

The Manchester Sermon 2012:
Rebegot

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Rebegot

Study me, then, you who shall lovers bee
At the next world, that is, at the next Spring:
For I am every dead thing,
In whom love wrought new Alchimie.
For his art did expresse
A quintessence even from nothingnesse,
From dull privations and leane emptinesse:
He ruin'd me, and I am rebegot
Of absence, darknesse, death: things which are not.

Hello. It's very nice to be here. Thank you for having me, and for inviting me to speak to you tonight. That was the second verse of the poet and minister John Donne's darkest, most mourning poem, *A Nocturnall upon St Lucie's Day, being the Shortest Day*. It's one of his most beautiful, most paradoxical poems too, about the darkest of possible times, a mind and body sunk in darkness on one of the darkest days of the year, a day which, in turn, happens to be dedicated to St Lucy, whose name means light.

Lucy is the saint to whom people who believe in asking saints to do things for us have recourse for help with diseases of the eye; her presence in paintings and art is usually indicated by a woman carrying her own two eyes on a plate, as if carrying a plate that can see, as if the plate has eyes. But they're her eyes. The saint who stands for the darkest day has eyes that can see from a different place.

John Donne's poem about the depths of mental anguish is also about a kind of blindness, and at the same time a shockingly unexpected new way to be, or new way to see.

It's a poem in which a human being has been "ruined", by a combination of love and grief. In it Donne spends all five stanzas conjuring new ways to express what it is to be undone, or no longer himself: "I am the grave / Of all, that's nothing", "I am None." He even imagines the gloomy darkness of the winter, now that the "world's whole sap is sunke", as a kind of lightsome comedy compared to how low he's sunk himself, his own dark state.

At the same time, this poem is a kind of turned-inside-out celebration of creativity. He can't help pointing out in the poem the cyclic coming-back-to-life nature of the seasons, the trees, the natural world. Even as he says he'll never be part of that again, even as he rejects suns and summers and love, something in this poem is keen to remind us that they exist. It's almost a gentle revelation of self-indulgence in the poem, as if Donne is watching his own sorrow with a wry eye outside himself, while at the same time expressing that sorrow, that terrible wretchedness, with what's, in context, an unexpectedly highly charged creativity.

But more: at his lowest point, Donne coins a brand new word, he takes and reinvigorates an old word and an old notion. "He ruined mee, and I am rebegot / of absence, darknesse, death; things which are not." Rebegot, it's a word that's part poetic, part biblical, a half and half thing forged into a brand new thing. Not reborn; something else, something further back, and deeper, and this deep thing is a gift of the deep, a particular and special gift of the dark.

"Things which are not" – absence, darkness, death – are the things which human beings have always feared, maybe feared most, maybe even beyond poverty and slavery. In our own falling-faster-than-the-speed-of-sound world the screens of our phones and computers light up every dark, prove it by messaging us, *we're* not alone, keep us slavishly safe from ever thinking about one thing for too long and constantly bombarded with the newness of the new. But technology, like everything else, is, depending on what angle you take to look at it, just another revelation of the metaphysical, and of all the same things human beings have always done and go on doing over the centuries, loving each other, hurting each other, dying, giving birth, trying to work out how to say things that can't be said, or work out just what needs to be said when we're up against, for instance, absence, darkness, and death.

It's these endless end-things that send Donne back to that place where things are at their most fundamental initial state of being, what you might call the beginning of beginning, the pre

genesis of genesis. “Things which are not” can bring about a state so new in us, in him, that Donne has to invent a word for it. Rebegot.

Okay. So. I know I’m pushing my luck a bit here, because my remit for giving this sermon came with only one rule, only one stipulation, that I take a Biblical text as a starting point. But to be honest what I want to do for the whole thing is talk about this word rebegot. But it isn’t actually in the Bible. No. Wait a minute. I can see a way round this. Pretend none of that happened. I’ll begin again. This time I’ll do it right.

Hello. It’s very nice to be here. It’s great, actually, because when I was a childe, I spake as a childe, I understood as a childe, I thought as a childe; but when I became a woman, and, by some strange curve of the path a life happens to take, found myself standing in the mighty beauty, the acoustic splendour, of Manchester Cathedral one Thursday night in front of a “congregation” waiting for me to give a “sermon”, well, first I thought how St Paul would have been a bit annoyed about me changing the words of his beautiful 13th letter to the Corinthians to allow for my gender, and how he’d probably also have been annoyed at me doing this and being a woman at all.

