

John Donne, Good Friday, 1613 Riding Westward

For God created man to be immortal, and made him to be an image of his own eternity Nevertheless through envy of the devil came death into the world: and they that do hold of his side do find it. --Wisdom of Solomon 2:23-24.

From Pam: Since this is a challenging poem, I've broken it into segments' each is accompanied by a comment.

Summary: This poem, considered one of the greatest devotional poems in the English language, is dated by Donne as 1613. An anguished Donne was struggling to decide if he did or did not have a call to ordination. Donne explains that he is on a business journey riding toward the west on Good Friday, the symbolic day on which he and other Christians believe Jesus was crucified. He cleverly uses the idea (the conceit) of an inner and outer journey. The outer journey is one of business and financial necessity. The inner journey is his soul journey to the mystical East and Jerusalem.

In the poem, Donne uses several references to medieval cosmography. The earth is at the center of the universe; all else revolves around it. In that ancient planetary system, the spheres (planets) as they circled the earth were guided or directed by a divine force of "intelligences." Eventually, that concept became associated with a Divine Power. The "first moved" or *primum mobile* was the outermost moving sphere, but in this old model of the universe there were deviations that interfered with the consistent, circular movement of spheres. Donne connects that idea to the soul as a sphere.

The major spherical deviation for humans is the pursuit of business and pleasure. Just as the other spheres may come under the sway of a stronger planet and, thus, lose the innocence of their natural orbit (around the one true Sun=Light and Son=Jesus), so can the human soul mistakenly treat secondary influences (business and pleasure) as its "first mover." That disrupts the spiritual dimension and leaves the ignorant soul unaware of its fall from the grace of God.

Good Friday, 1613 Riding Westward

1. Let man's Soul be a Sphere, and then, in this,
2. The intelligence that moves, devotion is,
3. And as the other Spheres, by being grown
4. Subject to foreign motion, lose their own
5. And being by others hurried every day,
6. Scarce in a year their natural form obey:
7. Pleasure or businesses, so, our Souls admit
8. For their first mover, and are whirled by it.

Linea 1-8. Donne begins by equating the human soul with a sphere. Like the sphere, our **soul(s)** contain a spiritual devotion that stimulates us to live a good & righteous life. This natural devotion is within us; however, we are all too often caught up in the spheres of pleasure and business, paying little attention to the spiritual life.

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9. Hence is it, that I am carried towards the West
 10. This day, when my Soul's form bends toward the East.
 11. There I should see a Sun, by rising set,
 12. And by that setting endless day beget;
 13. But that Christ on this Cross, did rise and fall,
 14. Sin had eternally benighted all.

Linea 9-14. Donne sets his outer & inner journey. Even though he is bodily riding west, his soul's **form** is turned toward the East. The outer journey is symbolically the hurried and swirling life of business & pleasure. The inner journey is the spiritual quest culminating on a mystical journey to the Crucifixion. In the East, Donne sees a **Sun by rising set**. Donne (as he often does) also implies the mystical **Son** of God Jesus. Jesus dies a mortal death, but rises to eternal life (**endless day**). If Christ had not ransomed us, we would be benighted: condemned to a state of darkness and moral ignorance.

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15. Yet dare I almost be glad, I do not see
 16. That spectacle of too much weight for me.
 17. Who sees Gods face, that is self life, must die;
 18. What a death were it then to see God die.

Lines 15-18. Donne regrets he is facing west, but after considering Christ on the Cross, he is glad that he doesn't have to look. A mortal cannot look directly at God and live (Exodus 33:20). If so, Donne's wonders if his self-life (his essential being) would be extinguished. If the mere act of looking upon God begets death, what kind of death would one invite if he faces the dying God

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19. It made his own Lieutenant Nature shrink,
 20. It made his footstool crack, and the Sun wink.
 21. Could I behold those hands which span the Poles,
 22. And tune all spheres at once pierced with those holes?
 23. Could I behold that endless height which is
 24. Zenith to us, and our Antipodes,
 25. Humbled below us? or that blood which is
 26. The seat of all our Souls, if not of his,
 27. Made dirt of dust, or that flesh which was worn
 28. By God, for his apparel, ragged, and torn?

Lines 19-28. Nature responded with storms, and the earth God's **footstool** split. The winking Sun became a psychedelic darkness. [Note: **Footstool:** See Isaiah 66:1. *Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build from? Says the Lord. Or where will my resting place be?*] Donne then presents the cosmic Christ holding the whole universe in his hands. In the medieval planetary system, the majority of spheres move in circles on a common axis. Donne imagines Jesus's nail-pierced hands as holding up the poles of the axis that runs right through the center of the universe, including the Earth. [Continued next page.]

