

mouth. I am rich, thou sayest, I have come into my own; nothing now is wanting to me. And all the while, if thou didst but know it, it is thou who art wretched, thou who art to be pitied. Thou art a beggar, blind and naked; and my counsel to thee is, to come and buy from me what thou needest: gold, proved in the fire, to make thee rich, and white garments, to clothe thee, and cover up the nakedness which dishonours thee; rub salve, too, upon thy eyes, to restore their sight. It is those I love that I correct and chasten; kindle thy generosity, and repent. See where I stand at the door, knocking; if anyone listens to my voice and opens the door, I will come in to visit him, and take my supper with him, and he shall sup with me.' (Apoc. 3.) The word is all around us: that word that breatheth forth love, that calls us home into the heart of God.

'Lord, that I might hear!', that I too might know thee in such homely things as the breaking of bread.



ST THOMAS AND THE WORD OF GOD¹

ROLAND POTTER, O.P.

THIS Word of life which was from the beginning, which we have heard and seen with our own eyes, have gazed upon and our very hands have handled—this it is which we proclaim unto you. . . . (I John, I, I.) With burning love and earnestness St John speaks of that knowledge and first-hand contact with the Lord Jesus which was his privilege. And now he can use these same words of the great Saint and Doctor St Thomas Aquinas. For he too loved our Lord, constantly and above all else, and by long familiarity with the things of God and long gazing upon the truths of God was enabled supremely to proclaim to thousands of others the saving truths of God.

But let us start, as St Thomas would surely start, with the Word of God; and meditate *not* on St Thomas and the Word of God, but on 'The Word of God and St Thomas'.

'This Word of life, which was from the beginning . . . this it is

¹ The substance of an address delivered on the feast of St Thomas Aquinas, 1954, at Blackfriars, Oxford.

which we proclaim unto you. . . . This Word 'from the beginning' reminds us of the creative activity of the Word or utterance of God. From the opening pages of Scripture we are taught how the world was fashioned by the Word of God appearing as a cosmic power: 'God said let there be light' . . . 'and by thy Word thou didst fashion man' (Wisdom 9,1). Creation is a work of God's word; it is also a *revelation*. God declared his perfections, showed himself when he 'uttered' the word. He created the world with a clear message which man, his creature too, should have read: 'for the invisible things of God are made clear from the things that are seen'. God intended that man should know the Creator from creatures, and knowing him, should draw nigh unto him.

Yet in cold fact, mankind did not and does not wish to know him thus. The first 'Word' of God resulted in failure on man's part to respond. For this reason, it would seem, God chose for himself a special people, his own heritage, a people to whom he could speak more clearly, more intimately, more lovingly. A people who were to be depositories of the secrets of God, mysteriously wedded unto God as a bride unto her husband, to whom God would lovingly say 'you shall be my people and I will be your God'.

This loved and chosen people was held to God by a Covenant or Charter. So that they might remain faithful to its terms, God spoke yet again through the Law or Sacred Teaching. Thus the Commandments are just so many 'words' of God, and 'word' comes to be used for 'law' (as in Psalm 118). Word, too, comes to mean not a load of particular precepts but rather 'an incarnation of all divine revelation'; and the Law remains fundamentally kindly. God is compassionate, 'making the people come from the house of bondage'.

Then as time went on, God again and again spoke through his prophets: 'The spirit of the Lord has spoken by me and his word by my word' (2 Sam. 23, 2). 'The Lord put forth his hand and touched my mouth, and said unto me: Behold I have put my words in thy mouth' (Jer. 1, 9). Constantly, too, we read: 'Man of God' . . . 'Thus says Yahweh . . .'

Yet, in spite of all, and the wonder of it all, Israel in the main failed to respond, and that after his creation and revelation, after his choosing and Law, and after his prophets. And so finally God sent his Son in the person of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . 'and the

word was made flesh and pitched his tent among us and we saw his glory . . . ' (John I, 14). 'Having spoken to the Fathers of old through the prophets, in these days he has spoken through his son . . . ' (Heb. I, 1). 'The love of God was made clear to us when he sent his only-begotten son into the world . . . ' (I John 4, 9-10). 'Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? . . . tribulation, famine, distress . . . ?' (Rom. 8, 35-39.)

Not only has the Word of God penetrated into time, entered the course of all history and profoundly modified it, so that we now live in a world redeemed. In this sense our religion is historical. But further, in the course of that long history, the word of God came, in part at least, to be written. So that our religion is also a religion of the Book, in this case God's Book, because God is Author above the many human authors.

St Thomas saw clearly the parallel between the Word Incarnate and God's book of the written Word, written for our salvation. 'If the Word of God is the Son of God, and all the words of God have a certain likeness to this word, we ought gladly to hear the words of God. . . . As the Word was made flesh in all things like unto us, sin excepted, so the Holy Scriptures were composed like other books in all things error excepted.' (Cf. Pius XII. *Divino Afflante*.)

The first 'Scriptures' were the words of God written on the tablets of the Law or Teaching. And then they came often to be written by the prophets; and then to be commented upon, expounded, developed in many holy writings. Finally there is a completion in the New Testament, which tells of the Word made flesh and with us to the end of time.

Se nascens dedit socium

Convalescens in edulium.

This is a brief foreshadowing and prophecy of that end when the heavenly Jerusalem will come to be and God will take his own to himself and wipe away the tears from every eye.

The New Testament tells of the fulness of time, and the fulness of time has brought with it a fulness of truth, and so a sort of finality and new order in the things of God.

With the death of the last apostle there is no new Revelation, but the conveying of a truth once delivered: 'the deposit' to be guarded.

So the Church comes to need, and ever has, Doctors of this

Truth of God who are first of all faithful servants of the Word of God, who, without being strangers to their own age, yet have a message from every age, because that message is God's and not theirs.

Such a faithful servant of the Word was the great lover of God, St Thomas. He lived with God, thought and spoke of God. Years of prayer and study gave him a familiarity with the Word Incarnate. Stories are told of how our Lord spoke to him. Stories are told, too, of his immense concentration on the things of God; of his immense capacity for work at the things of God (he was said to have dictated to four secretaries at once . . .). Anyway, he certainly had exceptional gifts of mind and heart, a lucid intelligence, a flair for the sense of Scripture (which at times amazes those who think to have modern advantages in exegesis), understanding, wisdom, and much else. With all this went an utter humility and child-like innocence of life (his dying confession resembled that of a little child), and an order of preferences which we might profitably reflect upon: he would have given the whole fair city of Paris in exchange for St John Chrysostom's commentaries on St Matthew.

In his service of the Word he particularly excelled in utter fidelity and reverence to the Word, written or unwritten. He championed the veracity of Scripture, and put order, distinctions and clarity into the difficult subject of Scriptural sensès. He had a sense of style and stressed the author's intent, and above all stood for a theological view of Scripture, and therein no doubt was his greatest achievement.

* * *

After an immense labour of years in faith and reasoning, he approached the end. For a moment all the toil, all the writing seemed mere rubbish. He whose genius had won the Church to a baptism of Aristotle; who had so read the Fathers that he is said to have participated in the wisdom of all; who all his life in faith and love had known and taught the Word and Word of God—would seem at the end to have approached unto a glimpse of 'what eye has not seen nor ear heard'. Be that as it may. Today we have much new knowledge, many new disciples. To hold to the one thing necessary, to relay God's truth, to be faithful to the Word of God, let us pray for something of the mind and heart of our brother St Thomas.