Thank you for asking me to do this, give this talk here tonight, because when I was a child and went to Mass with my parents and sisters and brothers every Sunday morning at half past eight, even there in the shiny new deLatinated Roman Catholicism of the 1960s, it was clear that the notion that a woman would ever preach a sermon in that space was deep indiscretion, no, was simply unimaginable, off the planet, so much more impossible to pull off than any old Moon landing. (And of course, although there are now lay ministers of both genders in the Catholic church, had I stayed RC faithful and not stopped going to Mass in my late twenties, and had I wanted to devote my life to that particular faith, I, being a woman, could still never hope ever to become a priest – it’s a good litmus test, the way a religion treats its different genders, it generally tells you a great deal about the religion, rather like the ways a government deals with its asylum seekers or refugees tells you a great deal about that government.)

Mind you, that was in the Highlands of Scotland, back there at that eight-thirty Mass in my past, and in the Highlands Roman Catholicism was a kind of exotica. We were plumed and feathered, rare birds in an uncanny kind of Highland Scottish church that had the frippery of painted statues, pictures up on the walls, though I'd say it was still pretty Presbyterian in there even so. So imagine the child me back then one Sunday morning, it's probably cold, about ten to nine, we've just had the Gospel, we've just sat down, and I'm about to do what I do every Sunday when it's time for the sermon, which is, with my eyes still wide open, go to sleep, let my mind go where it likes, I'm safe for ten minutes, I will not have to move, nothing will be asked of me.

And the priest began to speak, he was preaching on a text from Ecclesiasticus, about kindness to fathers, we'd just heard it as one of the readings. *Kindness to a father will not be forgotten.*

Except – did he really just say, there, without blinking, without any notion of what had just come out of his mouth – the words: *kindness to a father will not be forgiven?*

I caught my sister-in-law's eye, she was sitting along from me, she caught my eye behind my parents' backs, that meant I hadn't imagined it, she had heard it too, and my mother's shoulders were shaking, and an unlaughable laugh passed between us all, we had to stop ourselves laughing, because laughing in church would never do, my mother, shaking, nudged my father to stop him shaking with laughter, who nudged one of my sisters who had no idea what was going on, we could see, just by looking at the heads on the necks and the tensing of the backs of the people in the rows in front of us, who'd heard the word-slippage and who hadn't heard the mistake which the priest himself, I'm certain, hadn't even noticed himself doing. *My son, support your father in his old age, do not grieve him during his life. Even if his mind should fail, show him your sympathy, do not despise him in your health and strength, for kindness to a father will not be forgiven, and in the days of your affliction, it will be remembered of you like frost in sunshine, your sins will melt away.* Something melted,

all right, and became human, and alive, and of all the sermons I sat through, in my years of sitting through sermons, it's one I'll never forget.

And one of the other best prayerful mishearings or misunderstandings I ever heard came from a friend of mine who told me when she said her Hail Marys she'd spent a lot of her early life believing that what you should say, instead of the line of the prayer Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus, was *Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit on the dining room table.*

Again I tell you. It is easier for a caramel to pass through the eye of a needle. Puns and wordplay were right at the centre of medieval and early renaissance religious rituals, because a play on words was thought to be a marking of the specialness of the words, a sort of signalling to the hearer or reader to pay extra attention, a further ritualising of ritual. But sermons, I surmise, are meant to be the opposite of mistakes. They're certainly not a place for Freudian slips, or Freudian anythings; much more likely, I'd have thought, to be a form concerned to keep the unconscious both firmly at bay and firmly in hand.

So anyway I looked up the word sermon in the dictionary, and I found these synonyms: harangue, reproof, moralising lecture especially one delivered from a pulpit, on a Biblical text. It sounds most unforgiving. But what I found, underneath these words, in the etymological roots of the word sermon, was: From the latin, sermo, sermonis, meaning speech. Probably also ultimately from serere : to join. In the beginning is the word, and this word, at its beginnings, is rooted in notions of the place where voice and language come together, plus, even more deeply rooted in the bringing together of things, people, whatever, an act of joining things, connecting things.

Twenty minutes, it's all I've got, to bring this thing together. While I was writing it, and before I started, it felt like it'd take forever. And yet it's nothing, twenty minutes, the wingflick of a dragonfly, the swing of a spider down a thread of her worldwide web, and that'll be it over, that'll be it past, and I want to get it right, because it's the only sermon I'll ever give. And that's it

nearly half over, and I don't feel like I've even started, I've certainly not harangued you much yet, and I've still got some moralising to do.

