

*The Nineteenth*

**ERIC SYMES ABBOTT**

**Memorial Lecture**

delivered by

*Father Timothy Radcliffe OP*

*at Westminster Abbey*

on Thursday the 27<sup>th</sup> of May, 2004

and subsequently at Keble College, Oxford

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*The members of the Committee are: The Dean of King's College, London (Chairman); The Dean of Westminster; The Warden of Keble College, Oxford; The Director of the Lincoln Theological Institute, University of Manchester; The Reverend John Robson and The Reverend Canon Eric James.*

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## THE CRISIS OF TRUTH TELLING IN OUR SOCIETY

I feel deeply honoured to be asked to give this lecture in memory of Eric Symes Abbott. When the Dean of King's, Dr Burrige, invited me to do so, he informed me that these endowed lectures are to be on the theme of spirituality. However, as a Dominican I was brought up to be rather suspicious of spirituality. We are rooted in a tradition that predates the fragmentation of Christian thinking into the different disciplines of theology, philosophy, ethics, spirituality and so on. Once spirituality acquires a life of its own, then it tends to become vague and woolly, a pseudo-substitute for true religion. And so what was I to do?

I decided to talk about the crisis of truthfulness in our society. The motto of the Order is *Veritas*, Truth. It was this that attracted me to the Dominicans in the first place. This present crisis requires of Christians what might, at a stretch, be called a spirituality of truth, but a spirituality that is deeply theological and ethical.

However I am reminded of a man who was drifting across the country in a hot air balloon. He came down in a tree, with no idea where he was. He saw a couple of people wandering near by and he shouted out, 'Where am I?' One of them replied, 'You are in a tree.' And he replied 'You must be a Dominican.' 'Oh, how did you know?' 'What you say is true, but no help at all.' So it is with some hesitation that I address this topic. But I take heart from Eric Abbott. On the night before his ordination, he nervously looked out of his window of his digs on the Embankment and saw an advertisement for beer, 'Take Courage'. When I searched for an encouraging sign, all that I could find was an advert that said, 'Escape from it all with a holiday in the Caribbean.' The nearer that I got to this lecture, the better idea that seemed.

For most of the history of the West, telling the truth has been seen as valuable in itself, as belong to our human dignity, and required by honour. Aristotle wrote that 'falsehood is itself mean and culpable, and truth noble and full of praise.' This tradition is still alive in Kant, who wrote, 'By a lie a person throws away and, as it were, annihilates his dignity as a person.'<sup>1</sup> Raimund Gaita, of King's, wrote a wonderful account of his father, *Romulus my father*. His father was a blacksmith who emigrated from Romania to Australia. And at the heart of Romulus' character, his personhood, was this truthfulness. Gaita says of his father and his friend Hora, 'They valued [truthfulness] because, to adapt the words of a fine English philosopher, they were men for whom *not to falsify* had become a spiritual demeanour<sup>2</sup>.' This was nothing to do with any utilitarian calculation, that truthfulness pays in the long run, or that if you start telling lies then you get into a mess. It was a simple requirement of honour. Such a cherishing of truth for its own sake has largely been lost.

Onora O'Neill, in the Reith lectures of 2002, talked of a crisis of suspicion. People do not trust that they are being told the truth by politicians, doctors, business executives, the clergy and most especially by the media. Geoff Mulgan, who has just finished as director of strategy and policy at No.10, recently attacked the media for having no concern for truth. And of course the media make similar accusations against politicians and everyone else. We are drowning in information, but we do not know whom or what to believe. This is not to say that people are necessarily less truthful than before. I have no evidence for that, though I suspect that it is the case. Certainly people care about truth. The tremendous interest in the Hutton inquiry showed that we do. But we are afflicted with a profound uncertainty as to what is the truth and how we may obtain it.

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Bok *op.cit.* p. 32

<sup>2</sup> *Romulus my father* Melbourne 1998 p.148

It is often assumed that the answer is as much transparency as possible. If only everything were revealed, then we would know if our suspicions were grounded or not. And so every memo, every email, telephone call and conversation in the corridors of power must be recorded for inspection. And increasingly the government checks up on us all. But O'Neill argues that this can never kill suspicion. She said that 'demands for universal transparency are likely to encourage the evasions, hypocrisies and half-truths that we usually refer to as "political correctness". But which might more forthrightly be called either "self-censorship" or "deception"<sup>3</sup> Suspicion can never be allayed. There might always be some missing bit of evidence, if only one searches hard enough, like for the elusive WMD in Iraq. The fact that we cannot find the evidence only proves that our enemies are fiendishly cunning and so untrustworthy.

