

How to Read a Sermon by Thomas Aquinas

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IT IS strange to think that Thomas Aquinas's sermons have garnered so little attention over the years, given that he was a prominent member of a self-identified Order of Preachers, a group that identified itself precisely by its members' aptitude for *preaching*. Moreover as a Master of the Sacred Page at Paris, one of Thomas's official duties, along with lecturing on the Bible and engaging in disputation, was preaching, whereas all his commentaries on the texts of Aristotle were largely products of his spare time. Even so, it is only now, some 133 years since the creation of the Leonine Commission,¹ that a modern critical edition of all of Thomas's extant sermons, done by the late Fr. Louis Bataillon, O.P., is finally (we hope) nearing publication.² In the meantime, however, we thankfully

¹ In his letter *Iampridem Considerando* of October 15, 1879, Pope Leo XIII indicated his desire that a new edition of the complete works of St. Thomas might be made available "so that the wisdom of the Angelic Doctor might propagate and be spread as widely as possible." *Iampridem Considerando* was clearly intended to help put into effect the recommendations of Leo's earlier encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, promulgated just two months before, on the 4th of August, 1879, in which Leo had called the Church to a return to the wisdom of Thomas Aquinas. Within weeks of the publication of *Iampridem Considerando*, the Vicar General of the Order of Preachers, Father Giovanni Maria Sanvito, circulated a letter to the entire Order pledging them, in obedience to the initiative of Leo XIII, to publish a new edition of the complete works of St. Thomas.

² The author has no knowledge as to an exact date of publication, however. Indeed, much of the original research for this article was done over ten years ago and was presented first at the International Medieval Conference at Western Michigan University in 2001. At that time, the word was out that Fr. Bataillon's critical edition of the sermons would soon be forthcoming. So I put the work aside at that time, thinking I would check my Latin against the critical edition as

now have in print an English translation of all of the extant sermons by Prof. Mark-Robin Hoogland, C.P., appearing in The Catholic University of America Press series *The Fathers of Church: Mediaeval Continuation*.³ Indeed, if the reader does nothing more at this point than stop and order that volume without reading further, the author will be satisfied he has at least provided one invaluable service.

On the Oddity of Thomas's Sermon Style: Is He Guilty of Eisegesis?

And yet, let the reader be forewarned: Even the devoted fan of Aquinas may find the sermons something of an odd read. So, for example, each of Thomas's sermons is identified by the first few words of the biblical verse on which they are based. Thus, when the eager reader opens up Prof. Hoogland's wonderful volume and turns to "Sermon 1," for example, he or she will find that the title of the sermon, *Veniet desideratus*, has been taken from the first two Latin words of the verse in Haggai 2:8 on which the sermon is based: *Veniet desideratus cunctis gentibus et implebit domum istam gloria* ("The desired things of all the nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory").⁴ When this same eager reader turns to the

soon as it appeared. It is now 2012, Fr. Bataillon has long since passed on to his eternal reward, and there is still no sign of the Leonine edition of the sermons. Seeing Prof. Hoogland's new translation of the sermons, however, has stirred me into action. Since the appearance of an English translation often means more people will read a previously untranslated text, it seemed to me that now would be a good time to publish my findings. Whether I should have continued to wait for the critical edition, only time will tell. When the critical Leonine edition finally does arrive (God willing), I will, in fact, check what I have set forth here against the official Latin text. Readers who access this article after the appearance of the critical Leonine edition should be aware that I did not have the Leonine text available to me to work from. In most cases, I have made use of the texts available in the 1980 edition by Roberto Busa, S.J.: *S. Thomae Aquinatis Opera Omnia ut sunt in indice thomistico*, ed. Roberto Busa (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1980), vol. 6. Not all of the extant sermons of St. Thomas are available on-line in Latin, but those that are can be found at that invaluable on-line resource: www.corpusthomicum.org.

³ *Thomas Aquinas: The Academic Sermons*, trans. Mark-Robin Hoogland, C.P., *The Fathers of the Church: Mediaeval Continuation* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010). I have in most cases been guided by Prof. Hoogland's fine translation during the course of preparing this article, although I have in every case checked his English translations against the original Latin text, resulting in my taking the liberty of making several minor emendations to the English where I thought appropriate.

⁴ As many readers will know, the practice of using the first several words of a text as the title is merely a vestige of an old tradition among Latin paleographers of listing

text of Thomas's sermon, however, he or she may be disappointed to find that Thomas is not really going to "preach" on that text in the sense of "explicate it" in any of the usual senses in which we understand that term. Indeed, although in his biblical commentaries Thomas is noteworthy for his devotion to the literal sense of the text, in his sermons he will often garner all sorts of different interpretations, some of them rather odd, from just one or two words in the biblical text.

Thus in Sermon 5 (*Ecce rex*), for example—a text we will be analyzing in more detail below—it would appear from the opening biblical verse that Thomas intends to preach on the first words on the passage from Matthew 21:5 that reads: *Ecce rex tuus venit tibi mansuetus* ("Behold, your king comes to you, meek, and riding on a donkey"). The sermon itself was delivered, we know, on the first Sunday of Advent, probably in the year 1271, and so in accord with the season, we find Thomas distinguishing in the body of the sermon the four ways in which we can speak of the coming (the advent) of Christ: the first is the way in which He comes in the flesh in the Incarnation; the second is the way in which He enters the mind of believers; the third is the way in which He comes to the just after death; and the fourth is the way in which He comes to judge all things at the end of time—a fourfold distinction that seems perfectly appropriate in a sermon for the first Sunday of Advent, but which may stretch the reader's credulity when it is discovered that Thomas found all four of these senses of Christ's "coming" in the single Latin word *Ecce* ("Behold"). One might have thought that Thomas would have made this comment about the four different ways in which Christ "comes" while he was commenting upon the word *venit* ("he comes"), but no, he has other plans for that word. Rather Thomas reads *venit* together with the next word in the sentence, *tibi* ("he comes for you"), and tells us that these words speak about "the benefits of His [Christ's] coming" (that is to say, the benefits of His coming *for you*), which Thomas lists as: first, to make the divine majesty known; second, to reconcile us to God; third, to free us from sin; and fourth, to give us eternal life. As before with his comments on *Ecce*, so too here, the theological content is certainly appropriate, indeed fairly standard; what strains credulity is the notion that all of this content is somehow *contained within* or *communicated* by the two small, simple Latin words: *venit tibi* ("he comes for you").

And even if we could defend finding all four of the senses in which Christ "comes" in the single word *Ecce* ("Behold") or all four of the

the *incipit* ("it begins") for each catalogued manuscript. Indeed, Catholics still adhere to the tradition of referring to official Vatican documents by their first several words in Latin, such as *Gaudium et Spes*, *Evangelium Vitae*, or *Veritatis Splendor*.

benefits of His coming in the two words *venit tibi* (“he comes for you”), Thomas will certainly stretch our credulity beyond the breaking point when we find him, in Sermon 16 (*Inveni David*), beginning with the passage from Psalm 88:21 that reads, “I have found David my servant; with my holy oil I have anointed him; my hand will assist him and my arm will make him firm,” and then making the following claim:

From these words we can learn four praiseworthy things of the holy bishop St. Nicholas: (1) first, his wondrous election; (2) second, his unique consecration; (3) third, the effective execution of his task; and (4) fourth, his immovable and firm stability. His wondrous election is shown in the words: *I have found David, my servant*. His special consecration is shown where it says: *I have anointed him with my sacred oil*. The effective execution of his task is shown in the words: *My hand will help him*. And his stable firmness is shown where it says: *and my arm will make him firm*.

