

Evensong at Queens' College Chapel Cambridge

Sunday 15 October 2023, 6.30 pm

Sermon by Dr Anna Abram, Principal of the Margaret Beaufort Institute of Theology, Cambridge

First, I would like to thank The Reverend Anna Jones, Queens College' Chaplain, and The Reverend Tim Harling, Dean of Chapel, for their warm invitation to several of us from the Margaret Beaufort Institute to take part in this beautiful service. I am personally honoured to stand here in front of you to share my thoughts on education, which is the theme of sermons this term.

Education – where to start? I started with a search on academia – an online open repository of academic articles. Nearly 5 million papers popped up when I asked about the purpose of education. Needless to say, there was a huge diversity with regards to the aims and objectives of education.

Professor Deborah Prentice, Vice-Chancellor, in her Annual Address to mark the beginning of this academic year, talked about education as a search for truth and about Cambridge University as 'a moral community [...] dedicated to truth-seeking'¹.

Pope Francis (as a Catholic I am bound to refer to him in the sermon) focuses on truth too, when he talks about education. More precisely, he speaks about 'education for truth', by which he means learning and 'teaching how to discern, evaluate and understand our deepest desires and inclinations'. For him, 'education for truth', is a form of internal training in which discernment, evaluation and understanding are distinct activities, evaluation being more cognitive while discernment involving all the senses. Francis is quite directive when he says: 'discern everything that encourages communion and promotes goodness from whatever instead tends to isolate, divide, and oppose'². Francis is well aware that discernment for the purpose of communion or common good is difficult, especially in the polarised and conflicted world, increasingly marked by military violence. Even in the community like Cambridge common ground is not a given. The Vice Chancellor in her speech admits: '[a]lthough I find people at Cambridge to be on the same page about many topics, the devolved nature of the University makes that common ground difficult to recognise, much less to realise'.

So, how do we navigate in the climate that shakes the common ground of education and the common ground of the world in general, the world in which truth is one of the most contested things?

To address this question, let me turn to another staple source in the Catholic Tradition, St. Thomas Aquinas.

¹ <https://www.cam.ac.uk/about-the-university/how-the-university-and-colleges-work/people/vice-chancellor/speeches/annual-address-to-the-university-2023>

² Pope Francis, "The truth will set you free" (Jn 8:32): Fake news and journalism for peace', http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20180124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html, visited on 14 October 2023.

In the prologue to the *Summa Theologiae* Aquinas reveals that he finds inadequacy in the system of education he inherited³. He wants to reform the system by offering his students a better method of inquiry. We might find his correction of the old system excessive as it is spread over so many volumes; the best known -- Blackfriars edition -- has 61 volumes. This approach probably wouldn't go well today when our concentration span is more limited. I hope I haven't lost you yet. Please bear with me as I would share with you a few more thoughts.

Aquinas's educational system is a method of engagement with a variety of sources, including the works of Jewish and Islamic philosophers, most notably Avicenna or Ibn Sin who gets a mention several times already in the prologue to the *Summa*. Nobody gets cancelled. He goes thoroughly through all possible positions he can find in order to address what matters most.

It is fascinating to note the teachers he admires. So, Aristotle is the key teacher. Pythagoras and Socrates are the greatest teachers among the pagans (as he calls them). Of course, Jesus is the most perfect teacher. What do these teachers have in common? None of them wrote anything. This is not to say that writing wasn't important for Aquinas. After all, he wrote a lot. But, writing for him wasn't an end; it was a means to an end. For him the goal of education was to arouse the student's interest in the truth. He states over and over again that Jesus' primary task was to serve truth. For Aquinas, the story of the Last Supper is a model of education. In his commenting on the relevant passage in the Gospel of John, Aquinas reflects on the double mission of the educator: service and authority. He remarks that Jesus 'becomes a slave by removing his garments and washing his disciples' feet', he waits and then 'becomes a teacher by dressing appropriately and sitting like a master on his chair to explain the meaning of what he has done'. Aquinas wonders: why did Jesus wait to sit down before teaching his disciples?⁴ He offers the following answer: because 'teaching ought to be done in tranquillity'⁵.

Aquinas goes further to explain that by 'sitting and being quiet the soul becomes wise and prudent'⁶.

Sitting and being quiet are presented to us as conditions of growth in wisdom. According to the second reading we have just heard, wisdom is a 'tree of life'. It is a priceless quality - 'more profitable than silver and yielding better returns than gold'.

The propositions that 'teaching ought to be done in tranquillity' and that learning the priceless quality of wisdom requires sitting down and being quiet might sound unrealistic or even naïve. How do we cultivate these qualities in our busy and pressurized lives and how do we incorporate them into the fabric of our competitive, driven by the markets, educational set ups?

³ I am grateful to Vivian Bolland OP for igniting my interest in Thomas Aquinas' approach to reforming educational system. See Bolland's paper 'Truth, knowledge and communication: Thomas Aquinas on the mystery of teaching'. *Studies in Christian Ethics* 18.3 (2006), 287-304

⁴ Super Ioannem, XIII, lectio 3, §1770 in Bolland, 'Truth, knowledge and communication', 299

⁵ 'Doctrina debet esse in tranquillitate', translated by Bolland, Bolland, 'Truth, knowledge and communication', 299

⁶ Ibid.,

Yet, I want to suggest that these propositions deserve serious attention, if we believe that education has a spiritual dimension. Of course, we cannot talk about education without politics and economics. But, we also cannot talk about education without ethics and drawing insights from the very long tradition of Wisdom. Prof Prentice reminded us that we are part of a moral community dedicated to seeking truth. Pope Francis drew our attention to the internal aspect of that truth seeking which involves seeking truth about oneself. Thomas Aquinas presented tranquillity and quietness as conditions of this process. Seneca, in his *De Vita Beata*, talks about tranquillity ('summum bonum animi concordia') as the greatest good. For him, tranquillity arises when meaning and goodness come together within our heart. Tranquillity is much deeper than calming one's nerves or being composed. It is something that can be reached deep down in our hearts, despite our inner brokenness and chaos, proneness to distractions and failures. The third reading reminded us of this state, by juxtaposing love and sin where sin is considered as a failure to love.

Fostering tranquillity and inner quietness is a lifelong task. It is built on the commitment to self-education. By 'sitting and being quiet the soul becomes wise and prudent' says Aquinas. This is how the soul grows. Susan Neiman, one of my favourite philosophers, in her book 'Why Grow Up?: Philosophy in Transit' suggests that 'growing up is more a matter of courage than knowledge'. For Christians and probably anyone who subscribes to the theistic worldview, the initiative to grow and have courage is not ours. It comes from God – God. It is from that God who in the words of Psalm we heard earlier, searches us first, who perceives our thoughts from afar, who is familiar with all our ways. May this God give us courage, wisdom and a tranquil heart in our truth-seeking endeavours. Amen.