A culture of complete transparency also might actively discourage one from being truthful. One would never know when one's words might be used as evidence against one. And how can we ever think about anything if we cannot try out crazy ideas, float hypotheses, and make mistakes? Meister Eckhart, a fourteenth century Dominican, wrote that no one may attain the truth without a hundred errors on the way. We need the freedom for words for which we are not going to be held eternally responsible. Seeking the truth requires times of protected irresponsibility. So the ideal of complete transparency is neither possible nor desirable.

This frustrated hunger for truth is also evident in the endless desire for either self-revelation or the exposure of others. We live in what has been called 'the bare all society.' Amazon lists over a thousand books whose titles include 'The Naked...', from 'The Naked Chef' to the 'Naked Parish Priest.' On TV chat shows like Oprah's, people are heroes for a brief moment by telling all. And for the media, according to Zygmunt Bauman, 'public interest' means "the private problems of public figures."<sup>4</sup> Everyone's little secrets must be disclosed. Yet this passion for exposure never allays the suspicion that something nasty is being hidden from us.

My thesis is that this climate of mistrust is rooted in the fact that we understand truth almost exclusively in terms of the tradition of the Enlightenment. This is a wonderful and fertile tradition that has given us modern science and much freedom, but if it becomes the sole paradigm of seeking the truth, then it is not surprising that we are in such a mess. It would take a couple of lectures to give a fair presentation of the Enlightenment understanding of truth, so please forgive me for offering just a few suggestive hints.

Alasdair MacIntyre wrote, 'From the seventeenth century onwards it was a commonplace that whereas the scholastics had allowed themselves to be deceived about the character of the facts of the natural and social world by imposing an Aristotelian interpretation between themselves and experienced reality, we moderns, that is we seventeenth and eighteenth century moderns – had stripped away interpretation and theory and confronted fact and experience just as they are. It was precisely in virtue of this that those moderns proclaimed themselves the Enlightenment, and understood the Medieval past by contrast as the Dark Ages. What Aristotle obscured, they see.<sup>5</sup>' So we seek the truth first of all by rejecting tradition, especially the dogmas of the Catholic Church. This attitude is still widespread. For example, the proposed preamble to the European Constitution passes directly from the Greeks and Romans to the Enlightenment, as if most of the history of Christian Europe were an aberration in the advance of rationality.

The truthful eye is that of the detached scientific observer, who observes coldly, rationally, questioning the inherited assumptions and prejudices of the crowd. But it turned out not to be as simple as that. How could one be sure that one was seeing things as they are? How could one bridge

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<sup>3</sup> *A question of Trust: The BBC Reith Lectures 2002* Cambridge 2002 p.73

<sup>4</sup> *Liquid Modernity* Cambridge 2000 p.70

<sup>5</sup> *After Virtue* p.78

the gap between the mind and the world? How could one be sure that what was out there was in fact anything like my perception of it? In its search for certainty, the mind must doubt everything. One must be sceptical, suspicious and distrustful. It is characterized by Bernard Williams this way: ‘There is an intense commitment to truthfulness, or, at any rate, a pervasive suspiciousness, a readiness against being fooled, an eagerness to see through appearances to the real structures and motives that lie behind them.’<sup>6</sup> Voltaire remarked that we have language to conceal our thoughts. I do not wish to reject this tradition. We are all the children of the Enlightenment and we are profoundly indebted to it. But if it becomes the primary way that we understand seeking the truth then we shall inevitably create a society which is mistrustful and suspicious, and whose social bonds crumble.

Faced with this crisis of confidence, Christianity has something to offer. It is not that Christians are necessarily any more truthful than anyone else. It would be wonderful if we followed the advice of Mark Twain, who said ‘When in doubt, tell the truth. It will confound your enemies and astound your friends.’<sup>7</sup> But Christians are not usually much better than other people. Jesus came to call sinners and not the just, and in this he continues to be highly successful. Besides, I believe that there is a profound crisis of truthfulness within the Church. Bishops, priests and theologians are often afraid to say what we truly believe. So the Church cannot claim to be a beacon of honesty in a world of lies. Rather we may offer a different understanding of what it means to seek the truth. We are the heirs of an older and alternative understanding of truthfulness, which our society urgently needs if it is not to breakdown. . We need a spirituality of truthfulness, which is to say a way of living that helps us to see the world aright.

