

Jesus and the Woman of Samaria

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A Spiritual Conversation, A *Sacra Doctrina*

The woman grasps the opportunity afforded to her by Jesus and eagerly enters into the discourse. It is in the course of the conversation about God that the woman will come to ‘see’ Christ, and then to preach him ... Thomas is careful to tell us that ‘she did not ask Christ about worldly affairs, or about the future, but about the things of God’ (597).¹ The conversation is a *sacra doctrina* from both the student’s and the teacher’s perspective. Both must be eager to learn in order to grow closer to God. Thomas’ unwavering belief in the link between belief and understanding is illustrated using scripture – ‘To come to God, one must believe’ (Heb 11:6); ‘If you do not believe, you will not understand’ (Is 7:9)’ (600). As Thomas says the woman does not yet realise the significance of the conversation begun (572, 581). .. a willingness to engage, an openness toward dialogue.

for adults ‘grace is obtained by desiring it, i.e., by asking’ (578).² ... Two things, Thomas says, lead ‘a person to desire and ask for grace: a knowledge of the good to be desired and a knowledge of the giver’ (579).³ ... In Thomas’ eyes this is no monologue of Christ’s, here we are witnessing a conversation.⁴ This reflects Thomas’ attitude to learning, to the imparting of *sacra doctrina*. We have already seen Thomas’ understanding of learning as a coming to know, a dialogue ...

The discourse continues between this woman who understood in a ‘worldly’ sense and the ‘Lord who understood in a spiritual sense’. Her questions, her dispute is not an obstacle on the road to God indeed it is the gift of her intellect which allows her to argue (*argumento quodam utens*) and attempt to reject what Jesus has said, and it is this same gift that will bring her to God. ...

The whole story is a coming to know Jesus as Lord. The conversation opens with a Samaritan woman having a conversation with a Jewish man and ends with a ‘Christian’ telling others about ‘Christ’. Through questions and answers Thomas shows how Jesus is leading the

¹ *In quo admiranda est mulieris diligentia, quia mulieres, utpote curiosae et infructuosae, et non solum infructuosae, sed et otiosae, I Tim. V, non de mundanis, non de futuris eum interrogabat, sed de his quae Dei sunt; secundum illud Matth. VI, 33: ‘primum quaerite regnum Dei’, Cap. IV, lect. II, 9.*

² *Sed consequenter ostenditur, quod ad habendum aquam vivam, idest gratiam, in adultis per desiderium pervenitur, idest per petitionem, Cap. IV, lect. II, 1.*

³ *Sed ad petendum gratiam incitatur desiderium hominis ex duobus, scilicet ex cognitione desiderandi boni, et ex cognitione datoris, Cap. IV, lect. II, 1.*

⁴ Weisheipl’s and Larcher’s decision to translate this ‘*Dixit ei mulier*’ as ‘the woman challenged him’ is interesting.

woman from a sensual, worldly way of understanding to a spiritual one. The gift of the intellect is adjoined by Thomas to be of primary importance in this journey. His use of scripture to articulate this belief is fascinating. In this particular story, and indeed in all stories of growth in holiness, the recognition of wrong doing is a decisive part of the process. In this story the main guilt is attached to the woman having numerous ‘husbands’. In the literary sense Thomas tells us that she has had five husbands, and now was living with another man. His belief in the fruitfulness of sacred scripture and his trust in his own gift of intellect are made manifest in the way he progresses. One mystical interpretation he rejects – the five husbands being the five books of Moses. Instead Thomas urges her to ‘Call your husband, i.e., your intellect, so that you may really understand me’ (595).⁵ The reining in of intellect is of interest here, and a strange reading of text for a contemporary scripture scholar. The husbands (*viri*) are likened to the five senses. Thomas sees Jesus urging the woman to call upon ‘her (real) husband’, her intellect, to aid her in the journey toward knowledge of God.

Now that the intellect has been ‘reined in’ Thomas notes that the conversation returns to prayer, for this is how the gift is obtained. It is thus within the context of intellect and prayer that Thomas places the woman’s coming to recognise Christ. The naming of her secret by a ‘mere man’ leads the woman to name Jesus as a prophet. With his endless gift for precision Thomas cites Augustine to inform us ‘that her husband was beginning to return to her. But he did not return to her completely because she regarded Christ as a prophet’, to which Thomas adds, he was ‘more than a prophet, because he produces prophets: “Wisdom produces friends of God and prophets” (Wis. 7:27) (596).⁶

Ego sum qui loquor tecum, scilicet Christus

The long conversation (v.7-27) comes to a climax in verse 28 with Jesus’ declaration, ‘I who speak to you am he, i.e. I am the Christ’. The scripture passages that Thomas marries with this pronouncement remind us of something we have been stressing since the beginning – what we are speaking of is gift, God is the revealer and the lover.⁷

Our Lord did not reveal himself to this woman at once because it might have seemed to her that he was speaking out of vainglory. But now, having brought her step by step to a knowledge of himself, Christ revealed himself at the appropriate time. . . In contrast, when he was asked by the Pharisees whether he was the Christ . . . he did not reveal himself to them clearly,

⁵ *Voca virum tuum, idest intellectum, ut intelligas me*, Cap. 4 lect. 2,8.

⁶ *In quo, secundum Augustinum, patet quod coepit ad eam venire vir, sed non plene venit: quia Dominum Prophetam putabat . . . tamen erat plusquam Propheta, quia Prophetas ipse constituit*, Cap. 4, lect. 2,9.