What Thomas seems to be suggesting here, in other words, is that the Psalmist, whoever he was, a writer who lived roughly a thousand years before the birth of Christ, is referring in this Psalm neither to David (even though the Psalm says literally “I have found David, my servant”), nor even to Christ (by means of an allegorical understanding of “David”), but rather to the fourth-century A.D. saint, Nicholas of Myra, a man who lived some 1400 years after the Psalmist’s death. At this point, even the most devoted fan of Aquinas may worry that Thomas may be guilty of “eisege-sis” rather than “exege-sis”—that is, of transporting meanings *into* the text rather than digging meaning *out of* it. Modern biblical exegetes, one hardly need add, would certainly be inclined to draw that conclusion.

Let me suggest, however, that such a judgment would be not only hasty but the result of what philosophers sometimes call a “category mistake”—that is to say, it is the result of an unfortunate misunderstanding of the purposes served by the biblical epigraphs that preface Thomas’s sermons. What a diligent reading of Thomas’s sermons will show in fact is that the biblical verses that appear at the beginning of the sermons are not the texts to be *explicated* in the sermon; rather they are *structuring aids* that serve as mnemonic devices, a memory aid, allowing the listeners to remember more easily the material preached in the sermon.

On Reading the Opening Biblical Verse of the Sermon as a Verbal Mnemonic

Let me repeat: The opening biblical verse that prefaces each of Thomas’s sermons is not to be taken as the text he is *preaching on* (in the sense of doing some sort of explication of the text); it is, rather, a structured verbal

mnemonic-device systematically keyed to the material in the sermon. Allow me to illustrate with an example.

If we turn once again to the sermon *Ecce rex* (listed in Hoogland's translation as "Sermon 5"), we find, as noted earlier, that the sermon is prefaced with the Latin verse *Ecce rex tuus venit tibi mansuetus* ("Behold, your king comes to you, meek" [and riding on a donkey]),⁵ a passage from the prophet Zechariah quoted in Matthew's Gospel during Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (see Mt 21:6, cf. Zec 9:9). The casual reader might be tempted to think: here we have a verse that deals with Jesus' coming into Jerusalem; the sermon is supposed to deal with Jesus' coming at Advent; so clearly (we assume) the sermon will take its theme from, and perhaps be a commentary on, this biblical verse. Just as Jesus came triumphantly into Jerusalem (we expect Thomas to say), so also will He come triumphantly at the end of time. Indeed, those with some acquaintance with patristic or early medieval biblical commentaries might even be anticipating allegories on, for example, the palm branches, the donkey, the city of Jerusalem as a figure of the heavenly Jerusalem, and the like. But that's not what Thomas does at all.

Rather, after a brief introduction (in Latin, a *prothema*), Thomas repeats the opening epigraph, "Behold your king comes to you, meek," and then tells his listeners: "In these words, the coming of Christ is clearly foretold to us," and we his readers imagine that he is referring to Zechariah's words in the Old Testament "foretelling" the coming of Christ into Jerusalem. But contrary to our expectations, rather than talking about Christ's coming into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Thomas does something unexpected: he tells us that there are four different "advents" of Christ: the one in which He came in the flesh in the Incarnation; the one by which He comes into our minds; the one in which He comes at the death of the just; and the one in which He will come at the end of time in the final judgment—none of which, it should be noted, involves the coming of Christ into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, the obvious literal referent of the text in question. So where does Thomas "find" these four advents of Christ in this simple text about the coming of Christ into Jerusalem? The answer is, he begins by distinguishing four different senses of the word "behold" and then associating with each of them a different "advent" of Christ.

Notice how ingeniously this mnemonic device works. We use the word "behold," says Thomas, in a number of different situations. First, for

⁵ For more on this particular sermon, see the article by Jean Leclercq, "Un sermon inédit de Saint Thomas sur la royauté du Christ," *Revue Thomiste* 46 (1946): 152–66. The Latin text appears as *Ecce rex tuus*, in *S. Thomae Aquinatis Opera Omnia*, ed. Busa, vol. 6, 45–46.

example, we might be asserting something of which we are certain, as when it says in the Gospel of Luke: “*Behold*, I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord” (Lk 2:10–11). “Just as people doubt in some manner concerning the second coming of Christ,” says Thomas, “so also some doubted His first coming.” But in Habakkuk we read that the Lord “will appear at the end, and He shall not lie; if He delays, expect Him because the One coming will come, and He will not delay” (Hab 2:3). And in the Psalms, it assures us: “Surely the Lord will come” (Ps 96:13). Thus, for those who fear that the soul will not survive death, the Prophet Zechariah says to assure them of Christ’s coming: “*Behold*, your king comes to you.”

Next, when we use the word “behold,” we might be indicating a determination of time, as when Jesus says: “Behold, my hour is come.” So although Christ’s coming at the final judgment is not known to us, says Thomas, because God wished for us always to be vigilant in good works, “yet His coming in the flesh was at a determined time, and thus it [the epigraph from Zechariah] says *behold*.”

In the third place, when we say “behold” we can be indicating the manifestation of a thing, as for example, when John the Baptist points at Jesus and says: “Behold the Lamb of God” (Jn 1:29). So too, although the coming of Christ into the mind is hidden, says Thomas, yet His coming in the flesh was manifest and visible. So the verse says: “*Behold*, your king comes to you.”

And finally, when we use the word “behold,” we can be using it for the strengthening of men, and this in two circumstances: first, when they have won victory over their enemies, as when it says in 1 Samuel 24:4: “*Behold*, the day has come which I desire: . . . my enemies appear before me”; and second, when they have attained the good, as when it says in Psalm 34:8: “*Behold*, how good the Lord is.” Now since we have obtained both of these things in the coming of Christ—namely, we have peace and victory over the enemy, and we have joy from the hope obtained of future goods—so the prophet says “*Behold*.”

In this way, Thomas systematically associates each of the four different ways in which Christ “comes” with the four different uses of the word “behold.”

1. We say “behold” when there is something of which we are certain (“Behold, it is true”); so too we are certain that Christ will come to us after death.
2. We say “behold” to indicate a determinate time (“Behold, the time has come”); so too the Incarnation happens at a determinate time.

3. We say "behold" when we point out something we wish people to see ("Behold the Lamb of God"); so too although the coming of Christ into the mind is hidden, yet His coming in the flesh was visible.
4. And finally, we say "behold" when we've won victory over our enemies ("Behold, the day has come") and when we obtain something good ("Behold how good the Lord is"); so too with the coming of Christ we have victory over the enemy and hope for future good.

There is no doubt in each case about what drives the process: not the particular senses of "behold," but rather the points Thomas wants to make about the four different "advents" of Christ. The word "behold" is used merely as a mnemonic device to help lend structure to his analysis. Such will also be the case with each word that follows in the opening biblical verse.

Hence after discussing the different "advents" of Christ in association with the first word in the epigraph, "behold," Thomas turns next to the words in the sentence that immediately follow, in this case *rex tuus* ("your king"), about which he says that they "show the condition of Christ's coming." Now a person's coming is awaited with solemnity for two reasons, says Thomas: either because of his greatness, if for example he is a *king*; or because of a special love we have for the person, if for example he is an intimate friend of ours, which is suggested by the next word in the verse, *tuus* ("your"). And since Christ was coming as both king *and* friend, thus we find the combination: "*your king*."

And so on. Thomas's practice should be fairly clear by now. He will run through each word in the opening biblical verse in order, associating it or different uses of it with the various themes he intends to treat in his sermon. Since Thomas's Latin text has *rex tuus*, whereas in English we reverse the order and say "your king," Thomas focuses next on the things that follow from Christ being a "king" (*rex*) and then subsequently takes up the things that follow from Christ being our "friend" (which follows from the word *tuus*, "your").

What follows from Christ being a "king"? First, a king suggests unity; second, a king has fullness of power; third, a king has an abundant jurisdiction; and fourth, a king brings equity of justice. As is his custom, Thomas takes up each of these in turn.

With regard to the first, there must be *unity* for there to be kingship; otherwise, if there were many, dominion would not pertain to any one of them. "Thus we must reject Arius," says Thomas, "who was positing many gods, saying that the Son was other than the Father."