Of course in our complex world, there is no single measure or model of truthfulness. The academic has different obligations than the journalist or the novelist. Telling the truth is not so central to the politician’s vocation as it is for the philosopher. There is no simple code of truthfulness that can be universally applied. But if we form Christians in a fundamental spirituality of truthfulness, then Christian politicians, journalists, doctors and academics, business executives and plumbers might come to see what truthfulness is required of them.

A Christian spirituality of truthfulness must scandalize a child of the Enlightenment, because it grounded in doctrine. For the Enlightenment, truthfulness began with liberation from doctrine. Of course it was not noticed that the Enlightenment soon acquired its own doctrines. As G.K. Chesterton once remarked, ‘‘There are only two kinds of people, those who accept dogmas and know it, and those who accept dogmas and don’t know it.’

Let us begin at the beginning, creation. For St Thomas Aquinas, the doctrine of creation does not tell us about what happened long ago, before the Big Bang. It is our belief that everything now receives its existence from God and this is why we can understand it. . It is God’s world and we are at home in it as God’s creatures. It is not an alien and incomprehensible place. The central intuition of Aquinas was that, in the words of Cornelius Ernst, the world ‘effortlessly shows itself for what it is, flowers into the light.’<sup>8</sup> Of course sometimes we make mistakes and misunderstand. We may tell lies and wear masks. But the truth is prior to error and deceit. As fish were made to swim in water, human beings were made to thrive in the truth.

It would be easy to dismiss Thomas as just naïve. He never looked down a microscope and was astonished at what he saw. But that would not be fair. He spent his life arguing with people who believed that the world was not as it seemed. The Dominican Order was born in the clash between Christianity and the Cathars who thought that the material world was created by an evil principle.

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<sup>6</sup> *Truth and Truthfulness: An essay in genealogy* Princeton 2002 p.1

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Sissela Bok *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* New York 1989 p.145

<sup>8</sup> *Multiple Echo* p.8.

But for Thomas our openness to truth is grounded in faith. Everything is the fruit of God's word, and so is ultimately intelligible. We are attuned to the world, because the one who made the world made us and made us so that we might understand.

This is utterly different from the vision of Descartes, where the mind is 'the ghost in the machine', struggling to get in contact with reality. For the Enlightenment the big challenge was how we can be sure of anything. How can we get from our minds to the world? How can we know that reality is not entirely different from what we think we see? Can we even be sure that it really exists? So we start with doubt and mistrust.

Thomas believed that to see things as they are, we must be contemplative. Contemplation is that quiet, still opening of the mind to what is before it: the word of God, a person, a plant. It is that calm presence to what is not oneself, resisting the temptation to take it over, to own it or to use it. It means letting the other person be different from oneself, refusing to absorb them into one's own way of thinking. One must let one's heart and mind be stretched open, enlarged by what we see. He loved the phrase of Aristotle 'the soul in some way is all things.'<sup>9</sup> Understanding what is other than ourselves expands our very being. Contemplation is being nakedly and humbly present to the other. It was said of St Dominic that he understood everything in the humility of his heart. Simone Weil wrote that 'Real genius is nothing else but the supernatural virtue of humility in the domain of thought.'<sup>10</sup>

This demands of us quietness of mind and time. One source of our crisis of truth, is that our lives are so hectic and frenetic that we do not have the time to see each other or anything properly. Our preoccupation for truth, for accountability, means that we have to spend so much time filling in forms, making reports, compiling statistics, that we have no time to open our eyes and see. When Wittgenstein was asked how philosophers should greet each other, he replied 'Take your time.' So a spirituality of truth would invite us to slow down, be quiet, and let our hearts and minds be stretched open. Simone Weil writes that 'we do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them... This way of looking is, in the first place, attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive the human being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth'<sup>11</sup>.

