

# Dominus Illuminatio Mea

Timothy Radcliffe OP

*A Sermon preached before the University of Oxford,  
21 April 1991*

When I received a letter from The Summoner of Preachers inviting me to preach this Sermon before the University, I felt deeply honoured. But this turned to alarm when I discovered that there was no set text or topic. I was invited to talk about anything I wished. And this disturbed me because, within my tradition at least, what differentiates a sermon from a mere expression of opinion is that it starts from a text, a text that you have not chosen, may not like, and may well not understand.

Anyone who attends the Eucharist will have to listen to some extraordinary texts, which celebrate the squashing of the Amelekites, Moab becoming one's footstool, the cleansing of houses suffering from leprosy, and the torments of the damned. And after we have listened, we say: 'Thanks be to God'. The purpose of the sermon is to help us to be thankful, to discover some apparently bizarre or alarming text as a gift. The preacher should be the perfect host who shows us how to welcome the strange text, an exercise in hospitality of the heart and the mind.

But there was no text. And then I spotted a text at the top of the letter, *Dominus Illuminatio Mea*, 'The Lord is my light', the motto of the University. It is a quotation from the beginning of Psalm 27 in the Vulgate, *Dominus illuminatio mea et salus mea. Quem timebo? 'The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?'*

'The Lord is my light'. This implies that belief in God sheds light, illuminates. But in what sense? When the Christian looks down the microscope, does he or she see the microbe differently? Does faith make any difference to how one might see a cow, for example? We believe that everything is created by God, but what might it mean to *see* something as created? One might see that it is a Frisian cow by its colour and that it is a healthy cow by its fatness. Is there any special quality which makes one conclude that it is a created cow? The traditional answer would be that faith helps one to see things aright, and so to see that it is just a cow, no more and no less. It is not a golden calf that one should bow down and worship, now a cow goddess, like the Egyptian Isis, or the Norse Audhumbla; nor is it just a piece of walking meat, a milk machine. It is just a creature, a cow. In the light of the Lord we see things as they are.

In the Bible the contrary of true belief is not so much disbelief as

idolatry. We human beings have an almost irresistible desire to fling ourselves down and worship almost anything. Israel was constantly led astray by a rampant religiosity, so that people were seduced into sacrificing not only to golden calves, but trees and stones, stars and the moon and the sun, kings and angels. Faith, the light of the Lord, picks people up from floor, stand them on their own two feet and opens their eyes to see that the idols are blocks of wood and stone, the stars are lights in the sky and that King David is not a god but a foolish man like us, who sleeps with Bathsheba and over-indulges his children, but whom God loves. True belief clears the eye.

But one can go further. We have a hunger and thirst for understanding, for knowledge, and that is implicitly a desire for the vision of God. Every moment of insight, of illumination, gives us a glimpse of the God who is the cause and source of all. So the labour of study, the struggle to see things as they are, belongs to our search for God. Thinking is an implicitly religious activity, and so it is not chance that this Church of St. Mary the Virgin is both a place of prayer and the University's earliest lecture hall. Think of someone like St. Albert the Great, a thirteenth century Dominican who taught St. Thomas Aquinas. He had an endless desire to understand the natural world. He used to question fishermen as to whether it was true that fish make noises when they mated, and if so why? Was it true that ostriches liked to eat bits of metal? He carried around lumps of metal to offer to any ostrich that he met so as to verify this story. Why does our urine change colour when we fast?—not a pressing question for many of us. And this questioning belonged to his search for God, because God shows Himself in the intelligibility of the world. As he wrote, 'The whole world is theology for us, because the heavens proclaim the glory of God.' God is the 'principle and light of all that is known.'

This is a far more profound insight than the eighteenth century deist belief in the great Clockmaker who wound up the universe in the beginning and left it ticking. God discloses himself in the very intelligibility of things, the mystery of our understanding anything at all. One of my brethren, Simon Tugwell, wrote: 'Would it be too far from the truth to suggest that the *ratio* under which God especially showed himself to Albert was that of being the cause of all intelligibility, the ultimate explanation of everything? My suspicion is that for Albert beatitude would have to include, even if only as the minutest part of it, the opportunity to say, "So that's why flies lay their eggs on white walls!"'<sup>1</sup> So this is an understanding of *Dominus Illuminatio mea* which is the precise contrary of a belief in 'the God of the gaps', the God whom one invokes when understanding fails.

