

## ST. THOMAS AQUINAS ON RICH AND POOR

[St. Thomas treats of poverty in his *Contra Impugnantes Dei Cultum* (c.6), in the *Contra Gentiles* (III, 131-135) and in the *Summa* (II-II, 186, 3 and 188, 7). All these passages are important and will be considered elsewhere. But it seemed worth while to call attention to the little-known sermons translated here<sup>1</sup> which have special qualities of simplicity and directness. Further matter of a similar kind will be found in *Sermones Dominicales* 48, 80 and 125 and in the *Exposition of the Lord's Prayer* under *Panem nostrum*.]

## I.

*Remember that thou didst receive good things in thy lifetime, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and thou art tormented.* Lk. 16 : 25.

In these words four things are shown us. First the temporal prosperity of the reprobate : *Remember that thou didst receive good things in thy lifetime.* Second, the brief adversity of the just in this world : *Likewise Lazarus evil things.* Third, the eternal blessedness of the just : *But now he is comforted.* Fourth, the perpetual misery of the wicked : *And thou art tormented.*

*On the first.* Mark that temporal prosperity lies in three things which this rich man had.—In temporal riches : *There was a certain rich man.* So the Psalm (48 : 7) : 'They glory in the multitude of their riches.'—In worldly honours : *He was clothed in purple and fine linen.* So St. James (4 : 16) : 'You exult in your arrogancies.'—In fleshly pleasures : *He feasted sumptuously every day.* So Job (21 : 13) : 'They spend their days in wealth, and in a moment they go down to hell.' And Amos (6 : 4) : 'Woe to you that eat the lamb from the flock and calves from the midst of the herd.'

*On the second.* Mark that the temporal adversity of the saints lies in three things which Lazarus had. In the poverty of possessions. *There was a certain beggar.* So Tobias (4 : 23) : 'We lead the life of the poor, but we shall have many good things if we fear the Lord and depart from sin and do good.'—In the indignity of being despised : *He lay at the gate.* So St. Paul (I Cor. 4 : 13) : 'We are made as it were the refuse of this world, the offscourings of all, even until now.'—In the sharpness of afflictions and tribulations : *He was full of sores.* So Judith (8 : 23) : 'All that have pleased the Lord have passed through many tribulations.'

<sup>1</sup> Texts in the Parma edition of St. Thomas, vol. 15, pp. 163 and 202.

*On the third.* Mark in what things lies the blessedness of the saints in the next world.—In glory and honour: *He was carried by the angels.* So Augustine: ‘Noble were the ceremonies of burial that the rich man in his purple received from his band of servants; but nobler far in God’s sight were those of the poor man with his sores—rendered him by the ministry of angels, who bore him forth not to a marble tomb but to Abraham’s bosom.’ And the Psalm (20 : 6) : ‘Great is his glory in thy salvation.’—In the possession of the heavenly kingdom: *Abraham’s bosom*, by which is meant the repose of Paradise. So St. Matthew’s Gospel (5 : 3) : ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’—In the everlasting fruition of comforts and delights: *Now he is comforted.* So the Psalm (30 : 20) : ‘How great is the multitude of thy sweetness, O Lord, which thou hast laid up for them that fear thee.’ And again (15 : 11) : ‘Delights at thy right hand for ever.’

*On the fourth.* Mark that here are set out three things in which lies the future misery of the wicked.—The utter dearth of all good things, signified in this, that the rich man could not get a drop of water. So Job (27 : 20) : ‘Dearth shall lay hold on them like water.’—The sharpness and the number of pains: *When he was in torments.* So the Psalm (10 : 6) : ‘Fire, sulphur and the breath of tempests is the portion of their cup.’—Utter confusion and ignominy: *He was buried in hell.* What worse ignominy can there be than such a burial? So Jeremias (22 : 19) : ‘He shall be buried with the burial of an ass.’ (And again (20 : 11) : ‘They shall mightily be confounded, because they have not understood the eternal reproach which never shall be wiped out.’

We ought therefore to despise temporal prosperity; to endure with cheerfulness temporal adversity; to flee from the misery of the damned; and to strive with all our might for the blessedness of the saints; to which Christ bring us.

## II.

*Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*—Luke 6 : 20.

Scripture speaks often of the poor, and there are three things about them to be considered. First, the many good things which are given the poor by the Lord; then those which poverty brings of itself; then those which the Lord bids others bestow on the poor.

In the first place, you must know that in Holy Scripture many blessings are to be found which the Lord bestows on the poor, both in delivering them from evil and in granting them good.

As for deliverance.—He delivers them from the oppression of their

enemies : ' He shall save the poor from the hand of the violent ' (Job 5 : 15).—He delivers them from the distress of tribulations : ' He shall rescue the poor from his distress ' (Job 36 : 15).—He delivers them from the want of necessities : ' He has helped the poor man out of his want ' (Ps. 106 : 41).

As for good things granted by God, these are many.—He hears the poor when they pray : ' The Lord has hearkened to the desire of the poor ' (Psalm 10 : 17).—He exalts them among men : ' He gives judgment to the poor ' (Job 36 : 6).—He fills them with loving-kindnesses : ' The poor shall eat and be filled ' (Psalm 21 : 27).—He enriches them with heavenly wealth : ' Blessed are the poor in spirit ' (Matt. 5 : 3).—He gives them eternal life among all these things : ' What has the poor man but to go thither where life is ? ' (Eccl. 6 : 8).

In the second place, you must know that poverty makes a man God-fearing, by withdrawing him from evil things; and well-disciplined, by enduing him with virtuous habits : ' The poor man is glorified by his discipline and his fear ' (Eccli. 10 : 33). It makes him humble in speech : ' The poor man speaks with entreaties ' (Prov. 18 : 23). It makes him patient in bearing adversities : ' When the poor man is wronged, he will hold his peace ' (Eccli. 13 : 4).

In the third place, Scripture shows us what things are not to be done to the poor.—They are not to be reproached in words : ' He who despises the poor man upraids his Maker ' (Prov. 17 : 5).—They are not to be grieved in deeds : ' Grieve not the poor ' (Eccli. 4 : 2).—They are not to be oppressed in judgments : ' Woe to those that make wicked laws . . . to oppress the poor in judgment (Is. 10 : 1-2). These things are forbidden. What is commanded? The poor are to be helped when their cause is tried : ' Open thy mouth for the dumb, in the cause of all the sons of affliction ' (Prov. 31 : 8).—They are to be given alms in their want : ' According to thy means, stretch out thy hand and give to the poor ' (Eccli. 14 : 13).—They are to be heard in their requests : ' He who stops his ears to the cry of the poor, he also shall cry and shall not be heard ' (Prov. 21 : 13).

Finally, there are four things most blameworthy in poor men, Pride : ' Three manners of things my soul hates—a poor man who is proud, a rich man who is a liar, an old man who is a fool and doting ' (Eccli. 25 : 3-4). Vainglory : ' He who glories in poverty, how much more will he glory in riches ? ' (Eccli. 10 : 34). Idleness; and fastidiousness : ' In a monastery, where as far as may be the rich become workers, let not the poor become fastidious ' (Augustine).

And in accordance with this teaching let us make our petitions to the Lord,

*Translated by* WALTER SHEWRING.