Truthfulness, then, is not just the reporting of facts. Alasdair MacIntyre maintains that facts, like gentlemen's wigs and telescopes, were not invented until the seventeenth century<sup>12</sup>. Truth is the basis of human community. It is the medium in which we encounter and belong to each other. St Augustine talked of humanity as 'the community of truth.' He was virulently opposed to a heresy called Priscillianism, which maintained that one was under no obligation to tell the truth to strangers. There is a lot of it about today! For Augustine telling the truth to strangers is part of building the human community, constructing the Kingdom. And this explains why many theologians were extremely intolerant of even white lies. To lie was not just to fail to be accurate. It is destructive of language, the basis of human solidarity. When Athanasius was rowing on a river to escape his persecutors, they met him, going in the opposite direction. 'Where is the traitor Athanasius?' they asked. 'Not far away', he replied, and happily rowed on. That was alright, because he did not tell a lie!

I must confess that I do often tell white lies. I am not always rigorously truthful when I complement my brethren on their sermons or their cooking. This is necessary, as the Talmud says, for the peace of the household. And I encourage you all to tell lots of white lies when you tell me how much you

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<sup>9</sup> e.g. *De Veritate* art. 1, quoting *De Anima*, III, 8 (431b 21)

<sup>10</sup> Raimond Gaita *A Common Humanity: Thinking about love and truth and justice* London 2000 p.224

<sup>11</sup> *Waiting for God* London 1959 p.169

<sup>12</sup> *Whose Justice? Which rationality?* London 1988 p.357

enjoyed my lecture! For us, there might not appear to be much of a difference between a true remark that misleads and a lie. That is because we do not have that profound sense of the sacredness of true words as the foundation of human belonging. Lies pollute our natural environment. We die spiritually, like fish in a polluted river.

People often say that the Church is hung up on sex. For most of the Christian tradition the Church has been far more preoccupied with lying. In Dante's *Inferno*, the top circles of Hell, where people get off lightest, are reserved for people who got carried away by their passions. They desired the good, but got themselves into a mess by desiring it wrongly. The middle regions of Hell were reserved for people who desired what was bad, above all for the violent. But the absolute pits were kept for those who undermined human community: the liars, the fraudulent, the flatterers, the forgers, and worst of all the traitors. Sometimes the modern Church does get a bit hung up about sex, and this suits the media, since it locks the gospel into a safe little box where it can be mocked. But for a traditional Christian, lying is seen as much more serious. Which you may or may not consider a consolation!

It often said that the first casualty of war is the truth. There is absolutely no chance of winning this so-called 'war on terrorism' unless we build communication with those who hate the West by trying to speak the truth and to hear it. Otherwise we shall spin ourselves into ever deeper mistrust and mutual destruction.

So, to see the world truthfully, we need to a humble, serene attentiveness. Then, according to Aquinas, we shall see the goodness of the world. When God finished creation then he saw that it was very good. Fergus Kerr wrote, "The world, for Thomas, much against what was quite widely taught in his time, is simply the expression of divine bounty, freely shared, entirely unforced, "unnecessary", simply an expression of love.<sup>13</sup> The truthful eye of the Enlightenment is that of the detached observer, who dispassionately regards what is before his eyes. It is the scientific eye that looks down a microscope. That is a useful way of looking at the world. We would be immensely the poorer if it had not developed in the seventeenth century. But if we try to look at each other only through microscopes, like animals to be dissected, then we will not see each other's goodness, which is the deepest truth of our being. St Augustine wrote at the end of the Confessions: "All these works of yours we see. We see that together they are very good, because it is you who see them in us and it was you who gave us the Spirit by which we see them and love you in them."<sup>14</sup>

This is a goodness that we can show people even if they do not share our beliefs. Raimund Gaita once worked in a mental hospital in Australia. Most of the psychiatrists who worked there were compassionate and conscientious people. He wrote, 'One day a nun came to the ward. In her middle years, only her vivacity made an impression on me until she talked to the patients. Then everything in her demeanour towards them – the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body – contrasted with and showed up the behaviour of those noble psychiatrists. She showed that they were, despite their best efforts, condescending, as I too had been. She thereby revealed that even such patients were, as the psychiatrists and I had sincerely and generously professed, the equals of those who wanted to help them; but she also revealed that in our hearts we did not believe this.<sup>15</sup> She made the humanity of the mental patients visible. Her behaviour was revelatory. 'The purity of her love proved the reality of what it revealed.' Gaita argues that often we come to see people as lovable because we see other people loving them. 'Children come to love their brothers and sisters because they see them in the light of their parents' love.' This is not a matter of being kind, seeing the world through rose-tinted glasses. It is seeing things as they are, truthfully.