Lines 19-28 Cont'd. Christ becomes the Ultimate, the Zenith, the culmination of everything; we humans are his antipodal point, his likeness and his opposite. [Two antipodal points are connected by a straight line]. When drinking the communion wine, Christians partake literally or figuratively of Christ's blood, which redeems them from the power of hell and so provides their souls a **seat** in heaven. God's blood serves no such purpose for himself. God clothed himself in human flesh to enter this world. Through Christ's incarnation, Jesus accepted the **dirt of dust**, the death of the grave). God's body of flesh (his apparel) becomes ragged and torn as a result of his courageous suffering.



29. If on these things I dare not look, dare I
30. Upon his miserable mother cast mine eye,
31. Who was God's partner here, and furnished thus
32. Half of that Sacrifice, which ransomed us?

Lines 29-32. If Donne dares not look into the eyes of Christ, how can he look into the eyes of Mary, Christ's anguished mother, who was God's partner and gave 50% of her own birth son to ransom us from sin and death?

33. Though these things, as I ride, be from mine eye,
34. They are present yet unto my memory,
35. For that looks towards them; and thou looks towards me.

Lines 33-35. Donne continues thinking about facing the Son of God. Literally, Donne's physical eye cannot accomplish the impossible: he cannot stare directly into the physical **Sun**, nor can he look into the crucified face of the **Son of God**. But, suddenly, Donne receives the grace of a mystical encounter. Donne is still looking toward the West when--startled-- he realizes that *Jesus is gazing at his back*. However, Donne cannot face Christ because he knows full well that he is not yet deserving.

36. O Savior, as thou hangs upon the tree;
37. I turn my back to thee, but to receive
38. Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave.
39. O think me worth thine anger, punish me,
40. Burn off my rusts, and my deformity,
41. Restore thine Image, so much, by thy grace,
42. That thou may know me, and I'll turn my face

Lines 36-42 Conclusion. Donne asks for penance: **I turn my back to thee, but to receive Corrections, till thy mercies bid thee leave** [that is, until Christ in his mercy forgives Donne's sins.] Donne begs Christ's to punish him. A common penance was flogging in which the person punished would turn his back toward the person punishing him; floggings, for Donne, would symbolically mirror his back being turned for the whip and would replicate the vicious flogging Christ received on his way to the Cross. Purity is also attained through cleansing by fire. Donne begs: **Burn off my rusts, and my deformity**. In this image, the **Sun/Son** is imagined as the burning agent.

Donne's often focuses on the conflict between soul and body and between sacred and profane. Although he knows what is right, God's punishment (metaphorically or figuratively) is required to beat him into submission, making certain that he is cleansed and pure. As the poem concludes and with the grace of God, Donne may become worthy to face the crucified Christ. To do so, he must be restored in God's own image (Genesis 1:27). Then and only then will he be able to **turn my face** and, thus, become recognized by God. As the poem ends, he is on the dark eve of the coming dawn, but there is no evidence that the sin has been burned away. Until then, he will be unfit to turn his face toward Christ.

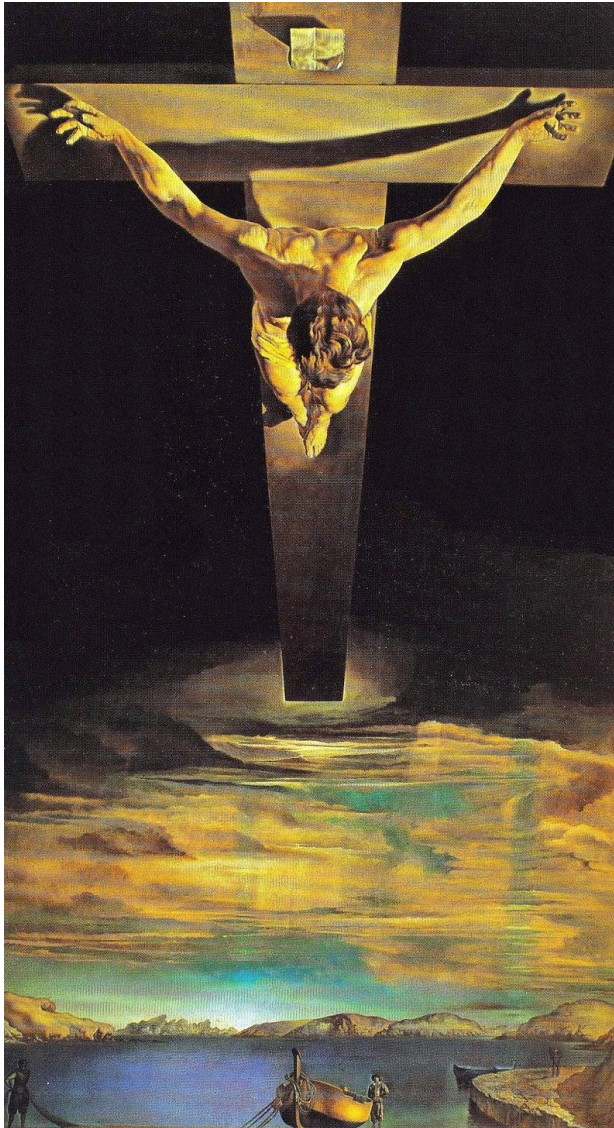
Part 2. Brief Tour of Holy Sepulcher & Garden Tomb <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gOZZaYsyx2g>, 7:43 min.



