

Model of an Homily for a Difficult Subject : Trinity Sunday 2003

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St Thomas Aquinas was one of those annoying children who persistently asked questions. He was above all inquisitive in theological matters. We all know how difficult it is to answer a child's questions about God and the meaning of life. St Thomas frequently pestered his mother with the same question: what is God? Why did he ask his mother? Because our mothers first taught the faith to us, we learned to pray at our mother's knee, we learned something of the fidelity and loving kindness of God from our mother's love. There is another reason we ask our mothers questions, it is because we trust our mother to tell us the truth. You might say that it was through his mother that Thomas began his career as a theologian. The answer to the question; what is God, is given to us in St John's Gospel: no one has ever seen God, the only Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. (Jn. 1:18) The Son who lies on the Father's breast hearing the beating of his heart, the rhythm of systole and diastole, expansion and contraction, calling and sending, this is the source of the Son's knowledge, as by tradition, it was the fount of the knowledge of the beloved disciple who reclined on the Lord's breast while they were at supper on the night he was betrayed. John uses a special word to describe Jesus's ministry of making known. The word is *exegesato*. Jesus is for us both the exegete and the exegesis of the Father, the medium and the message. The substance of revelation is not simply a doctrine, a bald teaching; it the coming of a presence amongst us: for we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son'. (Jn.1:14)

We have heard his voice, but we have also seen his glory. There is a hearing, but also a seeing. Some theologians have tried to draw a distinction between the revelation that comes through voice and by ear and that which comes by sight. In fact, both go together. Sometimes there can be a certain idolatry of the word which is no less dangerous than the idolatry of the ephemerally beautiful. It is true that scriptural revelation is a revelation of the word, but it is not only that. Underlying the word there is always a vision, there must always be a vision. The whole story of scripture is driven by a hunger for sight, a nostalgia for the vision of God. How long will you hide your face from me? (Ps. 13:1) Your face O Lord do I seek, hide not your face.(Ps. 27:8-9) In our intensely visual society dominated by the flickering image of screen and tabloid, people want to see. Instead of bringing them to see we stop their ears with our empty words. The vision we are promised is for all, not just for a privileged few. Those chosen by the risen Christ as his ambassadors are chosen because they have seen him, and eaten and drunk with him, they have enjoyed his society and been accepted as his friends. In drawing others into that same friendship they introduce them to the society of the Holy Trinity, that communion of living persons united in love, and what else is charity, as St Thomas tells us, but a kind of friendship we enjoy with God the Holy Trinity.

At Vatican II, during the debate on *Dei Verbum*, the Constitution on Revelation, some fathers were unhappy with the statement that God addresses us as friends. (DV.1:2). They thought that the word 'friends' should be replaced by the word 'sons'. Their suggestion was rejected, the Council fathers did not opt for patriarchy and notions of filial obedience. They argued, was not Moses a friend of God? 'And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend.'(Ex.33:11) With no one else had God shared his secrets. 'And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face.' (Deut. 34:10) We speak to our friends face to face. When we are ashamed, burdened with guilt, coming out with an untruth, we hang our heads, we cannot look up, we cannot show our faces, we cannot look our friends in the eye. Moses and the Lord spoke face to face, 'as a man speaketh to his friend'. John tells us that at the Last Supper Jesus does not call his disciples servants, but friends. (Jn. 15:15) He speaks to them face to face, not man to man. Revelation is a conversation of God with humanity, a conversation in which God takes the initiative, it is an impulse of his love. As St Bernard tells us: God willed to be seen in the flesh and to converse with humanity. (In *Cantica*, sermo 20, a 6)

St John tells us we have seen, heard and touched...the word of life. (1 Jn.1:1) The revelation of the Holy Spirit in the divine conversation on which we preachers are eavesdroppers takes place in word and gesture, language and signs. At Vatican II, again in the debate on the Constitution on Divine Revelation, some fathers wanted signs and gestures to be replaced by another word. *Haec revelationis oeconomia fit gestis verbisque intrinsece inter se connexis.* (DV.1:2) 'This economy of revelation is achieved by deeds and words, which are intrinsically bound up with each other'. Some of the fathers wanted words and deeds to be replaced with the Latin word *factum* with its connotations of an action performed in the past and now over and done with; something which could be described and reported upon but which does not have the emphasis of something still living now. In this way the tradition can be wrapped, packaged and sealed, controlled and dispatched, consigned from hand to hand like a baton in a relay race.