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<sup>13</sup> Fergus Kerr *OP After Aquinas Versions of Thomism* Oxford 2002 p.39

<sup>14</sup> xiii.34

<sup>15</sup> *Op.cit* p.18

This time last year I was in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. I visited an Aids clinic run by the Church. Each day the staff bring back people whom they have found dying of Aids on the streets. Most die soon. I saw a young man who was skeletal. He had not long to go. His hair was being washed and cut. He looked profoundly at peace and happy. Those who looked after him were being more than kind or even just. It was a revelation of who this young man was, his hidden dignity and goodness. The opponent of God's truth in the Bible is Satan, the father of lies. And his lies do not consist in being economical with the truth, or making errors of judgment as politicians say these days. It is not even just that he tells fibs. His untruthfulness is in sowing doubt and mistrust between God and Adam and Eve. He makes them suspicious. His name, 'Satan', means 'The accuser', and the Bible concludes with the saints singing that 'the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down.' For Christians the great lie is to see other people unmercifully, to shut our eyes to the goodness of their humanity and to weight them down with the burden of their sins.

We do not see the world aright unless we see it mercifully. Iris Murdoch wrote, 'The great artist sees his objects (and this is true whether they are sad, absurd, repulsive or even evil) in a light of justice and mercy. The direction of attention is, contrary to nature, outward, away from the self which reduces all to a false unity, towards the great surprising variety of the world, and the ability so to direct attention is love.'<sup>16</sup> As Simone Weil said, 'love sees what is invisible.'

So the conflict between truth and falsity within the Bible is not just about accuracy, about describing what is the case, though that matters. More profoundly it is the conflict between God's word, which gives being, and makes us flourish, and the Word of the accuser, which undermines, and denigrates and belittles. A spirituality of truthfulness includes a profound sense of the power of the words that we use to heal or harm. All day long we exchange words: gossiping, telling the news, joking, even giving boring lectures. Truthfulness requires not *just* that the words are accurate, factual, but that they are constructive, giving life and not death dealing. George Steiner wrote in *Real Presences*: 'In words, as in particle physics, there is matter and anti-matter. There is construction and annihilation. Parents and children, men and women, when facing each other in exchange of speech, are at ultimate risk. One word can cripple a human relation, can do dirt on hope. The knives of saying cut deepest.'<sup>17</sup> In the Bible the first sign of wisdom is care for one's words, learning not to say too much, above all not passing on gossip, enjoyable as it is, speaking well of others! As the Psalm says, 'Set a guard over my mouth, O lord, keep watch over the door of my lips.' (141.3).

The media are the typical eighteenth century fruit of the Enlightenment pursuit of truth, unmasking hypocrisy and denouncing failure. To a large extent it is through their eyes that we see each other today. Thanks be to God we have a media which is free. Thanks be to God for Watergate. The media exposure of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and the failure of the authorities to deal with it responsibly was profoundly painful and humiliating. But thanks be to God that the media did show up our failings, otherwise the Church would never have been forced to confront its sin. Thanks be to God for the media's revelation of the appalling abuse of Iraqis in the Abu Ghraib prison. Without the media's revelations, then it could never be stopped. But if denunciation and accusation become the main way in which human beings view each other, then we shall indeed be sucked into untruthfulness. Sometimes we must accuse, but we cannot do that until we have first seen the goodness of the other person. It is good people who do bad things.

After Robert Kilroy-Silk got himself into trouble, Libby Purves wrote in the *Tablet*, 'Like all columnists, I am often highly uncharitable. I suppose that we should consider every time whether it is more wrong than right. If I write that Robert Kilroy-Silk is a waste of space, I am failing in

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<sup>16</sup> *The Sovereignty of Good* London 1985 p.66

<sup>17</sup> London 1989 p.58



charity. On the other hand, if I don't – if I speak no evil – I might be failing in my duty to discriminate between good behaviour and bad. Difficult. One of you theologians out there with a bit of time to spare ought to do some work on this thorny problem of charity and journalism.<sup>18</sup> But if one were to say that Robert Kilroy-Silk is a waste of space, then one would be not only failing in charity but in clarity. If he were just a waste of space, then he would not exist to waste it.

Libby Purves raises complex questions here that even a theologian with a bit of spare time could not easily answer. It is only a journalist who has been formed in a spirituality of truthfulness who could do that. We have to think how we can offer oases in which journalists, and politicians and business executives and shop keepers can be sustained in others ways of seeing the world and so discover what it might mean to be truthful in their particular professions.