One may be tempted to think that we twentieth century people are superior to the temptations of idolatry. As far as I know people do not sneak up to Shottover Hill to sacrifice sheep and goats to idols. But I would claim that in this century idolatry is more rampant than ever. We have seen millions of people slaughtered on the altar of racial purity; we have seen the idolatry of the state, with its doctrine of National Security, that would

justify the use of nuclear weapons to kill millions of innocent people. Perhaps, most insiduously, we have seen, during the last couple of hundred years, the rise of the god of the market, which is slowly transforming the whole of creation into products to be bought and sold, commodities. We have seen the diffusion of what Karl Polanyi calls 'the commodity fiction'<sup>2</sup>, the illusion that the whole of creation, land and water and even human beings, are all commodities to be placed on the market to disclose their true worth. 'You too can become an owner of H<sup>2</sup>O'. So if many people seemed to be weighed down by a sense of the absence of God, it could be because we have turned his creation, pure gift, into commodity, and we ourselves, made in his image and likeness, have become mere customers, consumers.

Universities should be places in which idolatry is fought as we struggle to see things just as they are, neither more nor less; where the cow is seen as neither a goddess nor a milk machine, but just a cow, neither divine nor mechanical, but a creature and so a gift. But this will have important consequences for what sort of a place a University is thought to be.

In a novel called *How Far Can You Go?*, David Lodge describes the confusion of Father Austin Brierly when he goes up to university as a mature student. The gurus are those of twenty years ago, but the predicament today is the same:

His head was a buzzing hive of awakened but directionless ideas. There was Freud who said that we must acknowledge our own repressed desires, and Jung who said that we must recognise our archetypal patterns, and Marx who said we must join the class struggle and Marshall McLuhan who said that we must watch more Television. There was Sartre who said that man was absurd though free and Skinner who said he was a bundle of conditioned reflexes and Chomsky who said he was a sentence-generating organism, and Wilhelm Reich who said he was an orgasm having organism. Each book that Austin read seemed to him totally persuasive at the time, but they couldn't all be right. And which were more easily reconcilable with belief in God? Kant said he was the essential presupposition of moral action. Bishop Robinson said he was the ground of our being, and Teilhard de Chardin said he was the Omega Point. Wittgenstein said, whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent—an aphorism in which Austin Brierly took great comfort.<sup>3</sup>

Here you see the University as the Market Place, in which academics tout their competing theories, shouting for the attention of the consumer, the student, who hesitates between ideas as he might do between washing powders. Its a world of packaging and hype, in which even ideas have their sell-by dates. And the discernment of truth seems to occur by a sort of Darwinian process of survival of the fittest, and the weaker theories go to the wall. So the pursuit of truth is, like the market, a competitive, aggressive, intolerant business. I remember one Oxford lecturer whose sniff

310

of triumph each time he trampled a rival to the ground was the high point of every lecture.

This is not the only way of seeing the pursuit of truth. In his book *Real Presences* George Steiner claims that the reading of any text, or the appreciation of any work of art, requires a sort of courtesy, a hospitality to that which is other. The stranger must be welcomed: 'Face to face with the presence of offered meaning which we call a text (or a painting or a symphony), we seek to hear its language. As we would that of the elect stranger coming towards us.... The movement towards reception and apprehension does embody an initial fundamental act of trust. It entails the risk of disappointment or worse. As we shall note, the guest may turn despotic or venomous. But without the gamble on welcome, no door can be opened when freedom knocks.'<sup>4</sup> So the discipline of learning is that of attentiveness, as the host is attentive to the guest, of letting oneself be surprised. Universities should be places which are hospitable to ideas.

