



Sermon on 25th Anniversary of the Founding of the Catholic Theological Association

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Teacher, Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies, having a wife but no children, the man must take the widow and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first took a wife, and died without children. And the second and the third took her, and likewise all seven left no children and died. Afterward the woman also died. In the resurrection, therefore, whose wife will the woman be? For the seven had her as wife. (Lk 20.28ff)

This passage from the Gospel of Luke poses a problem: the seven brothers who have acquired legal rights and obligations in relation to this much-married woman cannot all claim the status of husband in heaven because polyandry, like polygamy, is excluded by the same Torah which requires the sequential marriages in the first place. The assumption, of course, is that the life of the world to come is fully continuous with the life of the present. And this, of course, is something which the Sadducees deny: for them there is no resurrection, and the view that there is such a completion is a late-made addition to the foundational teaching given by Moses. Instead, the obligations laid on us now are for this age only, with nothing beyond or above, or before or after: be married now and only now, because this age is all there is. Jesus agrees with them that marriage is only for the present age, but he differs from them on human destiny. In the world to come, he says, the God of the living will make us children of the resurrection:

The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage, but those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. (20.34–6)

We will be simply and simple like the angels; later Christian teaching will say that this is not a condition of monad-like isolation because in our risen state we will be in God and there we will know and love all those whom God knows and loves. Knowing and loving someone

in God is knowing and loving them as they are – a task that is difficult just now, even, or perhaps especially, for those who are married. You may remember the television programme when Terry Wogan interviewed the Irish nun, Sister Briege McKenna, and said to her, ‘Well, Briege, now you’ve taken vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Sounds a lot like marriage to me’. Perhaps so: the tasks of life do not differ much among married and unmarried: there are simply different ways of performing them.

While the teaching that Jesus gives to the Sadducees begins as a discussion of how the Torah is to be understood in relation to marriage and the obligation to produce offspring and ensure an inheritance of goods and property, it ends at the boundaries of what we can say, namely how we will be when God’s action in us reaches its consummation. The legal conundrum is raised by the Lord into one of his most powerful teachings about what awaits us.

But that the dead are raised, even Moses showed, in the passage about the bush, where he calls the Lord the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. Now he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him. (20.37f.)

Moses’ identification of the God in whom all live is given greater prominence than the puzzles raised by Moses’ Law. If it is the case that to God ‘all live to him’ (all are alive to him, in him all are living), then, within the limits of what can be said about this mystery, we are right to say that in our death we go deeply into God and that this entry into God is a ‘being alive’. Too much of our thinking and preaching treats death as an entry into non-being, a cessation of identity, yet if you have been at the death of a holy person and shared how they commit themselves to the mercy and goodness of God, it becomes impossible to return to sub-Christian accounts of death as a separation from goodness and life. Those who are deeply in God are not far from us because ‘in God we live and move and have our being’ (Acts 17.28).

I’m told that Herbert McCabe, that great and good man, surely one of the original geniuses of the Dominican order in this country, used to refer to Thomas Aquinas as ‘my colleague Thomas Aquinas’. There is something wonderfully Catholic about that phrase because the bond that Christ creates among human beings, binding them to himself, binds them also to one another across the ages. The one who can say, ‘Before Abraham was, I am,’ and ‘Moses wrote of me’ slips across time as the Word who takes us all up into the ever-present actuality of God. Even our grammar is revealing when we say, ‘St Paul says’ or ‘Thomas says’ or ‘Herbert says’: the conversation and listening across the ages is always a present thing. And this is not simply an academic convention: it springs from the shared bond of understanding that men and women under the action of grace have

with one another. That is surely what comes to expression in our Catholic Theological Association.

Soon, the relics of Therese of Lisieux will be brought to this country. You will know that she is a doctor of the Church, a young woman from Normandy, full, as they say in France, of '*la sagesse normande*,' full of Norman wisdom. Her name as you know was Thérèse Martin, and in the parishes of the East End this Doctor of the Church is now popularly known as 'Doc Martin'. When her writings were first published, the passages were omitted which showed her spiritual struggles, passages in which she said she could understand why people didn't believe in God. But these are the writings, now fully published, that now speak to us more powerfully than her pious language because this young woman lives out in the convent at Lisieux the spiritual trial of our age, that gnawing sense of the unreality and impossibility of God. She is perhaps the first Doctor of the Church for whom atheism was part of her spiritual reality.