Okay, I'll start, I'm starting, right, this is me starting now, and it's going to get bloody, I'll get bloody in a couple of paragraphs' time. Hello. Thank you for having me in this lovely space, it's really really nice, it's great to be here, I'm particularly lucky to be here today of all days because it happens to be the feast day of St Luke, in whose honour the choir sang Strengthen Ye The Weak Hands a moment ago, a song pieced together into such fineness from different sources (fragments of the books of Ecclesiasticus and Isaiah, and the Book of Common Prayer), and I happen also to know, because I looked it up, remember, that that's what sermon means, a bringing of things together. But that piece of music moves from different bits and pieces, weakness and brokenness into such a cornucopia, a conscious healing, a celebration of broken things that does what seems impossible, giving eyes to the blind and ears to the deaf and legs to the lame and roses to the desert – translating them, through a benignness of spirit, twinned with this good earth we live on, into a new state – mended and fertile. Rather like the state Job is left in at the end of the Book of Job, after God's allowed him to be ruined to see what'll happen when he is, remember, allowed all his camels, cattle, servants and children to be killed off, then when that doesn't make Job bitter, permitting a nasty dermatological pustule rash and a bunch of unhelpful friends to itch him, and, yes, that does it. But by the end, after God and Job have had a sort of dialogue, or a rant at each other, and Job's backed down, all is forgiven, it's all all right again and God gives him an ending blessed “more than his beginning”, doubles his livestock, gives him back the same number of children, though there's no mention of any redress for the lost servants. Something in me always feels for, pines for, those lost camels, asses, first children, but particularly for the forgotten servants so casually burnt to death with the sheep ... something in me suspects I'm supposed to, since the Book of Job is such a witty one, and one which demonstrates the hamstrung position we're inevitably in, trying to have any conversation with anything divine. Also, what a book for language. The King James version is where the phrases *give*

up the ghost and skin of my teeth come from, and even the later translations into modern idiom can't help but be beautiful: "Have you ever in your life given orders to the morning or sent the dawn to its post telling it to grasp the earth by its edges?" God rumbles at Job. "Have you walked where the Abyss is deepest? Have you been shown the gates of Death or met the janitors of Shadowland? ... Where does darkness live?"

I'm digressing, I was talking about St Luke, and about Strengthen Ye The Weak Hands, specifically a wonderful choice for St Luke's Day, the piece of music we heard, because this particular very real Greek man, Lukas, who was born in Antioch and died peacefully at the age of 84, seems to have been a doctor, and also a painter – if you look him up you find he's said to be the first ever icon painter – and he's also thought, of course, to be the great writer of the Gospel According to Luke. His version of the life and times of Christ happens to be the one that is most imagined, most upfront about its reimagining nature, because Luke, of all four Gospel apostles, was the one who wasn't actually there, and who tells his Gospel after the event, later, at one remove. Anyway, after his death and sainthood, St Luke became the patron saint of physicians, surgeons, artists, students – and butchers.

It's like the saint whose day I was born on, St Bartholomew, who's also a patron saint to butchers (it's interesting that butchers need more than one) and at the same time as butchers, Bartholomew's the patron saint of bookbinders, which sounds unlikely until you remember that books were bound with animal skins, that's why books have spines – because the place where the fold of skin covered the spine on the animal was a very good place for page-fitting. So Bartholomew happens also to be the patron saint of flayers, and leatherworkers, and of all things to do with skin and nervous systems, about which he was considered to have special knowledge, because his particular martyrdom was that he was flayed alive – he's often depicted carrying his flayed skin over his arm, or carrying a book and a knife. St Luke was a lot luckier in his end, dying in his bed. The deaths of the martyrs read like a course in butchery all right. It's rare for a saint not to have died a bloody and symbolic death, like Agnes the lamb,

stabbed at the altar, and Cecilia, her head not quite chopped off enough for her to die immediately, and Catherine defeating the Catherine Wheel only to be beheaded instead, and Lucy whose eyes go ahead of her on a little dish, killed by a sword in the throat.

St Luke, the imaginer, whose day it is today, is traditionally signalled in the paintings or illustrations which depict him by something you'd expect to see near a butcher: an ox. Except – this ox has wings, great white swan wings, or bright gold-lined wings like the ones on archangels. *This ox can fly*. This cow, which looks just like the kind we butcher every day, can jump over the Moon. In the mess of doctoring, butchering, painting, the meeting of healing and bloodiness and art, something heavy and earthy is changed, reconfigured, rethought, by something whose potential is light and airborne. It's quite practically a depiction of not just the work of the imagination on the real world, but also of the real world on the imaginary: the bestial weight and warmth is given feathers, the feathers are given stenchy muddy hoofs.

