

Of Tupperware and Tin

John Donne (d 1631)—poet, priest and everything in between—wanted to die with his boots on. No quiet exit, slipping away in bed while asleep. Unlike Woody Allen, Donne wanted to be there.

Ideally, he wrote, in a letter to a friend, ‘it hath been my desire (and God may be pleased to grant it me) that I might die in the pulpit.’ And preferably, mid-sermon, to fall headlong into the congregation. He wasn’t granted that wish, for which the staff and people of St Paul’s, London, were probably glad. Rather like Saint Paul himself, for Donne, Death was the last enemy, finally to be overthrown in the victory of God in Christ: let Death earn its keep, ‘not merely seize me...but win me, and overcome me.’ Donne was defiant in the face of death—which was, we must remember—everywhere around him; but he could confidently declare that, ‘I shall have my dead raised to life again.’

A more ‘material’ man would be hard to find and while I might not endorse every aspect of Donne’s life to be emulated (any more than my own, I hasten to add), I find his earthiness attractive and profoundly spiritual (which may sound like a contradiction to some). Not for him a denial of the stuff that is our present reality; not for him a fleeing from matter as if it were the tainted by-product of a failed cosmic experiment by some half-baked demiurge or godlet. That was—and is—the gnostic view of the world. This fragile, dangerous dimension we inhabit, wherein even the most ordinary of objects can result in disaster (‘a pin, a comb, a hair pulled, hath gangrened and killed’, Donne observed), is nonetheless that which God declared ‘very good’. And for which the Word became flesh, not to condemn the world, but to save it.

The reminder of this material fragility is everywhere around us; the Gospel itself—‘this treasure’—is held in breakable vessels, made of earth and clay, not even the perdurable materials of our time like Tupperware. Those who declare this Gospel are, like the metaphorical vessels, given to fragility: the representative egos of the disciples, whom Luke is polite enough not to identify by name, were likewise brittle. It showed itself as a ‘dispute’ (a strange word in Greek, φιλονεικία, denoting a desire for victory over others) about who

was to be ‘regarded as the greatest’, an argument they wanted settled—a potential we all exhibit from time to time, I expect.

Nevertheless, once again God is pleased to employ and display and to be associated with such fragile earthenware. God is not embarrassed by *matter*, it seems, which truth is supremely evident in the solid and thoroughgoing humanity of the Son of God, a humanity still present in a transformed, surpassingly superior yet recognisable resurrection body, still bearing the marks of suffering.

Here, this morning, we are surrounded by those material things in and through which the Holy Spirit of God is pleased to be present and to work: in addition to our very selves (whether lay or ordained, is no barrier), we have the scriptures, written and spoken; bread and wine and water; oils of the catechumens, of chrismation and of the sick; incense and perfume; lyrical voices; this building itself, a reminder of the importance of place and yet subject to decay. Even hand sanitiser, a sign of our times.

Each of these things is *material*, made of *matter*. Whether spoken words (mere systematised vibrations travelling through the medium of air, itself material), or words on the pages of the scriptures, ink-on-paper (or pixels-on-thin-film-transistors, polycrystalline silicon ‘words’, for you technology buffs), they are *material*. We have no doubt that the Gospel, so conveyed, is efficacious; that *words* can be a ‘means of grace’ as the old Prayer Book puts it. And if words, then so too water and bread and wine and oil—all manifestations of God’s good creation that can be and are used to achieve God’s purposes. (As a test, wherever you encounter the expression ‘means of grace’, substitute the word ‘grace’ with ‘action of the Holy Spirit’, or similar, and see if it works.)

The Gospel is properly described as ‘treasure’, yet one paradoxically to be kept on open display, with neither lock nor key; to be in constant use by means of its distribution to those who need it; and never to be rationed. Because the Gospel is not a finite resource, it is to be shared lavishly, even indiscriminately—for who is to say who the next ‘unworthy’ convert will be? And because the Gospel is surrounded by so many of the ‘means of grace’, those material expressions that will be used by the Spirit of God to convey the blessings of God,

then these, too, ought to be lavishly employed. Each of these material vehicles—words written or spoken; water of baptism, bread and wine of the Holy Communion; oils with or without fragrance—arises from, and points to, the coming of the Son of God as one truly human. *Ignoring* them impoverishes us, and others. *Rationing* them makes us mean. These material things point *forward*, too, to the perfection, the completion of all things in Christ, the first-born of all creation, who will be all and in all, as Saint Paul put it; when these things will no longer be needed.

We look forward to the putting on of a ‘spiritual body’—which looks like a contradiction in terms—an embodiment modelled on, and sharing in, that of the risen Christ’s: the-same-but-different, immortal (that is, not subject to decay), when the Last Enemy is finally overthrown.

In the meantime, and following on the scandalous example that is the grace of God—pressed down, shaken together, flowing over—let us dare to knock the tops off the fragile, earthen vessels and pour out the generosity of God: share the Gospel, in season and out; let the waters of baptism be sloshed about as if we mean it; welcome sinners to the Lord’s Table; anoint lavishly and with confidence; offer the best we can, given our circumstances. And leave the outcome to God.

There is less of me that is original now than there was when I was a younger, slightly more attractive vessel: my hips are made of titanium and ceramic; I have about a third of a metre of Dacron plumbed through a major artery; and my gallbladder is a distant memory. I am now more earthen than ever. As, I suspect, are some of you. But take heart: this is God’s good pleasure, to take the unlikely and the ordinary, and through it to do things unheard of, finally to renew it and make it fit for the Kingdom of Heaven.