Here is a 7:43 min. visual tour & explanation about the Church of the Holy Sepulcher conventionally viewed as the site of Jesus' tomb & resurrection. More recently, the Garden Tomb (unearthed in 1867) has been considered the more likely site. In 2016, National Geographic funded the restoration of the Holy Sepulcher. Samples were taken from that Jerusalem tomb where Jesus Christ reportedly was buried after Crucifixion. Among the startling discoveries was hard evidence that the burial site was at least 1,700 years old, dating it back to the imperial Roman era.

Sources: gradesaver.com/donne-poems/study-guide/summary-good-friday-1613-riding-westward/; poemanalysis.com/john-donne/good-friday-1613-riding-westward/; eamingnotes.com/2017/08/02/summary-analysis-2-3/#Summary_of_Good_Friday_1613_Riding_Westward; crossref-it.info/textguide/metaphysical-poets-selected-poems/4/855; matthewaucoin.com/on-john-donnes-good-friday-1613-riding-westward/; Will Williams, *Journal of Christian Scholarship*, September 28, 2007; Matthew Aucoin.

Part 3. The Meditation and Closing Prayer are on page 3.



**Left: Salvador Dali (1904-1989)
Christ of St. John of the Cross (1951)**



Above: St. John of the Cross (in pencil)

St. John of the Cross (1542-1591). Ordained a priest in 1563, he became a Carmelite monk. He was canonized in 1726; his feast day is December 14. He is considered one of the greatest Christian mystics and Spanish poets. He was a doctor of the church, a reformer of Spanish monasticism, and cofounder with St. Teresa Avila of the contemplative order of Carmelites. He is a authored mystical literature, expressing the experience of the mystical union between the soul and Christ

Dali's Inspiration. Dali, a Spanish painter and mystic, is noted for his surreal visions. This unusual crucifixion: "I had a 'cosmic dream' in which I saw this image in color and which in my dream represented the 'nucleus of the atom.' This nucleus later took on a metaphysical sense; I considered the Christ the very unity of the universe!" Secondly, a Carmelite priest introduced him to the pencil drawing made by St. John of the Cross, made after St John had a vision.

The Painting. There are two perspectives when viewing this painting. In both, the viewpoint is from above the cross. Christ is looking down at Earth rather than a traditional frontal or low angle view. Perhaps, we are being invited to see the crucified Lord from the viewpoint of the Father in Heaven. The seascape at the bottom is specific. It is the contemporary setting of the Spanish fishing village where Dali lived. The swirling clouds almost look human.

A Dominican priest shares his response to the painting: "Jesus dies not just for us in a universal way but for every person in their concrete individuality, and not just people back then but here and now. Viewed from here we can look up and, penetrating the clouds with faith, see Christ, at once very clearly physically human but filled with divine glory, immense, embracing everything, and pointing to the Father from whom he has come...there is also a challenge. But there is also a challenge. Do we want to get caught up in the redemptive work of Christ, a mystery known forever in God, but now made known for our salvation? And will we witness to it?"

Meditation: Choose a point-of-view in this painting and explore it. Choose another. Why is Christ looking down? Why does he appear to be almost a bird ready to fly? What about the empty fishing boat? Where are the fishermen? The other people? Where are you in this painting?

Closing Prayer: O Lord, our Christ, whom nails could not hold to the cross, but only love. Grant that we who have received the fullness of your love, may be ready to bear before the world the marks of Your passion; who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Ghost, one God, world without end. AMEN.