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**John Donne's  
Sermon Preached  
at the Spital**

**John Donne**



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## John Donne's Sermon Preached at the Spital

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**Author(s):** Donne, John (1572-1631)

**Publisher:**

**Description:** Most people who know the name “John Donne” remember the man for his poetry. During his lifetime, however, Donne had achieved fame for his sermons, and he expected they would remain his claim to fame as the centuries passed. Donne delivered this sermon at the Priory of St. Mary Without Bishopgate, a hospital and almshouse founded in 1197. Every year since the 14th century, a prominent English clergyman has come to the hospital to give a sermon, often on the topic of the Resurrection or the spread of Truth. In 1622, Donne spoke on learning the truth of God’s glory. To acquiring this great knowledge, he said, one must first learn that all the glory of the world is a “mere nothing.” Readers of Donne will recognize in this sermon the same theme of the tension between worldliness and spirituality they find throughout his poetry.

Kathleen O’Bannon  
CCEL Staff

**Subjects:** English literature  
3195 English renaissance (1500-1640)

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John Donne

*Twenty-Six Sermons (25)*

Preached at the Spital

April 22, 1622

I

Our God is not out of breath, because he hath blown one tempest, and swallowed a Navy: Our God hath not burnt out his eyes, because he hath looked upon a Train of Powder: In the light of Heaven, and in the darkness of hell, he sees alike; he sees not onely all Machinations of hands, when things come to action; but all Imaginations of hearts, when they are in their first Consultations; past, and present, and future, distinguish not his *Quando*; all is one time to him: Mountains and Vallies, Sea and Land, distinguish not his *Ubi*; all is one place to him: *When I begin*, says God to Eli, *I will make an end*; not onely that all Gods purposes shall have their certain end but that even then, when he begins, he makes an end: from the very beginning, imprints an infallible assurance, that whom he loves, he loves to the end: as a Circle is printed all at once, so his beginning and ending is all one.

II

The drowning of the first world, and the repairing that again; the burning of this world, and establishing another in heaven, do not so much strain a mans Reason, as the Creation, a Creation of all out of nothing. For, for the repairing of the world after the Flood, compared to the Creation, it was eight days to nothing; eight persons to begin a world upon, then; but in the Creation, none. And for the glory which we receive in the next world, it is (in some sort) as the stamping of a print upon a Coyn; the metal is there already, a body and a soul to receive glory: but at the Creation, there was no soul to receive glory, no body to receive a soul, no stuff, no matter, to make a body of. The less any thing is, the less we know it: how invisible, how unintelligible a thing then, is this *Nothing!* We say in the School, *Deus cognoscibilior Angelis*, We have better means to know the nature of God, than of Angels, because God hath appeared and manifested himself more in actions, than Angels have done: we know what they are, by knowing what they have done; and it is very little that is related to us what Angels have done: what then is there that can bring this Nothing to our understanding? what hath that done? A Leviathan, a Whale, from a grain of Spawn; an Oke from a buried Akehorn, is a great; but a great world from nothing, is a strange improvement. We

wonder to see a man rise from nothing to a great Estate; but that Nothing is but nothing in comparison; but absolutely nothing, meerly nothing, is more incomprehensible than any thing, than all things together. It is a state (if a man may call it a state) that the Devil himself in the midst of his torments, cannot wish.

### III

The light of the knowledge of the glory of this world, is a good, and a great peece of learning. To know, that all the glory of man, is as the flower of grass: that even the glory, and all the glory, of man, of all mankind, is but a flower, and but as a flower; somewhat less than the Proto-type, than the Original, than the flower it self; and all this but as the flower of grass neither, no very beautiful flower to the eye, no very fragrant flower to the smell: To know, that for the glory of Moab, *Auferetur*, it shall be contemned, consumed; and for the glory of Jacob it self, *Attenuabitur*, It shall be extenuated, that the glory of Gods enemies shall be brought to nothing, and the glory of his servants shall be brought low in this word: To know how near nothing, how meer nothing, all the glory of this world is, is a good, a great degree of learning.

### IV

Some things the Angels do know by the dignity of their Nature, by their Creation, which we know not; as we know many things which inferior Creatures do not; and such things all the Angels, good and bad know. Some things they know by the Grace of their confirmation, by which they have more given them, than they had by Nature in their Creation; and those things only the Angels that stood, but all they, do know. Some things they know by Revelation, when God is pleased to manifest them unto them; and so some of the Angels know that, which the rest, though confirm'd, doe not know. By Creation, they knew as his Subjects; by Confirmation, they know as his servants; by Revelation, they know as his Council. Now, *Erimus sicut Angeli*, says Christ, *There we shall be as the Angels*: The knowledge which I have by Nature, shall have no Clouds; here it hath: that which I have by Grace, shall have no reluctance, no resistance; here it hath: That which I have by Revelation, shall have no suspicion, no jealousie; here it hath: sometimes it is hard to distinguish between a respiration from God, and a suggestion from the Devil. There our curiosity shall have this noble satisfaction, we shall know how the Angels know, by knowing as they know. We shall not pass from Author, to Author, as in a Grammar School, nor from Art, to Art, as in an University; but, as that General which Knighted his whole Army, God shall create us all Doctors in a minute. That great Library, those infinite Volumes of the Books of Creatures, shall be taken away, quite away; no more preaching, no more reading of the Scriptures, and that great School-Mistress, Experience, and Observation shall be remov'd, no new thing to be done,

and in an instant, I shall know more, than they all could reveal unto me. I shall know, not only as I know already, that a Bee-hive, that an Ant-hill is the same Book in *Decimo sexto*, as a Kingdom is in *Folio*, That a flower that lives but a day, is an abridgment of that King, that lives out his threescore and ten years; but I shall know too, that all those Ants, and Bees, and Flowers, and Kings, and Kingdoms, howsoever they may be Examples, and Comparisons to one another, yet they are all as nothing, altogether nothing, less than nothing, infinitely less than nothing, to that which shall then be the subject of my knowledge, for, *it is the knowledge of the glory of God.*

John Donne, *Twenty-Six Sermons* 25 (1660)