The doctrine of creation teaches us to see the world as created, which is to say as gift. Our eyes are opened to the pure gratuitousness of being. Nothing need exist. It is sustained at every moment by God. In 1944 Karl Polanyi wrote a book called *The Great Transformation: the political and economic origins of our times*. It plotted the evolution of another way of seeing the world, the birth of 'the commodity fiction'.<sup>19</sup> This is fiction that everything can be bought and sold: land, labour, water, all of God's creation. The market economy provides the filter through which we look at the world. The ownership of property becomes the foundation of human dignity. The rights of property are absolute and everything becomes property.

Sixty years after the publication of Polanyi's book, we can see that commodification of creation is proceeding apace. He plotted the transformation of land into a commodity. He could never have dreamed that by the end of the century, multinational companies would seek ownership of even the fertility of the earth in the name of 'intellectual property rights.' A few companies are buying up control of seed plasma. According to Jeremy Rifkin, they 'then slightly modify the seeds or strip out individual genetic traits, or recombine new genes into the seeds and secure patent protection over their "inventions". The goal is to control, in the form of intellectual property, the entire seed stock of the planet.'<sup>20</sup> We are rightly indignant at the President of Zimbabwe for appropriating the land of the white farmers. It is a sin against justice. Far more disturbing is the appropriation of the fertility of the planet. It is a sin against the truth of creation.

In a society that is a market place, and in which we are first of all consumers, how we can sustain another way of seeing the world, a clarity of sight? One way is by saying our prayers. For Thomas Aquinas, praying was above all a matter of saying 'please' and 'thank you.' We ask God for what we desire and we thank God if we receive it. This may seem a rather infantile way of living. Shouldn't we be grown up enough to look after ourselves? I am reminded of the preacher he said that in the morning he had not had time to prepare his sermon and so he had had to pray to the Holy Spirit for inspiration, but this afternoon he had worked out his homily by himself and hoped to do better! But for Thomas, prayer is simply the recognition of what things are. Everything is a gift. To ask God for what I desire and to thank God when I receive it is merely to live in the real world. It is to open our eyes to the pure gratuity of being. The word 'thank' derives from 'think'.<sup>21</sup> Thanking is thinking truly. So the daily round of services in Westminster Abbey and Keble College is a constant reminder that the world is not as it seems. We are not ultimately producers and consumers but the recipients of gifts. I have often been struck in Muslim countries by the call of the muezzin to prayer, reminding one of the Creator of all good things.

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<sup>18</sup> The Tablet 31 January 2004 p.9

<sup>19</sup> Boston 1957 p.73

<sup>20</sup> *The Age of Access* London 2000 p.66

<sup>21</sup> John Ayto *Bloomsbury Dictionary of Word Origins* London 1990 p.526

I will make just one last point about the doctrine of creation. For Thomas to look at something as created is not just to see what is before your eyes. It is created by God to flourish and to find its own perfection. An acorn is a potential oak tree. You only have a good eye for a horse if you know what a flourishing, healthy and fast horse looks like. Fergus Kerr wrote, '[Thomas] does not look at the world and see it as simply all that is the case, in itself; rather, he sees the world, and things in it, as destined to a certain fulfilment, with appointed ends, modes and opportunities. It is perhaps not too much to say that Thomas sees the way that things are in terms of the way that they ought to be.'<sup>22</sup>

To see a foetus is to see a human being *in potentia*. If that is the way that you see the world then it is not awfully important to establish whether the foetus can be properly defined as human now. The exact moment at which we begin to be human is not so significant. We look at what God has created to become human. And to look at a human being is to see someone who is destined for God. To see human beings as created, rather than just as the accidental product of evolution, is to see beings who are made for more than we can say. I do not see an old tramp begging by the road aright, unless I see him as a future citizen of the Kingdom.

Two years ago I was in Cairo, and the Prior took me to visit part of the city that is not often seen by tourists, Mukatam, the town of the rubbish collectors. It is the dirtiest, smelliest place I have ever seen, and 500,000 people live here, mostly Christians. They go out each morning on their little donkey carts to collect the rubbish and bring it back to their quarter, and sort through it to see if anything can be recycled. On the cliffs behind the city, a Polish artist has painted vast images of Christ in glory: transfigured, resurrected and ascended into heaven. When they come back home with their rubbish they face these images of glory on the cliffs. Then they remember that they are not just the citizens of Mukatam. They are even now the future citizens of the Kingdom.

