

## ***The things that we love tell us what we are:***

Thomas Aquinas

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May my words be faithful to the written word, and may the written word lead us to the Living Word, Jesus the Lord. Amen.

Today we keep the festival of Thomas Aquinas, or the Angelic Doctor, as Aquinas is known. There's an extraordinary story some of you may know! The story is of St. Thomas chasing the prostitute from his room with a burning log. (She was sent by his wealthy family to tempt him away from the religious life.). I think the story of Aquinas gives us a little insight into how scandalous it was considered to become a Dominican (or Franciscan) at the time. Indeed when Thomas was 19 and decided to join the recently formed Dominicans, his family were so outraged they locked him up for a year! They clearly did not want Thomas to be friar who followed S Dominic and committed to preaching the word of Christ. The Dominicans were an intellectual order, whose motto was *contemplare et aliis tradere*—“to contemplate and to share the fruits of contemplation.”

Aquinas is a really important thinking in Christian history because he was the first Christian to draw on the philosophy of Aristotle rather than Plato. This led him to focus on the material world in which we live and how we explore it using our senses and our experience. Aquinas was certain that everything ultimately had its origin in God and anything observable owed that truth to God. Indeed there is a whole school of theology called Thomist philosophy which holds that we can know about God through creation (general revelation), but only in an analogous manner.

Thomist philosophy was later challenged by the the dominant philosophers of the 17th and 18th century, such as René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, who rejected the medieval foundations of philosophy and theology. Then the late 18th

century school of German idealism, such as the work of Hegel and von Schelling, rejected Aquinas's emphasis on natural creation. There was then a renaissance known as neo-Thomism in the first half of the 20th century, but this was then challenged at the Second Vatican Council. However, it became clear that Thomistic principals could be widely applied to ethics, virtues, spirituality and human rights.

Thomas was also very careful though to be clear about the limits of reason. We like to think that we use logic to examine evidence and are fair in our judgements. However, we are hugely influenced by intuition and unconscious factors. A really interesting example of this is in the work of the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who examines these influences. As an example he has proved that if you interview university students about their political opinions and moral concerns they become more conservative if questioned near a water cooler. (The suggestion is that there's a subliminal effect of water's association with purity and cleanliness). Or to put it more simply, we are affected by what is around us.

Aquinas was also vehemently clear that love was at the bottom of everything. As he put it, '*The things that we love tell us what we are*'.

*'The things that we love tell us what we are'*. I think this is a good moment to turn to our Gospel, where we see a parable which is easily misunderstood. If you think back to a time when you've known power cuts and the importance of that flickering candle light, you're beginning to get the right feel.

If you have a candle light and hide it away - no one can see much. And Jesus - the light of the world (Jn 9.5) is asking us to consider what we do with the light of Christ in our lives. Do we hide it away (Rom 13.11-14), or let it shine? (Eph 5.8; 1 Pet 2.9)

In verse 24 we are cautioned to listen to positive voices, we are counselled to pass on truth to others and we are comforted by a precious promise. Like Abraham in Genesis 22 we need to listen for the voice of God and we need to pass it on to others as a river of living water (John 7.48) rather than leaving what we gain to be like a still pond where the truth flows in and nothing ever flows out.

This verse about more being given more is frequently misunderstood. Jesus isn't talking about riches, talents, blessings, or influence. Jesus is talking about insight into the Gospel message.

What Jesus means is that the person who seeks to gain some spiritual insight into what she is saying will have that insight increased by exposure to Jesus' parables, whereas whoever does not listen to Jesus will end up in spiritual ignorance.

This chimes again with Aquinas, who said that humans are wayfarers, beings on the way to God. We are on the way of ascent to God. Sometimes it is narrow, sometimes it is steep and winding. And this is the way of *caritas*—the way of love, or as Thomas says just as often, the way of friendship.

Today we are challenged to consider: What is the image of Jesus that I have within me? And what are the subliminal factors affecting us? Who is Jesus for me and who am I for Jesus? In other words is Jesus a treasurer candle or just a flashlight we dig out from under the stairs when we want something. These are critical questions as we consider 'The things that we love tell us what we are'. Is Jesus kept hidden in our lives? Do we truly seek after the truth of Jesus, as Thomas did.

Finally, when writing, S Thomas said that a preacher must have 3 qualities:

first, stability to keep the preacher from erring from the truth  
second, clearness so as not to obscure teaching.

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and third, to seek God's glory and not the preacher's own glory.

Today as we hear the words of the gospel we give thanks for Jesus the light of the world. We pray that we might have the wisdom to seek Christ more fully in our lives and to ensure Christ is in the place of honour. And we are challenged by Thomas' words '*The things that we love tell us what we are*'.

May we open ourselves to the mysterious Light shining within us, however dim and small the flame might have become, and provoke one another to love and good deeds, so open up to other people in friendship. Amen.