Second, Christ is king in that he has fullness of power. Thus laws are not imposed *on* Him, rather He has authority *over* the law, which is why He can say in the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Mt 6): “You have heard it said of old . . . but I say to you,” as if to say, “I am the true king who can establish the law for you.”

Third, Christ has an abundance to His jurisdiction, in that, whereas other kings have dominion over *this* town or *those* cities, *all* creatures have been made subject to Christ.

Fourth, Christ brings equity of justice. Whereas tyrants submit all things under their authority for the sake of their own utility, Christ selflessly orders all things to their common good.

Notice that all four of these theological points are associated with the single word “king.”

And with this, the sermon ends—or at least seems to. But if we have been paying attention, we know that Thomas has not yet finished “explicating” (if that is what we can call it) his opening verse: *Ecce rex tuus venit tibi mansuetus* (“Behold, your king comes to you, meek”). He has only finished “explicating,” according to his original plan, the words *Ecce* and *rex*, whereas he still needs to “unpack” (as it were) *tuus*, *venit tibi*, and *mansuetus*. And indeed, since this is a university sermon, and preachers giving university sermons at the University of Paris in the thirteenth century were required by statute to give a *collatio* at vespers later that same night, if we look at the *collatio* that comes after this sermon (which in Prof. Hoogland’s volume is included with the sermon itself under the heading “Part 3: *Collatio in sero*,” or “Collation at the Late Hour”), we will find that Thomas repeats the same biblical epigraph from Zechariah with which he began his sermon earlier that morning (*Ecce rex tuus venit tibi mansuetus*), and, after giving a brief summary of the points he made earlier in that morning’s sermon in association with the words *Ecce* and *rex*, Thomas picks up right where he left off without missing a beat with *tuus*: “*your* king.” Notice that Thomas is able to pick up “right where he left off without missing a beat” precisely because his mnemonic device allows him to locate his exact position in the original biblical epigraph and then proceed on with his *collatio* according to his original plan, starting with the next word in the sentence: *tuus*.

Now I haven’t space here to recount in detail the rest of Thomas’s parsing of the verse, but very briefly, Christ is said to be “our” king (*rex tuus*) because of the similitude of image between Him and man; because of His special love for man; because of His solicitude and singular care for man; and because of His conformity or society with our human nature. He is said to “come for you” (*venit tibi*) because He manifests to us His divine majesty; reconciles us to God from whom through sin we were

estranged as enemies; liberates us from servitude to sin; and gives us grace in the present and glory in the future. Finally, his “meekness” is shown in the meekness of His conversation; in His gentle correction of others; in His gracious acceptance of men (not only the just, but also sinners); and in His passion, to which He was led as a lamb. And all that content, Thomas is able to map onto just a few key words.

Now granted, if we mistakenly thought that what Thomas was doing here was attempting an exegesis of the biblical verse “Behold, your king comes for you, meek and riding on a donkey,” then we would rightly be a bit skeptical that he could have found all that theological content in just this one sentence. We might even be tempted to accuse Thomas of reading the meanings *into* the biblical text that he wants to find there, rather than, as he should be, deriving literal meaning *from* them.

But when we come to understand that the opening biblical verse is really an ingenious verbal mnemonic, our perspective changes. Think about how much we can recollect just by remembering one sentence. *Behold* reminds us of the four manifestations of Christ's coming: in the flesh; into the mind of each person; to the just at the time of their death; and as judge at the end of time. *Your king* reminds us of the condition of His coming: His unity with God the Father; that He has fullness of power; that He has dominion over all; and that He brings equity of justice. The word *your* additionally reminds us of the similitude of image between Him and man; His special love for man; His solicitude and singular care for man; and His conformity with our human nature. The words *for you* remind us of the utility of His coming: to manifest to us His divine majesty; to reconcile us to God from whom through sin we were estranged as enemies; to liberate us from servitude to sin; and to give us grace in the present and glory in the future. And the word *meek* reminds us of the manner of his coming: He showed “meekness” in His conversation, in His gentle correction of others, in His gracious acceptance of men (not only the just, but also sinners), and in His passion, to which He was led meekly as a lamb. Each word in the sentence is a verbal cue meant to help bring to mind the content Thomas wishes to teach. To recollect the content, one need only bring to mind the one sentence, and the rest will spill out naturally.

On Memory and Recollection

Being able to bring instantly to mind one sentence is a function of “memory”; having the rest “spill out naturally” (as I described it loosely above) is a function of what Thomas, following Aristotle, calls “reminiscence” (*reminiscentia*), or what in English we often call “recollection.” An excellent text to help us clarify this distinction between “memory” and the

process of “recollection” is Thomas Aquinas’s commentary on Aristotle’s *De memoria et reminiscencia* (in a wonderful English translation by Ed Macierowski),⁶ in which Thomas distinguishes “remembering,” which he describes as “merely keeping in good condition the things that have once been received,” from “recollecting,” which is “a sort of re-discovery of things that were previously accepted but no longer preserved.”⁷ “Recollecting,” however, is very different from merely “re-learning”; Thomas describes the difference between the two thus:

He who is *recollecting* has the power somehow to be moved to something that is consequent upon a starting-point that has somehow been retained in the memory (for instance, when someone remembers that such and such a thing was said to him but has forgotten who has told him). One therefore uses what he has in the memory to recollect what he has forgotten. But when one does not arrive at the recovery of a lost notion through a starting-point that has been retained in the memory but through something else that is newly handed on to him by a teacher, that is *not* memory or recollection but *new learning*.⁸

Recollection can happen *naturally*, as for example when one hears a tune or smells an aroma that brings back a whole flood of recollections from one’s youth; or recollections can be created *artificially* by means of a purposeful association of ideas or images, one to another.

The key to the whole process is having the right sort of starting point from which things not currently available to one’s immediate memory can be recalled. “Just as he who searches through demonstration proceeds from something prior, which is known, from which he is made to come to something posterior, which was unknown,” says Thomas, “so too the one who recollects proceeds from something prior, which he remembers, to rediscover what had fallen from his memory.”⁹ Thus “recollections come about in the quickest and best manner when one begins meditating from the starting point (*a principio*) of the whole business.”¹⁰ It is important, moreover (as we shall see), that whatever one is using as a “starting point” (the *principium*) be “well-ordered.” The reason for this, says Thomas, is that

⁶ For the English text, see Thomas Aquinas, *Commentaries on Aristotle’s “On Sense and What Is Sensed” and “On Memory and Recollection,”* trans. Kevin White and Edward Macierowski (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

⁷ *On Memory and Recollection*, ch. 1 (449b4), p. 185.

⁸ *On Memory and Recollection*, ch. 6 (452a4), pp. 217–18.

⁹ *On Memory and Recollection*, ch. 5 (451b16), p. 212.

¹⁰ *On Memory and Recollection*, ch. 5 (451b31), p. 214.

"it is according to the order in which the *things* follow each other that their motions are engendered in the soul with this order."¹¹

Thomas is able to provide four pieces of advice in the *De memoria* for those who want to want to remember or recollect a large amount of information: the first is "to strive to reduce what one wants to retain into some order"; the second is "to set one's mind upon them deeply and intently"; (and by "set one's mind upon *them*" here I take it that Thomas is referring to the shorter, ordered list to which the original group of items has been "reduced"); the third piece of advice is to meditate frequently on the list "in order" (*secundum ordinem*); and the fourth is that one should "begin to recollect from the starting point" (*incipiat reminisci a principio*).¹²

This advice from Thomas's commentary on Aristotle's *De memoria et reminiscentia* helps to illuminate his practice in the sermons. Thomas wants his listeners to be able to call to mind what he is teaching them, but he knows that there is likely too much information, too many individual points, for most of the people in his audience to hold it all in their immediate *memory*. So he provides for them a *starting point*—a mnemonic cue—which is both well-ordered (such as the order of words in a sentence) as well as something likely to be meditated upon frequently (such as taking a sentence from the Holy Scriptures). As long as the listeners can call to mind the starting point—such as the single sentence from Zechariah with which Thomas prefaces Sermon 5 (*Ecce rex*)—then with a little training they will be able to recall the rest of what was contained in the sermon.

