A Sermon for St Thomas

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Parents are desperate bores about the cute things their children have said but the Aquinas family preserved a story about young Thomas of a rather different kind. They complained that he was always bothering people with the question: What is God? I expect the story is quite true and totally trivial; it only becomes interesting if we see it as a sort of premonition of his whole life, of what his life was to be like and of what his sanctity was like. The first interesting thing is that it was not a statement, an affirmation, but a question.

Some people are saints through their heroic work for the poor, some through their courage in dying for the faith, some through their indefatigable preaching of the gospel; sanctity takes all sorts of forms: the sanctity of St Thomas lay in asking questions.

We (and I mean especially his Dominican brethren) regularly get him wrong by thinking of him as someone who provides the answers. He does, I think, provide more and better answers than most, but what makes him central and vital to our tradition (which is quite an important one for the *whole* Church) is his conviction, which he hands down to us, that there is always a question to be asked to which an answer is either true or false.

"Is it true or false?" It is often a brave man who will ask this about the pronouncements of the Party or the Pope; it is a rather rarer kind of man who asks it about his own pronouncements. In every generation, St Thomas reminds us that this is the first requirement for a theologian. He must be interested in getting the answer right, and getting it right by answering a question. This means really entertaining the question, recognising that *you* could hold either position. Are black people inferior to whites? Is freedom of speech desirable? Is it right to threaten to use a hydrogen bomb? Is it right to put a bomb in a Birmingham pub?

Chesterton's Fr Brown said he could solve murders because he was spiritually trained to see that he could himself commit any abominable crime. A theologian in Thomas's tradition is trained to recognise that the most outrageous heresies or absurdities are humanly possible, and, moreover, possible to him personally.

That exercise is the beginning of the question; the next part is answering it rightly. Thomas did not take the vacuous liberal view that the question itself is enough; he thought that a question is only for the sake of its answer. This for him is the truth as we can

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receive it: the answering of asked questions. For us, truth, at least in its primary sense, only exists in language, it has to be expressed, it has to exist, in (if you will pardon the vulgarity) propositions.

St Thomas's life was spent in asking questions (nearly all his major works are divided up explicitly into questions), and this meant seeking to answer them. A man is a saint, though, not by what he does and achieves, but by his acceptance of failure. A saint is one who conforms to Christ, and what Jesus is about was not shown in his successes, his cures and miracles and brilliant parables and preaching, but in his failure, his defeat on the cross when he died deserted by his followers with all his life's work in ruins.

Now whatever his many other virtues, the central sanctity of St Thomas was a sanctity of the mind, and it is shown not in the many questions he marvellously, excitingly answered, but in the one where he failed, the question he did not and could not answer and refused to pretend to answer. As Jesus saw that to refuse the defeat of the cross would be to betray his whole mission, all that he was sent for, so Thomas knew that to refuse to accept defeat about this one question would be to betray all that he had to do, his mission. And this question was the very one he started with, the one he asked as a child: What is God?

Of course as a child he wouldn't know what he was asking. But he would begin to see when he was fifteen, for he was lucky enough to be sent to school to the part-Islamic university of Naples, the first secular university of Europe, set up by the excommunicated Frederick II to train his imperial officials and to oppose the pious papal places in Bologna and Paris. There Thomas met an Irishman called Peter who introduced him to the exciting, pagan, deeply unchristian new books that were banned by the Church in Paris but were being published under Frederick's protection in Naples, the translations of Aristotle. There, also, he met some Dominicans, living, I suppose, in their natural habitat.

From Peter the Hibernian and Aristotle he came to see that in human knowledge the question: "What is it?" is both the beginning and the end of understanding. If you cannot give some kind of answer, however vague and hazy, to that question, you won't even know what other questions to ask. And all the other questions and answers are only there to lead on to a full and adequate answer to that first question.

"What is God?" It was the intellectual sanctity of Thomas that he here accepted defeat. Unlike so many theologians before and since, he could in no way answer this most important of all questions. Right through his life he accepted this crucifixion of the mind; his whole life was devoted to talking about God, to theology, and yet he was intensely conscious that he knew nothing, that

God is the ultimate mystery, that we are peering into the dark. In Christ, he says, we are joined to God as to the utterly unknown. The most we can do is peer in the right direction; and all theology is about doing that. But we can never answer our basic question with any use of language, by any thought. We will understand what is God only when we have been taken even beyond language and thinking, and God brings us to share in his own self-understanding. Thomas was not making a new discovery when, at the end of his life, he said that all his writings seemed like straw. He had lived with this knowledge all the time he was writing.

This, then, is the heritage Thomas has left to his brethren and to the Church: first, that it is our job to ask questions, to immerse ourselves so far as we can in all the human possibilities of both truth and error; then we must be passionately concerned to get the answers right, our theology must be as true as it can be; and finally we must realise that theology is not God, as faith is not God, as hope is not God: God is love. We must recognise that the greatest and most perceptive theology is straw before the unfathomable mystery of God's love for us which will finally gather us completely by the Holy Spirit into Christ, the Word God speaks of himself to himself. Then, only then, is our first question answered.

Reviews

BREAKTHROUGH: Meister Eckhart's Creation Spirituality in New Translation. Introduction and Commentaries by Matthew Fox. *Image Books.* 1980. pp 579 $7.95.

Fr Fox believes that Eckhart can help us towards an understanding of christian spirituality which does justice to the biblical roots of our faith, and which allows us to escape from the rather jejune pieties and fussinesses which have so often obscured the real point of christianity. To make Eckhart more accessible to English-speaking readers, he has, with some assistance from others, produced a new translation of 37 pieces from the corpus of Eckhart's works, mostly sermons translated from German. He has also written brief commentaries on all these pieces, designed to bring out their spiritual doctrine, often with the help of further quotations from Eckhart. The whole is prefaced by a fairly long introduction, and rounded off with an Index of spiritual themes.

Eckhart is not an easy writer to present. Apart from the initial difficulty posed, for most of us, by the very language (Middle High German), his vocabulary is often idiosyncratic and it is sometimes very difficult to reproduce his sentence-structures. Also his thought is subtle and elusive, and it is frequently necessary to balance what he says in one sermon against the quite different things he says elsewhere. Naturally enough, he is not usually concerned to be

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