

God and Some Theologians: Thomas Aquinas

A Sermon for Trinity College Chapel, 6 February 2011
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Reading 1: Exodus 1-6

Reading 2: A Prayer for Study, by Thomas Aquinas

Creator of all things,
true Source of light and wisdom,
lofty origin of all being,
graciously let a ray of Your brilliance
penetrate into the darkness of my understanding
and take from me the double darkness
in which I have been born,
an obscurity of both sin and ignorance.
Give me a sharp sense of understanding,
a retentive memory,
and the ability to grasp things correctly and fundamentally.
Grant me the talent of being exact in my explanations, and the ability to express
myself with thoroughness and charm.
Point out the beginning,
direct the progress,
and help in completion;
through Christ our Lord.

Amen.

I am sure that Thomas Aquinas would be very pleased that the title for your sermon series this term is ‘GOD and some theologians’ - with the emphasis on GOD.) The title is far preferable, for instance, to ‘Some Theologians Talk about God’. Aquinas always put God first.

I am reminded of a conversation I once had with Fr. David Burrell, a great scholar of Aquinas and also of Maimonides and the Islamic theologians on whom both drew. We were leaving some joy-feast of interfaith discussion and David Burrell said, ‘You know, I’m not *very* interested in religion, but I’m *really, really* interested in God.’ So, too, was Thomas Aquinas and if you find yourself irrepressibly curious, even really, really interested in God, he may just be your theologians – or even your saint.

I feel somewhat disadvantaged, in terms of the theologian’s life and times, knowing that your first two sermons in this series have been on Athanasius and Augustine. These two had exciting and vivid lives – Athanasius variously exiled, banished or pursued across North Africa and Europe by rivals. Augustine, of course, left an autobiography documenting his spicy pre-Christian past, his rocket-fuelled career as a rhetorician as well as the beloved concubine, and indeed all the loves of

women (which had been dear to him), all of which he put aside when he fully embraced the Christian faith. Both these men were bishops, as well as theologians, who spent many hours resolving disputes over poisoned wells, contested will, errant slaves, and wandering husbands.

By contrast Aquinas is recessive. He seemed to go out of his way to leave little autobiographical trace. By all accounts a life-long Christian, his life may appear somewhat stolid – no dramatic conversion, no chases through the wilderness, instead a life given over principally to study – to the reading and the writing of books, to preaching and to teaching. All this make strike us as a bit dull, an impression enhanced by the sobriquet, *The Dumb Ox*...a nickname given by fellow students in Paris on the basis of his immense size (both height and breadth), and the fact that he spoke little.

And I may have added to this multiply ponderous somewhat geeky impression by choosing as my text from Aquinas a prayer we know as a Prayer for Study. Yet this prayer encapsulates what Thomas saw to be the pearl of great price, that which demanded the whole of his heart, mind and will. I will be returning to it.

Painstaking poking about by historians has revealed an early life which was not without drama.¹ The youngest of 4 boys and 5 girls, Thomas Aquinas was born around 1225 in his family castle in southern Italy (Roccasecca - about half way between Rome and Naples). It was a time of perilous tension between the Pope and the Emperor, and the family lands lay on was contested ground. One of Thomas's older brother's was executed for purportedly conspiring against the emperor. A sister met her death, just as dramatically but less politically, while still an infant by a lightning strike which just missed the infant Thomas and his nurse, who were sleeping nearby. At the age of about 5 or 6 he was sent to the famous Benedictine Abbey of Monte Casino as a child oblate, accompanied, it is rather touching to note by his nurse (was it the same nurse who, with him, narrowly escaped death by lightning, I wonder?)

Entering the monastery as a child oblate would not have obliged Thomas to become a monk but was a sign of the family's wish he head in the direction of the Church. And also that he should be a Benedictine, a wealthy, aristocratic and studious order in which his family no doubt thought, he could rise to the top.

Thomas himself never seems to have wavered from a religious vocation. One of the stories that have come down to us from his early childhood is that he was always asking the same question: 'What is God?'

When he was about 16 political turmoil made it expedient that he be sent to study in Naples, a move the was decisive for his future path. It was in Naples that he immersed himself in the works of Aristotle, newly recovered and translated there from Arabic translations, and it was in Naples that he met the Dominicans, the popular name for the Order of Preachers.²

¹ I am drawing on J-P Torrell's excellent *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Vol I The Person and His Work*, trans. Royal (Washington: CUA, 1996).

