification of heart, a good coming of the heart to nothing. It is as if you say, 'I am nothing; and though I am nothing, yet behold, I present you, Lord, as much as you had in the beginning to make the whole world of.' So a new creation takes place, a new creature is made in Christ Jesus.

Thus, in its dynamic character, repentance becomes transfiguration through *kenosis*. Deriving from the Greek verb that means 'to empty', *kenosis* implies putting off those clothes that we had or evacuating and thus liberating our inner space from all constructions. To be no longer me but Christ presupposes *kenosis*, the emptying of my own self from its accumulated ego-stuff. 'Our Lord Himself has stripped to come where we lay dead and heal our wounds,' Romanos commented.

'Sadly, so often we keep in resistance,' he continued, 'and our current unnatural state is that of cruelty.' Our mind and heart become hard and we get petrified. Donne rushed to agree that our hearts are like marble – cold, opaque and impenetrable. But just as a sharp wind may wear out a marble statue, so too can the holy tears of repentance wear out a marble heart and empty the room of that former heart, leaving God with a void to fill with a new heart. When we pray to God to batter our heart, we approach the point of *kenosis*, the eradication of the personal 'lead and iron will'. Only after or, rather, through

this act, in which we appear naked before God, without personal possessions or investments, do we receive the lucent garments of the transfigured Christ and come to our transfiguration.

It becomes clear that such mortification is not a morose self-punishment, or a descent to the dark waters of remorse; it is the discovery of the true spring of human nobleness and bliss, the prelude to a new creation; for it allows God more free space to move and create. This is the glorious deconstruction of the inner castle, the mystic's creative emptiness, and the intimacy that comes from self-surrender.

'This is the way of renunciation,' Romanos said. He went on to explain that to renounce ourselves, to give up all worldly matters, possessions, parents, and the things beloved, is the condition for our being indwelled and 'possessed' by God. Renunciation – another name for *kenosis* – is the fiery core of ascetic life, which is also the apostolic life and teaching; 'for the Apostles,' Romanos continued, 'cast off worldly affairs and took care of the heavenly things only, bearing the cross upon their shoulders, revelling on death.' It is a life of self-exile, of becoming a stranger, of becoming dead to your own selfish ego and the world, as a response and a way to God's love. After all, soon or later we shall be divested of our temporal clothing.

The decisive step, however, is the renunciation of one's self-confidence, so as to give place to God to act. For only that which God does *entirely*, is *entirely* good. The self should not take itself a self-luminous luminary but needs to recognise God as its only source of life and power. This new self is expected to 'produce creatures, namely thoughts, words and deeds' not out of discursive reasoning, or 'glimmerings of natural knowledge' or the 'chimera of worthiness', but 'out of nothing, nothing pre-existent in herself', by the divine power only.¹⁹ Paradoxically, the self that has lost or, better, given its own life acquires the potential to re-enact creation out of non-being. Because that alleged life was nothing more than the remnants of a shredded integrity and identity, a life torn apart by passions and dereliction.

But how free are we in committing or refraining from sin? In repenting and converting, how much freedom do we have? 'This is a riddle that caused a headache to our masters,' said Donne. Repentance, with its spiritual apparatus and the passionate relationship it fosters, introduces us to the topic of free will. 'In the Roman Church the concept of free will is wounded and maimed, while it is dead in the Anglican,' he conceded. As he has intimated to his closest friend, the dean

intends to take the middle point in the tug-of-war over this ostensible conundrum. Now, however, he confessed to Romanos that the same mystery has perplexed his grey cells too. In his tradition, the principle of free will was undermined by the original sin – the sin committed by the first humans and transmitted to all. It was considered a general curse, a natural poison, a universal guilt. That is why Donne couldn't put his finger on where sin originates.

'It is hard to charge the soul with the guilt of original sin; for man's soul is blameless at the time it infuses the body. Meanwhile, the soul possesses her perfume, the fragrancy that has a natural disposition to goodness. And yet, the causes in her wounds are intrinsic and hereditary, and the wounds were as soon as we were, and sooner.'

Romanos set out to clarify this matter. 'Our holy Fathers have no anxiety to safeguard free natural will; and, I trust, such anxiety is not evoked in my hymns either.' He explained that this is because the concept of a hereditary and devastating original sin is missing in Greek theology. For all the sinful inclinations passed down from generation to generation as the result of the ancestral Fall, human nature, in her concrete spiritual and material form, remains free and unimpeded in its course to fulfilment and, of course, she is not predestinated either to salvation or perdition.

This ontological and fundamental human trait, free will, was deeply affected by the doctrine of original sin, as it was articulated and developed by Saint Augustine. Though presumably free, we are incapable of choosing the good, which necessitates the doctrine of predestination to explain how certain people can attain salvation through an irresistible grace. Though Donne opposed predestination, the notion of the original sin had taken root in the Western mentality and, naturally, in the dean's spiritual soil. Nevertheless, Donne strives to navigate its challenges. In the final analysis, 'we sin upon reason,' he said, 'and we wrongly impute our sin to our youth, to our constitution, to our complexion, and so we make our sin our nature.' Therefore, even though there is a cause why we do sin, there is none at all why we should sin. Besides, we are also free in good things. This is why his *Holy Sonnets* begin with a human action, even though precipitous, urgent and insufficient, yet a free human action calling upon and engaging God.²⁰

'However, be cautious in interpreting ancestral sin as a universal guilt passed to all. For when the fall of our first parents is framed in