Reflections on 'Thomas Aquinas and Meditating Attentively' - 26th January 2022 – prepared by Hazel

Opening words: This week, we are meditating in person again and have a transcript for those unable to join us. We have included some pictures and resources to help you in your meditation. If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us' we meditate at 7.30pm on Wednesday in Wisdom Centre/ our homes. The tradition we meditate in is Centring Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centring Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob and Hazel, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: Eternal God, through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Introduction: This Friday, 28th January, is the feast of St Thomas Aquinas who was an Italian, Dominican theologian and philosopher (1224-1274), recognised as a saint in the Catholic Church.(1) He was a prolific writer and through his focused and perhaps intense study, he gained divine insights and perspectives, many of which align with those of St Paul, whose conversion is also celebrated this week – on 25 January. For example, they both spoke of the divine goodness present in all creatures and all of the universe.(2). One of Aquinas' insights was his four-step guide to 'growing in wisdom'(3), the fourth of these steps being to 'meditate attentively.' This reflection explores a little about who Aquinas was as a person and the practice of 'meditating attentively' with reference to his writings.

Some background to St Thomas Aquinas: From a philosophical perspective, Aquinas studied Aristotle and developed his own conclusions from their premises, notably in the metaphysics of personality, creation, and Providence. As a theologian, he was responsible for the classical systematization of Latin theology in his two masterpieces, the *Summa theologiae* and the *Summa contra gentiles*, and, as a poet, he wrote some of the most gravely beautiful Eucharistic hymns in the church's liturgy.(1)



Biographer and philosopher G. K. Chesterton(4) studied Aquinas as a person as well as his works. Here are some extracts of his description of Aquinas' appearance and his 'personal habits':

> 'His bulk made it easy to regard him humorously as the sort of walking wine-barrel, common in the comedies of many nations: he joked about it himself. It may be that he, and not some irritated partisan of the Augustinian or Arabian parties, was responsible for the sublime exaggeration that a crescent was cut out of the dinner-table to allow him to sit down. It is quite certain that it was an exaggeration; and that his stature was more remarked than his stoutness; but, above all, that his head was quite powerful enough to dominate his body. And his head was of a very real and recognisable type, to judge by the traditional portraits and the personal

descriptions. It was that sort of head with the heavy chin and jaws, the Roman nose and the big rather bald brow, which, in spite of its fullness, gives also a curious concave impression of hollows here and there, like caverns of thought.

'Of the personal habits that go with the personal physique, we have also a few convincing and confirming impressions. When he was not sitting still, reading a book, he walked round and round the cloisters and walked fast and even furiously, a very characteristic action of men who fight their battles in the mind. Whenever he was interrupted, he was very polite and more apologetic than the apologizer. But there was that about him, which suggested that he was rather happier when he was not interrupted. He was ready to stop his truly Peripatetic tramp: but we feel that when he resumed it, he walked all the faster.'

Growing in Wisdom: Chesterton's descriptions might lead us to be curious as to how a man whose mind was so busy and body so animated, could sit still and meditate attentively. Perhaps these were complementary and his exertions led to better focus when still, or perhaps he was simply impatient to get back to his quite place for thought and meditation? These are the four steps that Aquinas determined led to 'growing in wisdom', and they did involve encounters with others as well as attentive meditation:

- listen willingly (being open to wisdom through all people and things)
- seek diligently (actively seeking wisdom through a range of sources, including people, scriptures, the Wisdom of Sirach, nature, etc)
- respond prudently (careful thought for the outcomes of each sharing of wisdom – e.g. responses appropriate to one's own intellectual ability and the character of the listener; being clear, concise and avoiding embellishment of one's thoughts)
- meditate attentively (an aspect of prudence)

What did Aquinus mean by 'meditating attentively'? Did he view 'meditation' as the practice of beingalert and open to whatever came into awareness, or was it more of an external focus on a topic that would then speak to him, in the manner of a Lectio Divina practice? This is the full text of what Aquinas advises:[3]

'The highest degree of prudence is achieved when a man meditates attentively. As the Psalmist says: *The meditation of my heart is always in your sight?* We have an example in the blessed Virgin who *kept all the words pondering them in her heart*. In an explanation of these words a certain Greek says that a notable word suffices: "Consider, he says, how Mary, the most prudent of women, truly the mother of wisdom, becomes the scholar of her child, and furthermore she does not perceive him as a boy nor as a man, but as God, so that as she had conceived the Word itself in her womb, so she then conceived all his deeds and words in her heart."