There is an account of the events around her death bed: when she was dying, the Carmelite nuns were clucking round her saying, 'Thérèse is going to heaven, but for the rest of us all that we can expect is a long purgatory'. And Thérèse lifted her head from the pillow and said, 'There is no purgatory for those who love', and then carried on with the difficult business of handing herself over to the God whose existence was so problematic for her. We have the scene of deeply transformative spiritual teachings being given by a young woman dying far too young, and having to trust herself to a God who is barely glimpsed on the felt horizon of her life.

Was this what life, her life, was about? Is this in any sense a *telos*? If I in my creaking 60s register a mild and normal anxiety about what my life might be about, what is it like for this young woman, any young woman, any man or woman, to experience God at the end of one's life as difficult? You will know that if you look up 'ultimate truth' in the index of Ed Sanders' book, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, the references given there are to blank pages in the book. What was it like for Thérèse to face handing herself over to pages that were blank in the hope that the ineffable emptiness of those pages will be the space of God? Hope may be the portal to the theological virtues, as Péguy tells us, but it may also be the portal through which alone we enter heaven. Our work as theologians is a heavenly work in the sense that it is conducted as a knowledge that springs from hope, as prophetic knowledge of what life might be and will be if our sense of God is right. Who can guarantee that it is? No one, but we hope and risk our lives on that hope. As Thérèse did. As Herbert McCabe did. As did all those men and women of our Association who talked and taught and wrote their way to heaven, those who are our colleagues with Thomas Aquinas,

St Paul, Newman and the Irish farmer who, when asked how he was, replied that he was ‘stumbling between the immensities’.

What will it be like to hope and to hand ourselves and our lives over to God? We might think of a space in which a silent Word will come to us, the expressiveness of God. It will be silent like deep space that is without air. In God there is no sequence of sound or movement, only actuality, *ipsum esse*, says Aquinas. We will know an actuality beyond anything that we have experienced before, the real finally coming over us. Perhaps, just as in our present state only music can do, we will be unified into a single point of attentiveness, a climactic contact at last with the real, the one, the true, the beautiful, a rich but ultimately simple actuality, radiant and luminous not because it is empty but because like our created light in these wonderful northern hills around Ushaw, it contains all the modulations of the real, converging on a unitary, transcendent *esse*. As we cease to be here, we do not cease to be because we will be then in deep God, in the depths of what is real, and that is what we call resurrection. We will hope and trust as everything else fades from our consciousness and all that there is left to us is God in whom we will live. For ‘he is not God of the dead, but of the living, for all live to him.’

That moment might be like an entrance into the silence that underlies and lies between the notes of music. The only way to listen to music, to attend to what goes through it and lies behind it and is overlaid by it, is to attend to the silence from which it comes and into which it always goes. God might be that silence from which all sounds come and against which all discordances are resolved. Notes stand out when they are heard against a background of silence that is the condition of there being sound at all: so the world, with its chatter and its bustle and its stories and its whirring quantum elements that pop in and out of existence, exists against a matrix of silence that is God. The silence of God makes the world possible and it is where we come from, that in which we have our being, and that towards which we go in hope. Thérèse and Herbert, Paul and Thomas, our colleagues across the centuries, have gone into that divine silence and so will we.

Herbert McCabe tells us – present tense – that Aquinas thinks that theologians don’t know what they’re talking about. And so you should distrust everything I’ve just said to you. It was an imperfect way of taking you to the boundaries of our speech and reminding you that one day, we will cross those boundaries, and it’s no bad thing to approach them imaginatively from time to time. I tell my students that theology is about nothing and I try to mean it.

It may be good for theologians in particular to venerate the relics of the Little Flower because her speech about God, her *doctrina*, her spiritual engagement with a difficult God, took place in a body not different from ours. Her relics are the site of holy living, and an

untimely, difficult, yet we trust holy, death, a holy *agonia*, a wrestling with the Lord, an *agonia* resolved when the portal of hope opened to her and she gave herself finally to the living God in whom she is alive. We still have among us the physical remains of her body in which the Word was received by flesh and in which a young woman lived out the mystery of Christ. Matter matters, I think, because God *matters* in all the resonances of that verb. It is the basis of our doctrine of creation. Together with Therese, Herbert, Thomas and Paul, our theological colleagues, let us in this Eucharist go deeper into the silence of God in anticipation of the day when we will enter it fully.

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