

Trinity Sunday 2024

One of the greatest theologians the Church has ever produced was the thirteenth century Dominican friar, Thomas Aquinas. His *Summa Theologica* was the standard textbook for centuries; and there are many even today who would see in it the best resource for dealing with the intellectual challenges to faith. His writing has that timeless quality, and whilst like many classic works it can be incredibly complex; it can also be sublimely beautiful.

Interestingly, Thomas never finished the *Summa*. He abandoned it, quite suddenly, in December 1273 – despite being more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through the planned work. What happened?

Well, on or around 6 December 1273, Thomas was celebrating the eucharist – like we are – when he suddenly slipped into a trance, and on emerging from it all he could say was that compared to what he saw then, everything he had written till that point was ‘as straw’. As straw – the most beautiful, profoundly spiritual, work of intellectual genius was as straw besides the vision of God granted to Thomas in that trance. As St. Paul says to the Corinthians, ‘eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.’ Thomas saw it, and it struck him dumb. He never wrote again, and died within six months – to enter into the glory prepared for him.

The lesson of Thomas, and of our readings this morning, is that from time to time, we human beings are faced with reality that is simply Awesome – awesome in the proper sense of that word, that it fills with awe. There is that before which human beings can only bow down, that which rightly fills with fear and trembling. Isaiah’s experience is like Thomas’: ‘woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips!’ You could translate that as saying, ‘woe is me – for nothing in my life, in my language, in my thinking can match this reality. Woe is me because I cannot even begin to respond adequately to what I see. This is utterly overwhelming, and I am struck dumb’. Isaiah, like Thomas, saw God – at least as much as human beings possibly can, for remember the Scripture says no man can see God and live. And like Aquinas he goes away changed utterly: in Thomas’ case, to silence, in Isaiah’s to prophesy.

I am nothing like Thomas, or Isaiah. I’m more like Nicodemus, the Pharisee leader who comes to see Jesus in John 3. And saying that is not to beat myself up, but rather to flatter myself, for Nicodemus was a good man. He was learned; he was devout; he honoured the traditions of Israel, *and* he was open and wise enough to see that something new was happening in Jesus, and he came to find out more. Decency, learning, wisdom, humility – Nicodemus was a good man.

However, I suspect he wasn't the Thomas or Isaiah type. Of course, they weren't really a type either: what happened to them was a special gift from God, not the result of their psychology. I mean that Nicodemus hadn't had that raw experience of the holiness of God that they had. For him, like me, like most of us, it came ... filtered, or sensed dimly. Perhaps in the experience of birth or death; perhaps when staring at the glory of the night sky and sensing just how small we are; perhaps in the wake of a tsunami or earthquake. These things give most of us a hint of what was burned into Thomas or Isaiah's soul: a glimpse of the complete inadequacy of all our thought and language to ever do justice to the reality that confronts us. Such glimpses are not comfortable nor manageable, which is why we tend to replace them by religion: a way of making the spiritual safe, defusing the terror of God, a way of ordering life, of promoting wisdom, decency – Nicodemus' way.

And what does Jesus say to Nicodemus? 'Truly, truly, I say to you, unless ye be born from above, ye shall never enter the Kingdom of Heaven'. I think those words mean a lot of things, but one of them is this: Unless your religion is broken open, unless you realise that beyond all the comforting services, beautiful words, peaceful buildings, ordered lives – beyond everything that seems and is so right and important – that beyond all this there is terrible mystery, a Reality to which the only response is fear and trembling – unless you know this, your religion may make good human sense, but it is not engaging with the reality of God. To be born again is to be naked before God: stripped of all the ways we seek control reality, face to face with incomprehensible Power.

And yet, even as I say that, we know that there is more to it. God is not just incomprehensible power. Yes, the God revealed in the Bible is awesome and majestic – but look what he does. He sends Isaiah to prophesy to a people – to smash them open, yes, but to reform them too, to make them *his* people. There is always in Scripture this note not just of awe, but of intimacy: the Aweful One summons people to tender, loving union with Him. John says that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son – he gave him not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. So God is incomprehensible power, yes, but he is also tender love, and the one goes as deep as the other.

And that is why, despite all that's been said before, fear isn't the right response to God. It's true that generally we are too blasé about God; it's true that we run the risk of speaking and thinking of him as some sort of invisible best friend rather than the holy mystery he is. Do we pray with our hands in our pockets, do we think twice before daring to take Christ's body and blood? We do need a bit more reverence, desperately.

But as St. Paul writes to the Romans, we are children of God. We did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but a spirit of adoption by which we call 'Abba, Father'. Holy, terrifying mystery becomes something we have received; something which comes within us to lift us up, and calls us children, and makes us 'heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ' – that is, makes us fit, poor tawdry us, fit to enter the glory of God. Our religion is not about grovelling. It's not about always saying how bad we are, how unworthy we are. We're the children of God. We are destined to share all His glory.

Today is Trinity Sunday, a day when preachers are tempted to find analogies for the mystery of the three-in-one. You're familiar, I dare say, with many of them: water, ice and steam; fire, light and heat; spring, river, and lake; remembering, thinking, willing. Chocolate, Nougat, Caramel. The last one makes it clear just how futile the whole analogy business can be. God is not, in any way, like a Mars Bar. A Mars Bar did not knock Thomas Aquinas off his feet.

No, on Trinity Sunday, forget analogies and think of the Trinity itself:

- the God who is holy mystery, utterly beyond, awesome and terrifying;
- the God who is generous love, reaching out to us in Jesus;
- the God who is utterly close, breathed within us, raising us up and bringing us to glory.

This is the Trinity. This is the shape of the whole Christian story, the reality that underpins everything we say and do here, the whole thing. May each of us come to know it ever more deeply, ever more clearly. Amen.