² A number of Aristotle's texts were lost to the west, but had survived in the east through the Syriac Christian community, and then the Arabic translations made in eastern lands. The Arab presence in Sicily and southern Italy made these texts accessible again.

The Dominicans were a new order, founded only some 10 years before the birth of Thomas Aquinas, and they were a ragged and scruffy lot, especially when compared with the stately Benedictine antiquity of Monte Cassino. They were mendicants, giving up all possessions, living on alms, so that they could give themselves entirely to the things of God- and this was, above all, study and preaching. It was the life Thomas wanted and he joined up.

This is the first sign we see in Thomas of a rebellious spirit, for his family certainly did not want him to become a Dominican. His mother went so far as arranging for two of his soldier brothers to kidnap Thomas and imprison him for a spell so he could reconsider his choice. There is a story, apparently legendary, that they brought prostitutes to tempt him at this time. But what is absolutely certain is that he could not be dissuaded from his desire to become a Black Friar and, with their double emphasis on study and preaching and a rich admixture of Aristotle, to devote himself to the question that had troubled him since he was 5 or 6 – ‘What is God?’

In choosing to be a member of the Order of Preachers he was choosing to follow the way of Christ as he saw it. There is nothing wrong with a life of contemplation, he argued, but the ‘active life that consists in passing on to others through preaching and teaching truths that have been contemplated is more than the solely contemplative life....That is why Christ chose a life of this type’ (*ST. IIIa. 40*, cit. Torrell, p. 89).

To be a scholar, a preacher and teacher then, for Thomas, was to follow in the footsteps of Christ.

With this behind us let’s return to *the Prayer for Study* which Thomas himself composed:

Creator of all things,
true Source of light and wisdom,
lofty origin of all being..

It has been said, to my mind rightly, that if Thomas had a religious name like St. John ‘of the Cross’, it would be St. Thomas ‘of Creation’ for the doctrine of Creation suffuses and undergirds all his thought – and here we have, expressed with great concision, right at the beginning of this prayer.

Thomas Aquinas was a great exponent of the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, a teaching which the great Jewish theologian Maimonides (a thinker from whom Aquinas learned much) thought was the only teaching that Jews, Christians and Muslims shared.

CREATION *ex nihilo* is nothing to do with the business of the world being made in 6 days. Nor is it the same thing as the ‘Big Bang theory’ with which it is often confused and which might loosely be summarized as ‘the creation of everything at the beginning of time.

Creation *ex nihilo* is rather it is the conviction that God, from no compulsion and necessity, created the world from nothing – really nothing – no pre-existent matter, or space or time.³

Creation *ex nihilo* is not a Hellenistic notion. Plato, though his teaching is not entirely consistent, seemed to believe the demiurge molded the world from some recalcitrant pre-existent matter.

Aristotle had a less mythic view. Aristotle thought that if there was ever really nothing – nothing at all, no matter, no space, no time, not even a vacuum – there would be nothing now. This is an entirely consistent position and remains an important theoretical driver for contemporary astrophysicists like your own Master, Lord Rees. If we have an origin of our Universe, so this line goes, it must have originated from something – maybe a series of multiverses. It is an offense to reason to think that there was ever ‘really nothing’ for, as Aristotle put it, ‘from nothing, nothing comes’. Thus it was that Aristotle thought the universe must be, like Aristotle’s God, everlasting.

But Aquinas thought that God created the Universe, indeed God created space and time itself, and did so volitionally. God needn’t have created the world but chose to do so.

And this differentiates his position also from that of Plato and various Platonists whose cosmology saw the world emerging ineluctably, we could say, from God...just as the sun’s rays emerge, without will or thinking on the sun’s part, from the sun.

That is *creatio ex nihilo*. It is not an empirical statement. It is as much or more a teaching about God as it is about our world. If God creates all that is, including matter, space and time, then ‘whatever God is in Godself’, God cannot be a creature of space and time. At one bound we are freed from the horrible Wizard of Oz in the Sky that the so many of today’s critiques of religion assume Christians worship. It’s important to see that what Aquinas objected to in Aristotle’s idea of an ‘eternal’ universe was not that the universe might be without beginning or end. Aquinas was perfectly happy with the idea that God might have created, *ex nihilo*, an everlasting universe, although he believed that as a matter of fact the world had a beginning. Rather he objected to the suggestion in Aristotle that God and the world enjoyed the same kind of eternity, and were mutually implying. In Aristotle’s scheme you could not have the world without god, but neither could you have god without the world. For Aquinas God need not have created the world at all, and his being and hence his eternity was of an entirely different order from things, even things that might be ‘everlasting’.