In some ways, this debate lies at the root of our present troubles. Our present troubles are connected with revelation and its transmission, especially its transmission through frail and fragile human instruments. St Dominic wanted his Order to be called and to be an Order of Preachers. It was not simply what the preachers said that was the

preaching, it was what they were gestis verbi, in word and deed, language and sign. It was the performance of the preached word in the theatre of the world that was the preaching too. The preachers were to draw men and women into the society of the Holy Trinity, through sharing that friendship with Christ that was to be at the heart of their own lives. The Word of God is alive and active, but if the word of our own lives is lifeless, if there is a divorce between the word we speak and the sign we are, there is no health in us and we are useless servants.

In one of his poems Edwin Muir, the Scottish poet, has a bleak comment on the tendency of religious people to drain the blood from the word. He is describing a Scottish landscape and 'Calvin's bleak kirk crowning the brae, where Word made flesh is made word again'. It is not only Calvin's kirk, but even our own Order, which has made Word made flesh into word again. What else did we do in our neo-Scholastic decadence but aim for a kosher word, a bloodless word. Sometimes we drain the Word of its mystery because we are frightened of it, with good reason. 'Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of the heart of the fire, as you have heard, and lived?' (Deut. 4:33) Instead of putting off our shoes out of reverence, we have put on our surgical gloves, taken out our forensic instruments and operated on the Word, which we have drained of life, atomizing and dissecting it and turning it into an arid moralism, or a form of theological geometry.

The people complain of the pastors 'they come to visit me and speak empty words', but then they go further to the next verse 'their hearts full of malice, they spread it abroad.' The people do not trust their pastors, partly because they have drained the word of life; it has sometimes been used as a weapon of oppression. It is just word with no sign: empty, vain. The Word of God, the language of God, the conversation that is the Holy Trinity has been abused. The children feel that they have been lied to by their mother, who is the first teacher of the faith, and they are angry. What have we done? The cultural support and protection that sheltered us, but also confined us and muted our word, has been withdrawn and we wonder what to do. Who are we now? The beginning of the answer is 'be called again'. Allow your lives to be taken possession of once more by the Word.

In his Confessions, Saint Augustine writes:

I have learnt to love you late, O beauty so ancient and so new! You were within me, and I was in the world outside myself. I searched for you outside myself... You were with me but I was not with you.'

God is not absent from us. It is sometimes we who have been absent from him. We were too taken up with the success of our institutions, like the rich man in the parable whose harvests were so great that he tore down his barns to build bigger ones. When he had his harvest in and all safely under lock and key he told himself: soul you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry. But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you.' (Lk. 12: 19-20) He mistook the gift for a possession. We cannot take the gift of God's Word prisoner. He must captivate us and these present trials are simply the medium he uses to show us that he is with us, just as they are the invitation to us rediscover him who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Chrys McVey reminded us yesterday of the summons the risen Christ gives to his disciples to seek him once more in Galilee. Galilee of the gentiles is the place of mission, the marginal place, but it is also the place of vocation. Christ's call always comes to his disciples on the margins, where the sea touches the land, or where the mountain rises above the plain. The disciples, this group of apostolic failures, are summoned back to Galilee to be called again. The call to discipleship is the call to follow, literally, 'to come behind'. Meister Eckhart has a nice comment on this passage in one of his sermons:

There are some who follow God: these are the perfect. Others walk close by God, at His side: these are the imperfect. But there are those others who run in front of God, and these are the wicked. (A Sermon on the Following of Christ)

The true place for a disciple is not in front, not even alongside, but behind. In these difficult times we are being summoned back to Galilee, the place of beginnings to hear the call again in all its freshness. We are being summoned to abandon the security of our false Jerusalems in order to allow the Lord to find us once more. In the Letter to the Hebrews we are told that Jesus Our Lord learned obedience through suffering. (Heb. 5:8) The way of the disciple, above all of the Dominican disciple, is the way of obedience. What is true of Him can be no less true of us. We are being taught obedience through suffering, we are learning to follow, we who have sometimes been tempted to lead. God is in the Exile as he is in the Exodus and since it is His will that this shall be so we accept it in faith and love, joyful in hope.

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