'Consider three aspects about the meditation of the blessed Virgin Mary.

'First, that it was fruitful. What is the fruit of meditation? I say that meditation is the key to memory. You will be able to read and hear many things, but you will not be able to retain them unless you meditate. As the Psalmist says: *I have understood more than all my teachers because your testimonies are my meditation.* In fact just as food does not give you nourishment unless it is first chewed, so you will not be able to advance in knowledge unless, through frequent meditation, you chew upon those things you have heard.

'Also, the blessed Virgin's meditation was complete because she *kept all the words*. A man ought to meditate upon all the things he has heard.

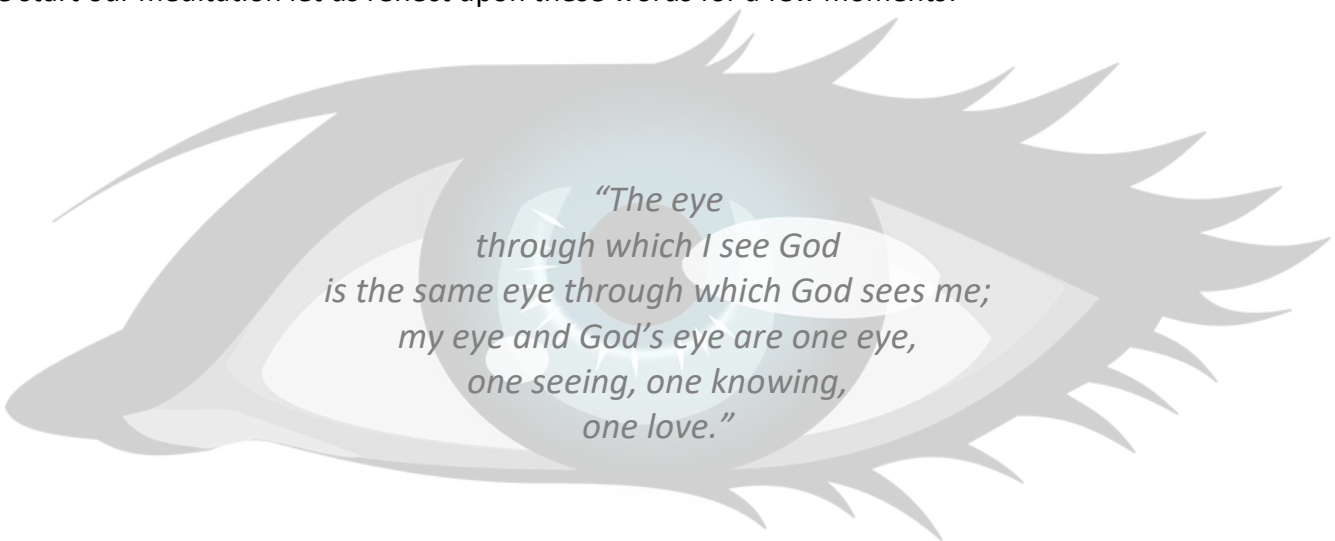
'Moreover, the blessed Virgin's meditation was profound. Some people only want to meditate superficially. If you cannot meditate at one time upon all things, then you should meditate at another time. Mary *kept all the words pondering them in her heart*. As the Psalmist says: I meditated in the night with my own heart and I was exercised and I search my spirit. There is not doubt that the person who gladly listens, prudently responds, diligently inquires, and attentively meditates, will advance in wisdom a great deal. This is the way of growing in wisdom.'