This has radical implications for our understanding of God. As the creator of time, for instance, but not a creature of time, God’s presence to the temporal order cannot be just like ours. This does not mean God is ‘far away from us’.... ‘Far away’ is a term within our spatial and temporal order. To be ‘far away’ you would have to

³ I’ve dealt with this topic at more length in my contribution to Creation and the God of Abraham, eds. David Burrell, Carlo Cogliati, Janet Soskice and W. Stoeger (Cambridge: CUP, 2010). This volume contains contributions on *creatio ex nihilo* from Jewish, Muslim and Christian writers.

be another thing like we are, but God is not a thing like we are, a being amongst beings. God can be closer to us than any other ‘thing’ can be because, as Aquinas famously wrote and reiterates in this prayer – God is Being itself and the source of all Being.

The idea that God is Being itself, the source of all beings (not a being amongst beings) amounted to a rupture in antique metaphysics effected by Jews and Christians. It is a truly radicalizing theory of divine transcendence.

To see where it comes from we need to go to Old Testament – not just Genesis but the Psalms and Isaiah. But we can find a key text in our first reading from Exodus 3. This is story of Moses called by God from the burning bush. In the course of some negotiations over God’s invitation (an invitation he is loathe to accept) that Moses go to Pharaoh and ask the king to free his Israelite slaves, Moses asks God for a Name. A curious thing to do under the circumstances, but no more curious than the answer God gives ‘I AM WHO I AM’.

From the early days Christians and Greek speaking Jews association that name - I am Who I am - with the God who in the book of Genesis creates the world by his fiat and Word – Let there be light. A God who creates everything from nothing.

The Hebrew which we translated as ‘I AM WHO I AM’ is actually rather less metaphysical, meaning something like ‘I am the One who is with you and will be with you’, but thinkers like Maimonides, and many others, were able to fuse the two meanings: the God who is always with us, in our need is *always already* the God who is present to us as the source of our Being and of all Being. Here metaphysics and loving-kindness meet.

This fusion is the stepping off point for all of Thomas’s theology, as with this prayer. It has some striking implications which his great works, and especially the *Summa Contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologiae* unfold.

First, although entirely intimate with all that is and closer to us than our own hands and feet, what God is in Godself we can never know. This is not because God is shy or secretive but because God is God.

Second, we **can know** who God is for us, and above all that God is our Creator. All that is made by God, rather is now made and held in being by God, for the world has its being from God and would not exist for a microsecond without God’s holding it in being.

Third, all that is, including our own existence, comes to us as gift.

For Aquinas, there is no conflict between the things of reason and the things of faith, because God has created all that it, and declared it good, and the order of rational creatures, that is ourselves, is of a piece with the order of creation – what else should it be?

There are of course things beyond our understanding, of which principally God. We are blind to the things of God (like bats that blink in the sunshine, says Aquinas picking up Aristotle) both by our own sin, but also because of our natural limitation as creations. We can know, for instance that God is the creator of time without being able to understand what that might mean (we know that without knowing 'how').

And we can know that God loves us. This we know, Aquinas believes, not by our reason alone but through revelation, God's revelation in history and pre-eminently in the life of Christ.

God loves us, and is supremely lovable and, Aquinas believes, supremely knowable. But this knowing for us, is a path of intellection and love – the two go together for Aquinas. We are made to know and to love God, and for Aquinas no less than for Augustine, we will only find happiness in this completion of love and knowledge. This is the human task to seek the face of God, in compassion and love, and to travel the path to God, not just in a solitary way, but in companionship with one another.

So if we return to his prayer we see it is not just a prayer for students, as it is sometimes named, but a prayer for teachers for a student must aim to be a teacher, and a teacher must always surely remain a teacher, pressing against the ignorance that comes from our own-pig-headedness or misdirection, but also sometimes just from the human condition, but we must press on, praying for:

a retentive memory,
and the ability to grasp things correctly and fundamentally.

And for capacity to be exact in our explanations.

Aquinas's prayer concludes, that he be granted

the ability to express myself with thoroughness and charm.

Study and the sharing of the fruits of study with others in this sense is not a temporary and transient part of life, but the whole of it - the whole of the life of a seeker of God.

We may ask with Thomas that God:

Point out the beginning,
direct the progress,
and help in completion;
through Christ our Lord

AMEN