They are, of course, places of disputation and argument, in which we stand up for our theories. God forbid that common rooms should become filled with dons deferring to each other. But what is at issue is what is meant by disputation. If we had come to this church in the Middle Ages we would have witnessed hard fought *disputationes* which were far more rigorously conducted than anything we are likely to find in most universities today. But the rules of the *disputatio* were different, at least as we were taught them when I was a Dominican student. One did not try to demonstrate that one's opponent was utterly wrong and had never had a coherent thought in his life. One was supposed to show that he was indeed right, but only in a certain respect. One made a distinction. *Distinguo dicendum quod*.... If he asserted that all swans were white, then rather than seeking to demolish him and undermine his credentials as an ornithologist who could not tell a blackbird from a robin, one would show that he was indeed right, but only in a limited respect: 'That all swans in Europe are white I concede; that all swans in the world are white I deny'. So the process of disputation, of making distinctions, should become a common pursuit of truth rather than of victory. It requires both attentiveness as well as disagreement. It is a matter of attaining consensus rather than just a majority vote. It is a matter of building community rather than destroying it.

Of course we would have found the Middle Ages profoundly, suffocatingly, intolerant and narrow in many ways, but I do believe that there is a sense in which our forebears were more hospitable to the stranger bearing ideas, than we are. In the very first article of his *Summa*, St. Thomas clinches his argument on the need for divine revelation by appealing to the Jewish Rabbi Maimonides, and constantly refers to the Muslim teachers Averoes and Avicenna, and of course the pagan Aristotle. For, as Thomas wrote to the novice John when he asked him how to be a good student, 'do not heed by whom a thing is said, but what is said you should commit to your memory'.<sup>5</sup> The thirteenth and twentieth centuries are both epochs in which Christianity and Islam met. And the evidence so far is that

our forebears were more intellectually open than we have been so far.

So then, the pursuit of truth can be thought of as an act of welcome, of attentiveness to the stranger. And this is in itself a deeply religious act; it belongs to the welcoming of God. Throughout the Scriptures the encounter with God is a meeting with the stranger who brings unexpected gifts. From Abraham who welcomes the three travellers and gives them the fatted calf to the two disciples who meet the Lord on the road to Emmaus and invite him in to share their bread, we encounter God by offering him hospitality. As Christ says in *Revelation*, 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and eat with him, and he with me.' (3:20)

Universities are, so it seems to me, places in which we practice the disciplines of attentiveness, and so predispose ourselves to the coming of God. Malebranche said that rigorous attention is the natural piety of the soul<sup>6</sup>. I have in my room in London two pictures which both tell the tales of meetings with strangers. There is Caravaggio's picture of the call of Matthew the Tax Collector. He is bent over the table counting his money. He is almost the only person in the room who has not seen Jesus, who points across the table towards him. He is so wrapped up in his coins that he does not see the stranger who beckons. And the other picture is Leonardo da Vinci's Annunciation. Again there is an outstretched hand, that of the angel. And Mary has paused in her study of Scripture; she marks the place with her finger as she looks at her unusual visitor. And it is surely no coincidence that it is the student who first attends.

But this sort of hospitality of the mind and the heart is frightening. As Steiner wrote, 'Apprehension (the meeting with the other) signifies both fear and perception. The continuum between both, the modulation from one to the other, lie at the source of poetry and the arts'<sup>7</sup> And of theology as well one might add! The greatest enemy of honest thinking and true believing is surely fear. And in our culture, which has consecrated aggression and competition as the very basis of society, fear is all-pervasive. No wonder we are so given to idolatry. And our faith invites us to study by proclaiming that there is no need to fear. All that could harm is defeated. Whenever people meet God or an angel in the scriptures, the first thing they hear is always 'Do not be afraid'. Or, as it says in the text for today's service, *Dominus illuminatio mea et salus mea. Quem Timebo?* The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?

1 *Albert and Thomas, Selected Writings*, ed. & trans. by Simon Tugwell, OP (New York, 1988,) p. 95.

2 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation; the political origins of our time*, (Boston, 1957,) p. 73.

3 David Lodge, *How Far Can You Go?* (London, 1981) p. 169.

4 George Steiner *Real Presences: Is there anything in what we say?* (London, 1989,) p. 156.

5 St. Thomas Aquinas, *How to Study*, Commentary by Victor White OP, (London, 1947,) p. 4.

6 quoted by Steiner, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

7 *ibid.*