It is not clear from this how Aquinas' meditation practice was structured, but Joe Heschmeyer[5] explores core aspects of this passage on 'meditating attentively'. He writes:

> 'When Aquinas wants to understand how to meditate attentively, he turns to someone else … the Virgin Mary. Aquinas suggests that Scripture presents Mary as the model of fruitful meditation. He gives several reasons…. So what is it about Mary's meditation that made it so great?
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> **It was *fruitful*.** Mary received the *Word*, who came forth in the Nativity. But what is the fruit of contemplating the *word*? Aquinas says that "meditation is the key to memory," and that this is the reason that the Psalmist can say "I have more understanding than all my teachers, for thy testimonies are my meditation" (Psa. 119:99). The truly wise person doesn't just *listen* to a lot of true, good, and beautiful things… he then meditates upon them. As Aquinas says, "just as food does not give you nourishment unless it is first chewed, so you will not be able to advance in knowledge unless, through frequent meditation, you chew upon those things you have heard." Mary doesn't just witness the Presentation and the Finding in the Temple, she keeps these things in her heart, and then ponders them.
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> **It was complete.** Scripture says that Mary kept "*all these things.*" Mary doesn't take one part of the truth out of the context of the rest. Likewise, "a man ought to meditate upon all the things he has heard." Aquinas knows that this is a tall order, which leads to the last point…
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> **It was profound.** Aquinas points out that we often want to meditate only "superficially," and to this, Aquinas has some hard words: "if you cannot meditate at one time upon all things, then you should meditate at another time." Or to put it another way, you need to be in the regular habit of making time for deep, profound meditation. If you're too busy or distracted to dive delve deep right now, make some time and actually do it. Aquinas turns to the Psalms again: "I commune with my heart in the night; I meditate and search my spirit" (Psa. 77:6).'

Aquinas' approach seems to me to focus on the building of memory, paralleled by his capacity for rational presentation of ideas arising from the deeper, numinous places of divine knowing within himself or others. He was creative as well as rational and used his creativity to capture what emerged from his contemplation (in poetry, hymns, etc). His advice to 'meditate at one time upon all things' might seem to contradict the advice to meditate on specific texts or teachings to remember them, but perhaps Aquinas was open to meditating on particular teachings or experiences in a way that then led to a stepping back from the detail, towards a stance that that opened his awareness to 'all things' as he let go of his egocentric self.

A final reflection before our meditation: Richard Rohr[6] draws upon Meister Eckhart who said of the deep meditative state: "The eye through which I see God is the same eye through which God sees me; my eye and God's eye are one eye, one seeing, one knowing, one love." All we humans are doing is allowing God to "complete the circuit" within us—until we both see from the same perspective. This is the "mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:16), which will be experienced as a "spiritual revolution" in thinking (Ephesians 4:22). Before we start our meditation let us reflect upon these words for a few moments:



Beginning Meditation: Let us prepare now for our meditation. James Finley[7] offers guidance on meditating attentively, which you may wish to follow or just stay with your normal practice if that feels right today: Sit still. Sit straight. Place your hands in a comfortable or meaningful position in your lap. Close your eyes or lower them toward the ground. Breathe slowly and naturally. With respect to your mind, be present, open, and awake, neither clinging to nor rejecting anything. And with respect to attitude, maintain non-judgmental compassion toward yourself—as you discover yourself clinging to and rejecting everything—and maintain non-judgmental compassion toward others in their powerlessness that is one with yours.

Meditation for 25-minutes.



A final poem: This poem suggests a kindly attentiveness and acceptance brought to all experiences throughout our day:

'The Guest House' **-** by Rumi (*Translation by* Coleman Barks)[8]

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
Meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
Because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…**Amen.**

Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon. Stay safe and well.

Resources: Pictures: Pixabay.com

(1) Britannica.com Thomas Aquinas
(2) Richard Rohr (2018). 'God's Goodness' Daily meditation 06 Mar 2018, CAC
(3) Thomas Aquinas, translated by Athanasius Sulavik. Sermon - Puer Iesus On The First Sunday After Epiphany II. COLIATIO
(4) G. K. Chesterton (1933). Thomas Aquinas: The real life of St. Thomas
(5) Joe Heschmeyer (2021). Four ways to Grow in Wisdom and *St. Thomas Aquinas' 4 Ways to Grow in Wisdom: Part 4*
(6) Meister Eckhart in Richard Rohr (2015). Meister Eckhart, Part II Daily meditation 16 Jul, 2015, CAC
(7) James Finley (2017) 'How to Meditate' CAC Daily meditation 23 Feb 2017
(8) Rumi in The Poetry Exchange



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