If we are made to find our fulfilment in God, then it also means that now we cannot fully know who we are. We are made to flourish in the one whom we cannot imagine. God is beyond our words. We can have only glimpses of what it is to be a human being even now. As St John says, 'Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is' (1 John 3.2).

So if I am to describe a human being truthfully, it is not enough for me just to describe what is before my eyes. I am reaching out for what cannot be fully told now, what can only be glimpsed at the edge of language. Truthfulness drives us often to poetry, and Thomas Aquinas was of course one of the finest poets of the Middle Ages. Seamus Heaney writes of poetry of giving us an intimation of 'that more radiant and generous life which the imagination desires'<sup>23</sup>. He describes a poem by Dylan Thomas as giving 'the sensation of language on the move towards a destination in knowledge'<sup>24</sup>. He writes, 'We go to poetry, we go to literature in general, to be forwarded within ourselves. The best it can do is to give us an experience that is like foreknowledge of certain things which we already seem to be remembering..<sup>25</sup>' This foreknowledge which is also a remembering suggests the dynamic of the Eucharist which is both a remembrance – 'Do this in memory of me' – and also a promise of an indescribable future.

It is time for me to conclude. Our society is afflicted with a crisis of truthfulness. We do not trust that politicians, business executives, doctors, and above all the media are telling us the truth. No amount of checking and verification appears to be able to restore our trust. No amount of exposure or unmasking of lies does the trick. How can we recover trust in each other? For this we need to

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<sup>22</sup> op.cit. p.3

<sup>23</sup> *The Redress of Poetry*, 1995, London, Faber and Faber, p.113f

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p.141.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p.159

learn to cherish truth again, for its own sake, as something beautiful and intrinsic to our human dignity.

Bernard Williams wrote well of what he called ‘the two basic virtues of truth, Accuracy and Sincerity.’<sup>26</sup> These are necessary but not sufficient. We need what I have called a spirituality of truth. Well, I was told to speak about spirituality! By this I mean a way of living that opens our eyes. We need the time and the leisure to see. You cannot see someone else if you are caught up in a frenetic and hectic life, rushing from one engagement to another. According to Thomas, no society is civilized which does not sustain some people in the contemplative life. Unless we learn that quietness, there can be no human bonds, not even friendship. At the beginning of his *Spiritual Friendship* Aelred of Rivaulx wrote, ‘Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst. There is no one now to disturb us. There is no one to break in upon our friendly chat, no one’s prattle or noise of any kind will creep into this pleasant solitude. Come now, beloved, open your heart, and pour into these friendly ears whatsoever you will, and let accept gratefully the boon of this place, time and leisure.’

Truthfulness requires also a sense of the power of words to hurt or heal. We cannot just fling them out irresponsibly; it means learning to live in a world of gifts and to see each other as the children of God and to speak the truth to strangers.

This does not mean that other people must accept our doctrines if they are to see what we are on about. Gaita’s eyes were opened by the behaviour of the nun in the mental hospital without his having to accept her beliefs. She showed him how to see the patients more truthfully. Millions of Hindus were moved by Mother Teresa’s care for the dying. They did not have to become Christians to see the dying differently. And other religious traditions may also open our eyes to see the world better. It has recently been claimed that Islam has a profound understanding of our relationship with nature. Green is the colour of Islam and it is a green religion. As it is said, ‘All the earth is a mosque.’<sup>27</sup>

I have not tried to say what it might mean for a politician or a journalist or a taxi driver, an accountant or even a priest to be truthful in this Christian sense. In a complex world there can be no single and simple model. What the Church should try to build are spaces and places in which people can come to have their sight refreshed and their eyes cleaned. The climate of mistrust and suspicion, the constant bombardment of the media with its culture of accusation, the ethos of consumerism, all press upon us, and deform our perceptions. We need oases of leisure and silence and gratitude where we can, literally, come to our senses.

Thomas’ pursuit of truth as a friar was embedded in a way of life with regular prayer, silence, and study. But we cannot all become Dominicans! Westminster Abbey and Keble College, which Eric Abbot loved so much, are such oases, where the daily rounds of services, praising and thanking God, remind us that we live in a world which is not made just to be bought and sold. What others may we build?

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<sup>26</sup> op.cit 44

<sup>27</sup> Richard C. Folz, F. M. Denny and Azizan Baharuddin, editors *Islam and ecology: a bestowed trust* Boston 2003