⁷ ‘Wisdom goes out to meet those who desire her, so she may first reveal herself to them’ (Wis.6:14). ‘I will love him, and reveal myself to him’ (Wis. 14:21).

because they did not ask to learn but to test him. But this woman is speaking in all simplicity (619).⁸

This long extract from Thomas' commentary on one verse is rich in insight. Encapsulated in a few lines we see the story of a person coming to faith. It is a gradual process that comes as a result of communication – we are reminded of the involvement of the woman 'speaking'. Once again, because we are speaking of a *sacra doctrina*, the verb 'reveal' features prominently. The human participation in the act of revelation is emphasised – the journey took place step by step with one wished to lean. Thomas' message remains constant. The journey to faith, to holiness, takes place within the realm of human possibility, through conversation, *sacra doctrina*, and simultaneously it is gift, revealed to those who truly seek to learn and not to those concerned with testing.

De effectu ipsius doctrinae

The effect of these words of Jesus, this significant moment in the process of a *sacra doctrina*, are immediate (v.28 – 30). The reaction of both the disciples and the woman are noted. Thomas remarks that the disciples were amazed at what was good - Jesus speaking with a woman, and a poor woman, a Samaritan and a foreigner at that (622). Again note the emphasis on the act of conversation – it is not so much the presence of the woman but the speaking that is the real source of wonder. Although the disciples were not immediately involved in the discourse the effect of this education in holiness, of *sacra doctrina*, is not limited to those partaking. Observation of the effects is also formative. On this occasion the disciples reacted to Jesus' action with silence but we are reminded that 'now and then they would question him'. Discourse is a way to knowledge.

In contrast the effect on the woman is startling. We generally think of Mary of Magdala as the first apostle but here Thomas tells us that this woman, who remains unnamed, takes 'on the role of the apostle' (624).⁹ She proclaims Christ's power (620)¹⁰ and from 'what she says and

⁸ *Non autem Deus manifestavit se mulieri a principio: quia forte credidisset, et visum fuisset sibi ex vanitate loqui. Nunc autem paulatim in cognitione Christi eam reducens, opportune revelavit se ipsum . . . Et quidem interrogatur a Pharisaeis, utrum esset Christus . . . et tamen eis non se manifeste revelavit, quia non ad discendum quaerebant, sed ad tentandum. Haec vero simplici mente loquebatur, Cap. 4, lect. 2,17.*

⁹ *Officium Apostolorum annuntiando assumptis, Cap. 4, lect. 3, 1.*

¹⁰ *Secundo fructus proveniens ex parte mulieris virtutem Christi annuntiantis, Cap.4, lect. 3, 1.* The use of the term fruit is very significant in Thomas' theological world. The discussion of fruits, gifts of the Spirit and Beatitude play a prominent role in the *Summa theologiae*.

does, we can learn three things. First, her affective devotion; secondly, her way of preaching; thirdly, the effect her preaching had' (624).¹¹

Thomas counsels the reader to notice her affection in two ways, we are to note both what she says and does for the whole person is transformed by the encounter with Christ. The Samaritan woman forgets herself, the water jar, a 'symbol of earthly desires' and she goes to concern herself with 'the welfare of others'. The magnitude of her devotion is reflected by the number she brings the news to - 'the entire town' (625)¹². This reminds Thomas of the duty Christ gave the apostles to 'teach all nations' (Mt. 28:19). This connection is interesting as it reflects the esteem with which Thomas holds the woman and her story.

His reading of her preaching is also insightful. 'Come and see the man' she invites.¹³ Again each word of Thomas is significant. The woman issues an invitation to see an unidentified person. As she was invited and brought gently to belief so she invites people to come and see convinced that 'by seeing him, they would be affected in the same way she was . . . In this she is imitating the example of a true preacher, not calling people to herself, but to Christ' (626).¹⁴ Her reason for not identifying him immediately are interpreted by Thomas as a way of avoiding being scoffed at - again a sign of his insight into the way of bringing people to knowledge, in particular of divine things. Lead gently and let nature and grace co-operate. Put the proposition in the form of a question (as he does in his *Summa*), 'Could he not be the Christ?', she submits this suggestion to their judgement 'For this is an easier way to persuade someone'(628).¹⁵ The choice of a woman and a Samaritan for this task allows Thomas to emphasise the action of God in the work of preaching (629). The fruit of her preaching is wondrous – '**the people set out from the town to meet him** . . . We see by this that if we desire to come to Christ, we must set out from the town' (630).¹⁶

¹¹ *Et ponuntur tria, quae colligi possunt ex dictis et factis eius; scilicet devotionis affectus; secundo praedicationis modus; tertio praedicationis effectus*, Cap.4, lect. 3, 1.

¹² *Non curans de corporeo commodo propter utilitatem aliorum . . . Per hydriam autem intelligitur cupiditas saeculi . . . Secundo vero apparet ex multitudine eorum quibus annuntiat: quia non uni tantum, nec duobus vel tribus, sed toti civitati*, Cap. 4, lect. 3, 1.

¹³ *Venite, et videte hominem*, Cap. 4, lect. 3, 2.

¹⁴ *Quia manifeste noverat, quod si gustarent de illo fonte, eum videndo, eadem paterentur quae et ipsa . . . Nihilominus tamen in hoc veri praedicatoris imitatur exemplum, non ad se homines, sed ad Christi*, Cap. 4, lect. 3, 2.

¹⁵ *Numquid non ipse est Christus? Hic enim facilius modus est suadendi*, Cap. 4, lect. 3, 2.

¹⁶ *Et exierunt de civitate . . . et veniebant ad ipsum . . . in quo datur intelligi, quod si ad Christum ire volumus, oportet nos exire de civitate*, Cap. 4, lect. 3, 2. Thomas understands setting 'out from town' as a symbol of leaving behind carnal desires.