In this regard, we might fruitfully compare what Thomas has to say in his commentary on Aristotle's *De memoria et reminiscentia* with what he says elsewhere, in *ST* II–II, q. 49, a. 1, ad 2, where he suggests that "there are four means whereby a man advances in remembering well." The first of these is that "he should get hold of some fitting but somewhat unusual likenesses (*similitudines*), since we marvel more at the unusual and thus the mind is more intensely preoccupied with them." Second, "a man must set out in an orderly fashion in his consideration the things he wants to remember, so that he may easily advance from one object of memory (*ex uno memorato*) to another." Third, "a man must care about and attach his affections to (*sollicitudinem apponat et affectum adhibeat*) the things he wants to remember, since the more something has been impressed on the spirit, the less it slips away. Hence as Cicero says in his *Rhetoric* (*ad Her.* 3.4): 'care (*sollicitudo*) keeps the shapes of the images whole' (*conservat integras simulacrorum figuras*)." And finally, "one must meditate frequently on the things we want to remember

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² *On Memory and Recollection*, ch. 5 (451b31), p. 215.

... this is why we quickly recollect things that we often think about, as though advancing in a natural order from one item to another.”

Let me draw the reader’s attention to the first and third of these points in particular: that one should seek out “fitting but unusual” similitudes with which to associate what one wants to be able to recall, and that one must “care about and attach his affections to the things he wants to remember.” By associating the content of his sermon with a single, memorable passage from the sacred Scriptures, a book guaranteed to call forth from his listeners the deepest affection as well as the most profound respect, both of which can then be transferred to the material to be recalled, Thomas is helping to make the process of recollection more lively and thus more likely. So too, although the associations Thomas makes between the biblical text and the various points in his sermons may seem rather odd or strange to us—such as associating the Incarnation of Christ with the word “behold” or the unity of the Godhead with the word “king”—if Thomas is right, then the very oddness can help make the associations more memorable. The trick, on this view—or perhaps it would be better to call it the “art”—is to find just the right phrase wherein the images suggested by the words are “fitting” (that is, they are *somewhat* similar to the theme you wish to convey) and yet still a bit “unusual” (such as when the single word “behold” is used to remind us of the Incarnation). The other trick of course is to find just the right phrase with words in just the right order to fit the subject matter you wish to cover. It helps, naturally, to have large sections of the Bible memorized. But there’s simply no getting around the fact that being able to recall just the right phrase to lend structure to a very particular sermon is a tall order. It is a testament to Thomas’s remarkable memory and his truly astounding ability to recall just the right text to fit a very particular situation that he so often showed himself up to the task. Indeed, it was a skill he would manifest repeatedly and to similar good effect in his endlessly remarkable *Summa of Theology*.

It is worthwhile noting, moreover, that in choosing the particular method of preaching he has, Thomas has managed not to confuse his various roles as a Master of the Sacred Page: he has not mistaken *praedicare* (“preaching”) with *legere* (“reading”), nor has he mistaken either of these with *disputare* (“disputation”).¹³ When engaged in *legere*, the *magister* attempts to teach by giving the students a good first “reading” of the

¹³ The three duties of a *magister in sacra pagina* were “preaching” (*praedicare*), “disputation” (*disputare*), and “reading” (*legere*). “Reading” involved reading and commenting upon the Scriptures in class. “Disputation” is what he did regularly during the periods called *Quaestiones Disputatae* or *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*. And “preaching” is what he did regularly at Mass or Vespers.

biblical text. When engaged in *praedicare*, on the other hand, the *magister* seeks to teach by imparting knowledge to the congregation in a manner suited to their abilities to recollect it when the need arises. What they retain in their *memory* for immediate recall is merely a passage from Scripture, which, if they are monks or friars, they should be committing to memory anyway. When they call to mind the particular biblical text with which Thomas opens his sermon, then they can more easily *recollect* the entire content of the what was preached in proper order. The “order” in this case, however, is not the rational, demonstrative order of a *disputatio*, a disputed question; it is, rather, an order of the mind, particularly of *memory*, directed toward the listener’s retention of the material being taught. Indeed, as recent studies have shown, the medievals knew quite a lot about the arts of memory, valued them highly, and spent a great deal of time perfecting them.

On the Importance of Memory in Medieval Culture

Mary Carruthers suggests in her excellent study, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, that “medieval culture was fundamentally memorial, to the same profound degree that modern culture in the West is documentary.”¹⁴ Indeed, medieval scholars prized mnemonic devices to the same degree that modern scholars prize a thorough index, a good annotated bibliography, or a complete analytical concordance. (Modern Thomists have along these lines the Ottawa edition of the *Summa Theologiae*, that invaluable resource with all its amazing cross-references to other primary texts, made possible by scholars whose knowledge of Thomas’s corpus of work was as vast as their ability to recall it was astounding; a reference tool made necessary by those of us whose knowledge of Thomas’s work is not so vast and ability to recall it not so astounding.)¹⁵ According to Ms. Carruthers: “Ancient and medieval people reserved their awe for memory. Their greatest geniuses they describe as people of superior memories, they boast unashamedly of their prowess in that faculty, and they regard it as a mark of superior *moral* character as well as intellect.” “They would not,” moreover, she insists, “have understood our separation of ‘memory’ from ‘learning.’”¹⁶ In their understanding of the matter, it was memory that made knowledge into useful experience, and memory that

¹⁴ Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1.

¹⁵ See *S. Thomae de Aquino Summa Theologiae*, Institut d’études médiévales (Ottawa, Canada: Commissio Piana, 1941–45), 5 vols.

¹⁶ Although, as we have seen, Thomas does distinguish both *memory* and *reollection* from *new learning*. See the text for n. 12 above. To say that Thomas *distinguishes*

combined these pieces of information-become-experience into what we call 'ideas,' what they were more likely to call 'judgments.'"¹⁷

Indeed, one of the most renowned and paradigmatic exemplars of this memory culture in the Middle Ages was, as Carruthers notes, Thomas Aquinas, of whom Bernardo Gui wrote at Thomas's canonization hearing:

His memory was extremely rich and retentive: whatever he had once read and grasped he never forgot; it was as if the knowledge were ever increasing in his soul as page is added to page in the writing of a book. Consider, for example that admirable compilation of Patristic texts on the four Gospels which he made for Pope Urban and which, for the most part, he seems to have put together from texts that he had read and committed to memory from time to time while staying in various religious houses. Still stronger is the testimony of Reginald, his *socius*, and of his pupils and of those who wrote to his dictation, who all declare that he used to dictate in his cell to three secretaries, and even occasionally to four, on different subjects at the same time.¹⁸

What is particularly noteworthy about this passage for our purposes is the degree to which it was Thomas's *memory* that so impressed his contemporaries. Even his famous ability to dictate to several scribes at once, which we might be tempted to ascribe to his powers of creative genius, was ascribed in his own day to his remarkable powers of memory.

In her book, Carruthers compares Thomas's ability to dictate to several scribes at once with a memory device developed by Hugh of St. Victor to help novices learn several Psalms at once in such a way as to be able to move back and forth easily from any one place in one psalm to any place in any of the others. "The fundamental principle," she says, "is to 'divide' the material to be remembered into pieces short enough to be recalled in single units and to key these into some sort of rigid, easily reconstructable order."¹⁹ Romans during Cicero's time used a similar practice to memorize long speeches, associating objects they would see while strolling around their house with the various parts of their speech. The sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci would later suggest a similar technique to the Chinese (the so-called "Memory

the two, however, is not the same as saying he would have *separated* them as we do, thinking that somehow "learning" could take place without any memorization. So even though Thomas distinguishes the two, I take it that Ms. Carruthers's point still stands and is indeed well-taken.