Of course, the truth about our world is that there's probably some science lab somewhere out there right now where people are slaving away trying to work out how you DO graft wings onto cows. Where does darkness live? Right there. And a writer like Donne can let us understand what to do when we're thrown into the dark by the unbelievable true surrealities of real life. It's writers, like Shakespeare, who quiz the responsibilities of the human imagination. "Tell me, where is fancy bred, Or in the heart, or in the head? How begot, how nourished?" is how he puts it in *The Merchant of Venice*; a singer sings it casually as a character ponders which box to open, for he's got to choose the right one, out of three, he's got to play the right game, tick all the right boxes to win the hand of the rich girl. *The Merchant of Venice* is one of Shakespeare's most difficult, most uneasy, most problematic and dark plays. With its impossible knots of who gets what, in an amoral world where everything is a type of getting, it's a play *about* all sorts of butchery, smart to the inhumanities of its own contemporary racisms and smart to, prescient about, future centuries of racism and butchery.

Or in the heart or in the head or in the wallet, we mustn't be naïve about the power of the imagination and the ways people use the power and use it for power. *In dreams begin responsibilities.* That's Yeats. Murakami says it like this: *Our responsibility begins with the power to imagine.* And that's us back to the beginnings of things again.

Hello, it's lovely to be here, thank you for asking me, it's really nice to etcetera and if you're wondering what's to be got out of all this endless beginning, in the Book of Genesis, the book of beginning after beginning, there's a fantastic and satisfying list of begettings: so and so begate so and so, and lived for five hundred and fifty years and then so and so begate so and so who was a great hunter and became known, before God, as The Great Hunter, and he begate so and so who lived five and thirty years and begate so and so, so and so and so and so, (that's my translation). No, but in actuality, the begetting section of Genesis is really beautiful, I just don't have time to read it all to you now, it takes up the bulk of two chapters, in fact it straddles a crucial point – a point where God's clearly got really fed up, has had enough of humans and decides to interrupt all this begetting, which has after all resulted in the building of a Tower which all the people who've been begot are planning to use to climb up to, and invade, heaven, which is why God banishes everyone into a state of different languages, so nobody can understand each other and doing things together will be much much harder. So the Tower fails. But the begetting continues (regardless of language problems) cheekily, definitely joyfully.

Begetting is also really important in the New Testament. In Matthew's Gospel, it's used as a kind of birth certificate for the Holy Family's genealogy; *Abraham begate Isaac, and Isaac begate Jacob, and Jacob begate Judas and his brethren. And Judas begate Phares, and Zara of Thamar, and Phares begate Esrom, and Esrom begate Aram. And Aram begate Aminadab, and Aminadab begate Naasson, and Naasson begate Salmon* ie the fish, it tickles me, that fish leaping upstream all the way from Abraham to Joseph, who marries Mary (but who is not, as it happens, the onlie begetter of the baby Jesus).

What comes across, in both New and Old Testaments, is rhythm, repetition, continuance. The begetting is a kind of revelation that time is chronological but life force is cyclic, a matter more of rhythm than of chronology. In the Bible it's all firmly a matter of fathering. By the time Shakespeare is writing, his word beget has come to mean conceive in both senses, the physiological and the thinking sense. When Donne invents the word rebegot, he is remaking everything – fathering, conceiving, the very deepest place of thought; almost, you could say, the place before thought, the original source of both birth and thought.

Rebirth is another favourite concept of Shakespeare's who, in the late plays, joins comedy and tragedy together at the seam to deliver rebirth after uncanny rebirth. It's analogous that Donne the meditative religious poet is never far from Donne the love poet; they fuse and form the imaginative force which, in his most famous meditation, gives us the vision that no man or woman is an island, entire of itself, that, because we are involved in mankind, any and every man's or woman's death plucks at the seams of every one of us.

As soon as you open a book – those things of skin and wings – something connective happens. It's partly the urge in the single human voice towards harmony, or the choral. It's partly the urge for dialogue. Donne, the great sermoniser, the great poet of the sex and death drives, vitalises us with what vitalises his work, dialogue – between human and human, human and divine, human and the body, human and morality, human and power, human and world, human and geography real and imagined, human and the imagination, and in the reading it's the centuries that melt to nothing, and what's dead and gone comes to life. But this is powerful beyond belief, and brings us back to the importance of what nourishes the imagination, and how we nourish our individual and collective imaginations; it brings us back to the responsibilities of the kinds of language and the acts of language which can bring us together rather than divide us, which can allow us to change things for the better, and if and when things go wrong (because they will – we're human, we make mistakes) allow us both individually

and communally, even at the point of giving up the ghost, to begin again.