¹⁷ Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 1.

¹⁸ Quoted from Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 3.

¹⁹ Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 11.

Palace”) in his famous “Treatise on the Mnemonic Arts.” The use of such memory devices, as Carruthers thoroughly documents in her book, had become second nature by the time of Aquinas; indeed, by that time, their use had become a standard part of the basic medieval pedagogy in the language arts. It is against the background of this mnemonic culture and the practices that supported it, I suggest, that we must understand the use Thomas makes of his opening biblical epigraphs. Given the intellectual culture in which he lived, Thomas’s method of preaching likely would not have struck his audience as oddly as it does many of us today.

On Several Minor Deviations from a Rigorous Observance of the Practice

Of the twenty extant sermons of Thomas Aquinas deemed authentic by Fr. Bataillon, nearly all of them follow the same pattern we’ve seen above: an opening biblical verse serves as a structuring device for the material within the sermon. Sometimes, however, the associations between the opening biblical epigraph and the content of the sermon are a bit more straightforward than those we’ve examined so far. In Sermon 8 (*Puer Jesus*), for example, where the opening biblical verse is: “The boy Jesus advanced in age and wisdom and grace before God and men,” Thomas deals in order with the four ways in which Christ is said to have “advanced”: namely, first, in “age” with respect to the body; second, in “wisdom” with respect to the intellect; third, in “grace” before God; and fourth, in “grace” before men (in the sense of “living together with” them). So too in Sermon 9 (*Exiit qui seminat*), which begins with the verse from the Parable of the Sower (Lk 8:5) that says: “He who was sowing went out to sow his seed,” Thomas considers, in turn: first, what the seed is (the word of God); second, who the sower is (Christ above all, but also earthly preachers of the word), and “his” (namely the earthly preacher’s) three ways of “going out” (from the state of guilt, from the worldliness of his youth, and from hidden inner contemplation to the public field of preaching); and third, the nature of the sowing (namely, what hinders the sowing, and what is the fruit of the sowing). In these instances, the opening biblical verse still serves as a structuring device for the sermon, and it has an important mnemonic role as well, but the associations between the individual words of the opening biblical verse and the content of the sermon is not as unusual or odd as some of the ones we examined earlier. One imagines in retrospect that the decision about whether to use these somewhat odd associations would have depended to a large extent either on the nature of the text or the nature of the occasion for which Thomas was speaking.

Take Sermon 13 (*Homo quidam fecit*), for example, where it was likely the nature of the text that suggested a different handling of the imagery. The sermon begins with the opening verse from the Parable of the Banquet in Luke 14:16: "A certain man made a great supper, and he invited many," about which Thomas says: "Just as the body cannot be maintained without physical refreshment, so also the soul is in need of spiritual refreshment for its maintenance." "Thus in this passage," says Thomas, "we can discern two things": first, the preparation of this refreshment, where it says, *A certain man made a great dinner*; and second, the announcement of the feast after it was prepared, where it says, *and he invited many*. The first of these sets up the topic for the morning sermon, in which Thomas comments that, "with regard to the preparation of the supper, there are three aspects to be considered": first, who the man is who made the dinner; second, what kind of dinner it is; and third, how big it is. During his *collatio* at vespers later in the day, Thomas takes up the second phrase, *and he invited many*, in order to discuss: who the servants are who are called; how they are called; and why they decline the invitation. Those acquainted with patristic or early medieval biblical commentaries will recognize that Thomas's interpretation here resembles a fairly standard *typological* or *figurative* sort of exegesis characteristic of the early Church. Who is the man? (Christ.) What is the dinner? (The Eucharist.) Whom has he invited? (Sinners.) Why don't they come? (They can't approach the Table of the Lord because mortal sin prevents them.) Perhaps because Thomas is dealing here with a *parable*, he may be less interested in creating his own noteworthy similitudes and associations than in getting as much meaning as possible out of the various images in the parable itself. Perhaps precisely because it is a parable, and parables already have a layer of similitude at work, its images are already memorable enough.

What we've been examining so far, however, are only what I would call "minor variations" from the practice. Of all the sermons, there is only one that diverges in any serious way from the sort of order and structure we've been discussing so far, and that variation is to be found in Sermon 17 (*Lux orta*). It may have been the nature of the occasion that demanded a slightly different approach toward the opening epigraph, the sermon having been preached on one of Mary's feast days; or it may be that the text as we now have it was slightly garbled somewhere in transmission (we must await the critical edition and its scholarly apparatus to make any final judgment on this question); or granted, it may be that in this one instance Thomas simply allowed himself a rather substantial digression from his original order. But whether it is one or the other, since this

sermon is the only one that diverges in any serious way from the pattern I've been describing, the only responsible thing to do is to bring this potential counterexample to the attention of my reader.

In this sermon, preached on the Feast of the Birth of the Virgin Mary, the opening biblical verse is from Psalm 97(96):11: "A light is risen for the just, and joy for the upright of heart." According to Thomas, two things in particular are brought to our attention by means of this verse: "first, the rising of the Virgin's glory, where it says, *A light is risen for the just*; and second, the fruits of her birth, where it says: *and joy for the upright of heart*. And as we might be expecting by now, the first part of the verse ("A light is risen for the just") provides the structure for the sermon in the morning, while the second part ("and joy for the upright of heart") provides the occasion for the *collatio* in the evening. Indeed, the evening's *collatio* begins, as usual, with a repetition of the opening verse: "A light is risen for the just, and joy for the upright of heart," after which Thomas reviews what he had accomplished earlier in the day, saying "Today we talked about the way in which the Blessed Virgin in her rising is a brilliant light," followed by what he intends to do in the coming *collatio*: "It remains for us to see in what way she is joy for upright people." This much is all according to plan.

And yet there is an odd, unmistakable break in the order of the sermon right near the beginning. After a brief *prothema*, Thomas, as usual, repeats the first part of the opening biblical verse: "A light is risen for the just," and then says: "This is a short saying, but it holds a manifold meaning." But rather than proceeding immediately to discuss the ways in which "the Virgin's glory" is suggested by the words "A light is risen for the just," as we might expect, instead Thomas goes off on a rather substantial digression to explain that "the birth of the Blessed Virgin was shown beforehand [before her birth] in many figures in the Old Testament"—three, in particular: the ascent of the dawn (which prefigures the sanctification she brings); the rising of the morning star (which prefigures the purity of her virginity); and the sprouting of a twig from the root (which prefigures her contemplation: as the twig is raised up toward heaven, so the heart of the Virgin Mary was lifted up to the things that are above). Now of course all three points make perfect sense in a sermon about Mary; what's odd is their placement. What happened, we wonder, to Thomas's discussion about the ways "the Virgin's glory" can be associated with or suggested by the words "A light is risen for the just," the first words in his opening epigraph? The best we can say at this point is that perhaps "dawn" and "morning star" and the twig "rising up to the sun" were all suggested by the word "light," although this connection is not made explicitly anywhere in the sermon as we now have it.

In fact, it is not until Thomas has finished his explication of the image of the sprouting twig that he returns to his explication of the opening epigraph, with the result that Thomas is a full two pages into the sermon before he finally says, without introduction or transition: "Now two things in particular are brought to our attention in this verse." It's only made clear by what follows that by "this verse" he means the opening epigraph, because he suggests that the first thing "made clear" is "the rising of the Virgin's glory, when it says: *A light is risen for the just*; and the second, the fruits of her birth, where it says *and joy for the upright of heart*." Read in a certain way, it looks as though Thomas had forgotten that he already discussed this distinction earlier in the first lines of the sermon. He's well into the sermon before he repeats the opening epigraph and begins laying out the points he intends to make in relation to its various parts. Why the delay? The answer is not entirely clear. It's possible the original *reportatio* may have been confused—the scribe may have missed the verbal connection Thomas made in his sermon—or the manuscript as we now have it may have become corrupted in transmission over the years. Or, to be quite honest, it may simply be that Thomas, moved by the joy and spirit of Mary's feast day, took the liberty of making an interesting and worthwhile digression. We cannot make any final judgment on this score, however, until we see Fr. Bataillon's critical edition—although perhaps even then the matter will not be entirely resolved.

And yet if it turns out upon examination that the text of Sermon 17 (*Lux orta*) has in fact been somewhat garbled in transmission (something I'll leave for others to decide), then our survey of Thomas's usual method of proceeding offers a possible way of sorting through the confusions of the text. It might be possible to use the structuring principle offered by the opening epigraph to sort out which sections likely belong to the sermon and which don't, or at least to identify which sections seem likely to be out of their proper order.

Let me make clear, however, that Thomas is not always as precise and detailed in working out the structure of his sermons as in the examples I've given above. While the opening biblical verse always serves as a mnemonic device around which Thomas structures his sermon, sometimes he is more painstaking and meticulous in making associations with each and every word in the biblical verse, sometimes less so. So, for example, whereas in Sermon 5 (*Ecce rex*), Thomas divides the parts of his sermon by commenting in turn on each of the words in the opening biblical verse (*ecce*, then *rex*, then *tuus*, then *venit tibi*, and finally *mansuetus*), in Sermon 17 (*Lux orta*), by contrast, he does not comment on each of the words in the opening biblical verse (*lux orta est iusto et rectis corde laetitia*; "a

light is risen for the just, and joy for the upright of heart") but rather divides the verse into its two constituent clauses ("a light is risen for the just," on the one hand, and "joy for the upright of heart," on the other) and structures the two parts of his sermon according to each of these. In the latter case, the individual words are not irrelevant—the association between the Virgin Mary and "light" is not unimportant, for example; it's simply that Thomas does not always labor intensively, making multiple associations for each and every word in the biblical verse. The mnemonic association can be made either with a single word or with a clause.

On Reading the Prologues to Thomas's Biblical Commentaries

There is another added benefit to noticing the way Thomas structures his sermons: namely, it teaches us how to read the prologues to his biblical commentaries as well. Consider, for example, the prologue to Thomas's *Commentary on the Psalms*. This prologue has been treated at length by A. J. Minnis in his book *The Medieval Theory of Authorship*, where he suggests that the development in the thirteenth century of a more sophisticated understanding of the literal sense of biblical texts was due in large part to the creation of what he calls a new sort of "Aristotelian prologue" structured around the four Aristotelian causes—the efficient cause or author of the work, the material cause or subject matter of the work, the formal cause or form of the work, and the final cause or purpose of the work—which gradually came to replace the more complicated prologues that had been popular in the twelfth century.²⁰ What Professor Minnis fails to take note of in his otherwise fine study, however, is precisely the mnemonic function of the biblical epigraph with which Thomas begins each of his prologues.

While it is true that Thomas's prologue to his Psalm commentary is based in part on the four Aristotelian causes, the four causes are themselves keyed to the parts of the biblical verse that introduces the prologue as a whole. Thomas uses as an epigraph for the text of his prologue the following passage from Ecclesiasticus 47:9: "In his every work, he gave confession to the holy one and the most high, with a word of glory" (*In omni opere suo dedit confessionem sancto et excelso in verbo gloriae*).²¹ There are two reasons, it would seem, for quoting this particular verse from Ecclesiasticus at the beginning of a prologue to the Psalms: first, the passage is

²⁰ Alistair J. Minnis, *Medieval Theory of Authorship: Scholastic Literary Attitudes in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Scholar Press, 1984), 75f.

²¹ In what follows, I will be quoting from the Latin version in the Busa edition; all English translations are my own. See *Postilla super Psalmos*, in *S. Thomae Aquinatis Opera Omnia*, ed. Busa, vol. 6, 48–130.

about David, who was thought to be the author of all the Psalms; and second, because each part of the epigraph is keyed as a mnemonic structuring device to a different section of Thomas's prologue, as was the case in Thomas's sermons.

Thus the phrase *In his every work* suggests the *materia* (or what we might call the subject matter) of the Psalms. "The matter of the work is clear," says Thomas, "because it concerns every work of the Lord." Moreover the work of God is fourfold: it involves creation, governance, reparation, and glorification. All four are covered in the Psalms. Not only are there psalms praising the works of *creation*, there also many dealing with God's *governance* because, says Thomas, "all the stories of the Old Testament are treated in this book." The Psalms also deal with God's work of *reparation*, because they speak of Christ and all the effects of grace. Indeed, according to Thomas, "all the things which pertain to the faith of the Incarnation are so clearly treated in this book that it seems almost a gospel, and not prophecy." Finally, the Psalms treat of God's work of *glorification* because "through it, he invites us to glory." And this is the reason why the Psalter is the most frequently used book in the Church, says Thomas: "because it contains the whole of the Scriptures."

The mode or the *form* of the work, then, is suggested by the next phrase in the epigraph: *he gave confession*. There are a number of different literary modes used in Scripture: the narrative mode, which is found in the historical books; the admonitory, the exhortatory, and the imperative modes, which are found in the law, the prophets, and the wisdom books; the disputative mode, which is found in the book of Job; and finally, the beseeching or laudatory mode, which is the mode found in the Psalms. Indeed, according to Thomas, "whatever is said in the other books in the aforementioned modes, is found [in the Psalms] in the mode of praise and prayer." The "beseeching" mode is suggested to Thomas by the phrase *he gave confession*.

Next, the final cause or *purpose* of the Psalms is clearly prayer, says Thomas, which is the elevation of the mind to God—something which is suggested by the phrase *to the holy one and the most high*. But the soul is elevated to God for four reasons: for admiring the loftiness of His power, which is the elevation of faith, and for tending toward the excellence of eternal beatitude, which is the elevation of hope, both of which are suggested by the phrase *to the most high*. The soul is elevated, moreover, for clinging to divine goodness and sanctity, which is the elevation of charity, and then for imitating divine justice in work, which is the elevation of justice. And these two are suggested by the phrase *to the holy one*. The purpose of the Psalms, therefore, says Thomas, "is that the soul may be conjoined with God, as *to the holy one and the most high*."

Finally, the author or *efficient cause* of the work, is signified by the last part of the epigraph: (In his every work/he gave confession/to the holy one and most high) *in a word of glory*. Why are the Psalms a “word of glory”? Because, says Thomas, whereas the other sciences are written by means of human reason, the sacred Scriptures are written by means of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. They are, therefore, the “word of the Lord”—that is, “the word of glory.” The Book of Psalms is called the “word of glory,” moreover, for four reasons: first, with regard to the cause from which it flows, because its teaching emanates from the glorious work of God; second, with regard to its contents, because in this book is contained the glory of God, which it announces; third, with regard to the mode in which it is expressed, for “glory,” says Thomas “is the same as clarity,” and whereas other prophets utilized images, figures, or dreams, “this one taught unveiled concerning the truth,” and thus “the revelation of this prophet was glorious, because laid open (*aperta*).” And finally, the Psalms are called the “word of glory” because through them “God invites us to glory.”