Hello, it's lovely to be here tonight, and I just wanted to talk about something with you, I was wanting to talk to you about time and how we survive it, but I see I'm a bit pushed for time, I was going to tell you this great fact I found out, about how there was once, not that long ago, no need for gravestones, because everybody simply grew up knowing exactly who was buried where, which families, which ancestors, it was something we as a community didn't need to mark, as obvious as knowing your way home.

I was going to talk about stratification, depth and surface, and tell you how uneasy I am about the way we've lost and we lose context because we are moving at a speed so fast and taking in so much given information that for many people it's hard just to concentrate, never mind actually almost *inviting* just to forget to be ethical, because what difference can we make, things happen so fast, what can we do about them anyway? And I wanted to talk about how we are developing a politics which tends towards being 140 characters long, even shallower than a soundbite (by developing there I mean developing it like a cold virus, like catching something contagious). I was going to say something too about words, about how layered they are if we'll allow them to be, how they always carry their shifting contemporary context bound up with their histories, regardless of how lightly we use them, and I meant to say something about how this is a dark time all right though we are lighting it with the screens of our smart phones – I'm thinking particularly about the ways in which the educational equalities I for one was lucky enough to have been born into and to have grown up with, have been eaten away, are being erased right in front of my eyes, our eyes; how the divide between people who have money and people who haven't is being encouraged, not addressed, not solved; how global and local ethnic division and racial stereotyping are endemic; how the sexism we thought we'd got rid of has never really gone as away as we thought, it's just put on (and taken off) some new clothes, still haunts our institutions and at the same time has done a nifty sidestep into ubiquitous internet porn, a whole new global slave labour

market, a new meat market, alongside the old ones. And I haven't even mentioned poverty, local or global, and the way that because of the determination of the rich to get richer, Europe itself (not mentioning the countries which have always had to contend with desperate poverty) is now beginning to give at the seams.

And that's me just scratching the surface of the divides which are making us islands, entire of ourselves, and will make us less, nothing but clods to each other.

"All mankind is of one another, and is one volume", Donne says in the same meditation in which he declares that we aren't islands, that we make one land, an earth. His idea, his vision, of heaven? "That library where every book shall lie open to one another."

If they keep taking libraries away from us, maybe we will fill all the churches with books. Because :

What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult to each other? (That's George Eliot.) Fresh images that yet / Fresh images beget. (That's WB Yeats.) Soft morning, city! Lsp! I am leafy speafing. Lpf! ... Lispn! No wind no word. Only a leaf, just a leaf and then leaves. (That's James Joyce.) Over this great city, light after long dark, truth, the sweet silver song of the lark. (That's Carol Ann Duffy.) Forget your literature? Forget your soul. (That's Edwin Morgan.) Hubris, imagination, desire! The blood sang in her veins. ... across the entire globe, as if a spontaneous response to the giant comedy that endlessly unfolded beneath it, until everything that lived and breathed, everywhere, was laughing. (That's Angela Carter.) The dead don't go till you do, loved ones. The dead are still here, holding our hands. (That's Jackie Kay.) Everything in life that we really accept undergoes a change. So suffering must become love. That is the mystery. (That's Katherine Mansfield.)

Let me stand in this consecrated place while I'm here and be evangelical at you with all the heft of the word evangelical, a word that means there's a message to be given, to be got. Let me Donne you, let me Shakespeare you, let me Yeats you and

Keats you and Eliot you, I mean both TS and George. Let me Joyce you and Woolf you and Mansfield you, let me Cummings you, Proust you, Camus you, let me Colette you, Dylan and Edward Thomas you, Plath you and Hughes you and Tagore you, Austen and Dickens you, Calvino you, Ishiguro you, DH Lawrence you, Grace Paley you, Amos Tutuola you, Irene Nemirovsky you, Helen Oyeyemi you, let me Elizabeth Bishop you, let me Toni Morrison you, let me Susan Sontag you, Rilke you, Atwood you, Rumi you, Gertrude Stein you, let me Kay you and Duffy you, Muriel Spark you, Christine Brooke-Rose you, Jose Saramago you, Angela Carter you up to the roof, and raise high the roof beams, carpenters, because we're going to Sappho this place from top to toe too.

Let me above all leave you a space as big as a sizeable planet to list all the writers you know should be there, every writer you want as an active verb, every writer it's my mistake not to have included. I'm sorry. Remember. I've only twenty minutes. But hello. It's really good to be here.

And when all's said and done? Or it looks very like it is? Absence, darkness, death, things which are not? Think. Again. Change your eyes. Open your eyes in the new place. Find and make the new words for it. Open the closed book. Back to the start of the start of the start.

Begin again. Be rebegot.