Now all of this, though it might seem more than just a little strange to a modern audience, makes more sense when the various elements are understood to be parts of an elaborate mnemonic device. And in that regard, consider this: how many prologues of books that you’ve read do you remember? Now think back to Thomas’s prologue and its epigraph. *In his every work*: The Psalms deal with every work of the Lord: creation, governance, reparation, and glorification. *He gave confession*: The style of the Psalms is that of prayer or praise. *To the holy one and the most high*: The purpose of the work is that we might be elevated and joined together with God, “the holy one and the most high.” *In a word of glory*: The author of the Psalms is the Holy Spirit Himself, and through them God invites us to glory. You might even be able to remember some of the details related to the phrase “the holy one and the most high” (when you think of *holy*, it suggests God, and when you think of *most high*, it suggests “elevation”: thus “elevation of the soul to God”) or that, as Thomas says, “glory is the same as clarity,” and thus the Psalms don’t prophesy “using images or dreams,” but speak plainly and “openly,” so much so that “they almost seem to be a Gospel rather than prophecy.” One can *recollect* much of the content of the sermon as long as one can *remember* the opening epigraph and then let it help call to mind the various associations.

In none of the other of Thomas’s biblical commentary prologues will we find what Prof. Minnis calls the new “Aristotelian-type” prologue, structured as it is here around the four Aristotelian “causes.” What we will find, however, in nearly every case is an opening biblical epigraph that serves as an organizing device and verbal mnemonic, just as we did in all

of Thomas's extant sermons—the exceptions being Thomas's commentary on the book of Job and his early commentaries on Isaiah, Lamentations, and Jeremiah. The latter three were likely completed when Thomas was only a *bachelor biblicus*, and in them Thomas, following the standard practice of his day, especially among the bachelors, borrowed a prologue from St. Jerome and then commented on it, rather than audaciously daring as a mere bachelor to compose one entirely of his own.

As Thomas honed his preaching skills, he may have come to realize how effective the mnemonic epigraph was for structuring his material and helping his audience remember large amounts of information and so adopted the method for use in the prologues to his biblical commentaries as well, in preference to the old style that involved merely commenting on one of St. Jerome's prologues. We might think of these later prologues, then, as a kind of mini-sermon introducing the book of the Bible on which Thomas intends to comment.

On the Theological Justification for This Textual Practice: Thomas's Christocentric Understanding of the Biblical Texts

So far, we have been discussing a textual practice. Pointing out a textual practice is one thing; providing an underlying philosophical or theological justification for it is quite another, especially a practice whose use of the semiotic potential of a sentence is so striking and largely so foreign to us. One sort of justification for the practice has to do with the nature of human memory: we human beings tend to prefer interesting and evocative *similitudes* arranged in a sensible order to help us recollect things when we have a lot to remember. Using biblical verses as a verbal mnemonic just made sense, then, because if Thomas's audience had not already committed the Bible to memory, it was at the very least a book they revered and whose words they cared about, making it more likely something they would be able to recall.

Underlying this mnemonic use of the opening biblical verse, however, is something else as well. What makes this sort of cross-textual "mapping" conceptually possible in the first place is, I would suggest, a profoundly Christocentric view of the sacred Scriptures. There is not sufficient space here to go into this matter in detail for each of the sermons, so allow me to illustrate what I mean using two examples from sermons we've already touched upon above: the first, from Sermon 5 (*Ecce rex*), the other from Sermon 16 (*Inveni David*).

In Sermon 5 (*Ecce rex*), as the reader will recall, Thomas opens with the verse from Zechariah 9:9 quoted in the Gospel of Matthew upon Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem:

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. If anyone says anything to you, tell him that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away." This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

"Say to the Daughter of Zion,
'See, your king comes to you,
meek and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'" (Mt 21:1–5; cf. Zec 9:9)

Now if you take the trouble to look up this verse from Zechariah 9:9 in its original context, you will find that it comes at the end of a prophecy of judgment against the enemies of Judah and in the midst of a series of promises that God will bless Jerusalem. In Zechariah 8, for example, we read of the promised restoration of the city of Jerusalem after the Israelites' long captivity in Babylon, when all the people will be gathered from exile, and the old as well as the young will live in peace as God's people:

This is what the Lord says: "I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the Lord Almighty will be called the Holy Mountain." This is what the Lord Almighty says: "Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with cane in hand because of his age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there." . . . This is what the Lord Almighty says: "I will save my people from the countries of the east and the west. I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God." (Zec 8:1–7)

This theme of peace dominates the passages after the verse in Zechariah 9:9 as well. Once "the king" returns, there will be no more need of war:

I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
and the warhorses from Jerusalem,
and the battle bow will be broken.
He will proclaim peace to the nations.
His rule will extend from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Zec 9:10)

Modern biblical commentators will no doubt insist, with more than a little justification, that these passages refer (in the mind of the writer, at least) to a hoped-for restoration of the Davidic monarchy over an undivided

kingdom, with worship at the Temple of Jerusalem at its heart. Whatever truth there may be in such theories, and whether or not this was the original intent of the human author, we can say in retrospect that, as far as the establishment of a *political* monarchy and a lasting *earthly* peace goes, sadly it didn't happen.

And yet, whatever the prophet Zechariah himself may have had in mind when he wrote these words, when the New Testament author applied this text to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, he offered a new perspective and a new possibility: that perhaps the Holy Spirit had inspired the writing of words the full realization of which would surpass what Zechariah could have imagined or even hoped for when he uttered them. Whatever fulfillment Zechariah might have had in mind when he spoke these words to his fellow Jews returning from exile, the New Testament authors believed that the fullest and final realization of what they promised had occurred only with the coming of Christ, especially with His sacrificial death on a cross in Jerusalem that revealed a new, very different sort of kingship: one based not on power and conquest, but on love, forgiveness, and service to those in need.

There are other evocative remarks, especially in the second half of Zechariah, that would have had a very different significance for the New Testament authors reading them than they would have had for the original writer and his audience. It sometimes seems as though the prophet himself was aware that the full significance of his words was not apparent even to him. There is, for example, the strange parable in Zechariah 10:12 concerning the good shepherd who takes over the flock and gets rid of the evil shepherds who have been selling the sheep for slaughter. And yet, rather than the good shepherd being welcomed by the sheep whom he has saved, he is rejected by them. So the shepherd takes his staff called "Favor" and breaks it in their midst, revoking his covenant with them and saying: "If you think it best, give me my pay, but if not, keep it," after which we hear the fateful words that will later in the New Testament be applied to Judas Iscariot: "So they paid me thirty pieces of silver" (Zec 11:12; cf. Mt 27:9). Since the shepherd in Zechariah knows that taking the money is not right, however, he inquires of the Lord what he should do with it, to which the Lord replies: "Throw it to the potter." And so, says Zechariah: "I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord to the potter" (Zec 11:13). It is of course Judas Iscariot in the New Testament who throws the thirty pieces of silver back into the Temple, whereupon the members of the Sanhedrin, having concluded that it is blood money and cannot be put back into the Temple coffers, buy the "potter's field."

So too in Zechariah 12:10, we find a prophecy about the one who will be the deliverer of Israel being “pierced” by those whom he has been sent to deliver: “And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son” (Zec 12:10). What the Gospel writers and theologians of the early Church believed is that these words, beyond whatever else they might signify, signify Christ. Whether or not Zechariah understood the full significance of these words, whether or not he could have known who it was whose side would be pierced by that spear, whether or not he could have known whose “only son” it would be, the Holy Spirit, who writes figuratively with the events of history, did know. Whatever Zechariah had in mind and to whomever he was referring in his own time, this, they believed, would have its ultimate fulfillment in the person of Christ. What the authors of the New Testament and the early Fathers of the Church came to believe, moreover, is that God can *prefigure* not only in words—this much even human authors can do—but in the actual *events of history*. And since metaphysically and historically God could use the realities discussed in the Old Testament to prefigure those in the New, so too textually, many of the things that “lay hidden” in figures in the Old Testament were “made manifest” in the words of the New.²²

It is to this particular understanding of the relationship between the two testaments that we must look ultimately, I would suggest, to explain why Thomas thinks he can take a verse from the Old Testament and apply it to a sermon on Christ; and why by extension, he considers it fitting to use an Old Testament verse from Zechariah 9:9, “Behold, your king comes to you, meek, and riding on a donkey,” in a sermon on the advent of Christ: it is because he believes that, whoever the king is to whom Zechariah is referring, he is a prefiguration of the “king of kings” who is to come. Thomas has scriptural warrant for this belief, moreover, because he finds Matthew using this text from Zechariah in a similar way in his Gospel: “the king” who enters Jerusalem is not merely a human king like others, he is the incarnate King, the One who is truly “the holy one” and “the most high,” the one who will finally and truly bring peace and justice.

Such is the case also, for example, in Sermon 1 (*Veniet desideratus*), where, after quoting the passage from the book of the prophet Haggai that says, “He who is desired by all the nations together will come, and he will fill this house with glory” (Hg 2:8), Thomas adds the comment:

²² For this oft-quoted comment of St. Augustine’s, see his *Questions on the Heptateuch* [the First Seven Books of the Bible], 2.73.

the Prophet shows three things [in this sentence], in this order: (1) first, he shows it is God's Son himself who is coming down from the heavens: *he will come*;²³ (2) second, he shows He is the one who mercifully fulfills the desires of the Patriarchs: *who is desired by all the nations together*; (3) third, he shows He is the one who freely bestows his pleasing benefit [upon us]: *and he will fill this house with glory*.

Thomas can make this series of associations (even though the prophet Haggai himself clearly did not know that the one who "will come" would be the Son of God incarnate, the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ) because Thomas shares with the New Testament writers a Christocentric understanding of the relationship between the two testaments.

It is important to remember that Thomas lived in an intellectual and spiritual culture where the words of the Psalms were chanted several times a day, and these words were always understood to refer ultimately to Christ. Thomas makes clear that he shares this perspective in the prologue to his own Psalm commentary, insisting that "all the things which pertain to the faith of the Incarnation are so clearly treated in this book [the Psalms] that it seems almost a gospel, and not prophecy." So even with a text that says "I have found David, my servant; with my holy oil I have anointed him," David is understood to be a *prefiguration* of Christ; that is to say, the fullest and most complete realization of the promises made to David arrive only with the coming of Christ, who is most truly God's servant and most truly God's "anointed one": the Messiah. This is the truth of the matter *metaphysically*.

The relationship between David and Christ can also be understood *analogically* and *pedagogically*. First *analogically*: Just as we first know our own human fathers, and then apply the word "father" to God, only later to realize that the word "Father" is predicated more truly of God than of our human fathers (since God is the one who created us out of nothing and who loves us without fail everlastingly), so too we first become acquainted with David and learn *pedagogically* from the Old Testament descriptions of him something about what it means to be God's "anointed one," only later to realize that the order of our learning is the reverse of the order of reality, and that the title God's "anointed one" is predicated more truly of Christ than of David. Christ is the Anointed One; David *prefigures* the One who is to come by revealing, in a way that we can more easily understand,

²³ Notice that the first word in Latin is *Veniet*, which means "he will come," so Thomas is justified in saying that the Prophet deals with this "first." To render the whole in English translation, however, we have been forced to put "will come" later in the sentence, after "who is desired by all the nations," even though the word *veniet* actually comes first in the Latin sentence.

one of the categories we will need to comprehend if we are to appreciate who Christ is when He comes. Such categories, limited as they are, having primarily a pedagogical role in preparing us for a reality that goes beyond them, both reveal as well as conceal the reality they prefigure. The prefiguring figures are always utterly surpassed, and the limited concepts they entail must all be ultimately broken open when we enter the presence of their Ultimate Referent: the One whom “no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived.”

So too, once we have understood how a passage that begins “I have found David, my servant” can apply to Christ, then by extension we can also come to understand how Thomas can use the same passage to refer to one of the saints. Take, for example, Thomas’s striking use of the passage from Psalm 88:21 (“I have found David my servant; with my holy oil I have anointed him; my hand will assist him and my arm will make him firm”) to refer to St. Nicholas in Sermon 16 (*Inveni David*), a peculiarity I had occasion to mention near the beginning of this essay. The sermon was delivered on December 6, the Feast of St. Nicholas, and Thomas’s mnemonic “unpacking” of this line goes something like this:

From these words we can learn four praiseworthy things of this holy bishop St. Nicholas: (1) first, his wondrous election; (2) second, his unique consecration; (3) third, the effective execution of his task; and (4) fourth, his immovable and firm stability. His wondrous election is shown in the words: “I have found David, my servant.” His special consecration is shown where it says: “I have anointed him with my sacred oil.” The effective execution of his task is shown in the words: “My hand will help him.” His stable firmness is shown where it says: “and my arm will make him firm.”

One difficulty in interpreting these lines comes from imagining that Thomas thinks that these words from a tenth-century B.C. psalm refer *literally* to St. Nicholas, a fourth-century A.D. Christian bishop, when in fact Thomas is simply using this passage from the Psalms as a mnemonic device to help structure his sermon on Nicholas. And yet there is something more going on here as well. To the extent that St. Nicholas succeeded in getting his false, sinful self out of the way—thereby allowing rather his *true* self, the self he was meant to be as he was made by God, to shine forth—to that extent he had become, as the Church Fathers used to say, *alter Christus* (“another Christ”). As such, Nicholas became the visible symbol of Christ’s presence, especially for the other members of his diocese. He had, as Paul says, “put off his sinful self,” and by “putting on Christ” had become a new man *for* them. It is for these

reasons that passages that are interpreted Christocentrically can be applied, by extension, even to the saints, such as St. Nicholas. Since St. Nicholas is one who had very clearly “put on Christ,” so by extension we can apply the Scriptures that apply to Christ to St. Nicholas as well.

It is, to sum up, Thomas’s Christocentric understanding of the biblical texts that provided the theological justification for what might otherwise seem a rather odd or illicit use of Old Testament texts as epigraphs for his sermons. Just as it is not unimportant for readers to see how Thomas uses his biblical epigraphs as a mnemonic device around which to organize his sermons, so too it would not do for readers to imagine that what Thomas was doing amounted to nothing more than fiddling around with words. The words, it is important to note, offer themselves up for this use because they are understood to witness ultimately to the Word Himself, the Incarnate God, Creator and Source of all things. Just as the things of creation point to their Creator who is their origin and end and thus their ultimate fulfillment which gives them their ultimate meaning, so too the words of Scripture point us to the Word who is their origin and end and thus their ultimate fulfillment which gives them their ultimate meaning.

On “Mixing Memory and Desire”: A New Pattern for Preaching

I have mentioned “Mixing Memory and Desire” in the title of this final section because, for one thing, it is part of a famous line from the beginning of T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*,²⁴ a reference that I thought might make the title more memorable for some modern readers. But I have used it also because I believe there is something Thomas understands about delivering sermons that many who preach tend to forget: namely, that to have a lasting impact on the life of the listener, the substance of the sermon must be remembered past the moment when the sermon is delivered. Many can dazzle with displays of rhetorical fury; few can preach in such a way as to impress the thoughts in a lasting way on the mind of the listener, like a seal imprinted into soft wax, as Plato describes it in the *Theaetetus*.²⁵

Dom Jean LeClerq entitled his famous book on monastic culture *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*.²⁶ It has often been said of the biblical sermons of St. Bernard that they were excellent at enkindling in listeners the “desire for God.” St. Thomas’s way of preaching is different,

²⁴ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, II. 2–3 in “The Burial of the Dead.”

²⁵ Cf. Plato, *Theaetetus* 190e5–196c6.

²⁶ Jean Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi, 3rd ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1948).

no doubt, but no less biblical. And as examples of how to mix learning and the desire for God, his sermons are, I would suggest, no less effective. Friar Thomas pioneered a new rhetoric: a rhetoric of the mind—a rhetoric attuned not so much to the rhythms and cadences that stir the passions as to the patterns and structures that inform the memory. The result was a profound, and profoundly *Dominican*, way of mixing memory and desire. **N-V**