

## Award address – Sarum College

18 June 2016

I have a confession to make. This is my first – and maybe my last - address at a graduation ceremony. I have however attended enough graduation ceremonies over the years to learn some tricks, and pitfalls, of the trade. One thing I know is that an address like this has to communicate to a number of audiences, the most important being **you** the award holders. We are here to celebrate **your** achievement. It is no mean feat, and certainly one that will launch a thousand party conversations over the years, to have a postgraduate qualification from Sarum College, Salisbury. Award holders, I need to give you your charge. But I know too I need to speak through you to the family and friends who have supported you throughout your studies and have travelled to celebrate with you today. Finally, betraying my background as a higher education teacher, I know that the staff of Sarum College are another audience of what I have to say. Achieving an academic award always involves you, the students, those who teach you, and those who support you. Let's see then if I can speak to you all.

The emphasis I have placed on **communication** in my opening comments strikes at the heart of the gospel, and so derivatively to theology, theology being a form of speaking in the wake of the gospel.

The God of the Gospel is a communicative God, or as Rowan Williams evocatively expresses it 'to be God *is* to be the generosity of self-communication'.<sup>1</sup> God's self-communication is the outpouring of his desire to live in fellowship with his creatures. God speaks first in the words of the law and the prophets, these words being 'sweeter than honey' (Psalm 119:103). Definitively, or as Hebrews puts it 'in these last days' (Hebrews 1:2), God speaks in and through the human life of his Son. God

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, 'Teaching the Truth', in Jeffrey John (ed.), *Living Tradition* (London: DLT), p. 31.

*speaks*. God does not bellow to us in his Son. God in Jesus does not deafen us. Or, in more contemporary vocabulary, God in Jesus does not ‘download’ himself into us. To speak is to communicate. Communication is a practice that is vulnerable to time. The time that communication takes is reflected in the time that Jesus’ life took. That Jesus had to communicate, and so seek hearers, is an implication of his life needing to have length. ‘And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour’ (Luke 2:52). Of this verse from Luke, Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century had this to say:

By his intimate union with humanity, Christ shared all the marks of our nature. He was born, reared, grew up and went so far as to taste death...It was in keeping with his intimate union with our nature that he should be united with us in all our characteristics...the power which amends our nature had to touch the beginning and to extend to the end, covering all that lies in between.<sup>2</sup>

What you might be asking, does all this emphasis on communication have to do with learning and teaching theology? Quite a lot, I would say.

First, to focus on communication as a way into thinking about theology is to mark out *the territory* for our work, both as students and teachers. Nearly 800 years ago Thomas Aquinas, the great Dominican theologian, was faced with the task of giving his inaugural lecture at the University of Paris. He took as his inspiration Psalm 103:13 (in the Vulgate), “Watering the mountains from his things above, the earth will be filled from the fruit of his works”. Teachers, like Aquinas, were

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, ‘Address on Religious Instruction’, §27, in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, eds. E.R. Hardy and C.C. Richardson (London: SCM, 1954). Cited in Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), p.27.

represented by the mountains. 'The mountains are the first to catch the sun's rays, and holy teachers are likewise the first to receive radiance in their minds. Like mountains, teachers are the first to be enlightened by the rays of divine wisdom.'<sup>3</sup> Lest the Sarum College staff get a little puffed up Aquinas quickly reminds his hearers that the text does not say God *poured* his knowledge from above, but 'watered' from above. Moreover, teachers stand only by the grace of God.

Students for Aquinas are represented by 'the earth' a reminder that learning begins with humility. 'Where there is humility, there is wisdom', Proverbs 11.2 tells us.

Now there is much in Aquinas' prose that will doubtless make us feel a little queasy. I am not quite sure the University of Winchester's Learning & Teaching Strategy and Aquinas would be natural bedfellows. It is difficult to eke out from the words of a thirteenth century theologian the kind of discursive, exploratory, risky forms of learning that Sarum encourages in its students. In the lingo, Aquinas is no social constructivist when it comes to learning. But what Aquinas *does reinforce* is is that learning and teaching theology is made possible by the generous self-communication of God. Learning and teaching theology has its home in the desire of God to be known. Aquinas offers us a seductive image of teaching and learning theology as a sharing in divine abundance:

We see that rain pours down from the things that are above in the clouds, and watered by the rain the mountains produce rivers, and by having its fill of these the earth becomes fertile. Similarly the minds of teachers, symbolised by the mountains, are watered by the things that are above in the wisdom of God, and by their ministry the light of divine wisdom flows down into the minds of students.

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<sup>3</sup> All translations of the lecture by Aquinas are taken from *Albert and Thomas*, ed. and trans. S. Tugwell (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), pp. 355-60.

Second, to focus on communication as a way into thinking about theology reminds us of the importance of life lived in common. Good communication needs healthy communities, communities in which there is no falsehood. Communication, like learning, is an inherently social activity. What places like Sarum College do is keep alive the notion that only together, in conversation, will we grow in our knowledge and love of God. Speaking as a teacher I know the classroom to be an immensely exciting place, not a place in which I can pour out my learning (sorry, Aquinas), but a catalyst for generating ideas and thoughts *together*. I have every confidence that you award holders will have loved those intensive days you spent at Sarum, time when you looked up from your books and gave flight to your thoughts in community. Your challenge now is to take that Sarum vision of life together and make where you dwell even more abundant.

Third, to focus on communication as a way into thinking about theology helps us see that as a graduate from Sarum you have been equipped with skills in word-care. 'The right to be heard speaking about God must be earned',<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams wrote once, in words that impressed themselves on my memory when I was an Undergraduate student of theology. We all know words about God that have become hateful, limpid, sentimental, or glib. These are words that fail to communicate the imagination of the gospel, its ability to transform the way we see the world. Sometimes, of course, the best form of communicating the gospel might be the slow reserve, the caution that you would expect of all who know what they are handling.

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<sup>4</sup> Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 40. The influence of Williams is implicit in this paragraph.

Award holders, your task as graduates is to help ensure that talk about God remains always life-giving, transformative, and capable of building up our common life. God bless you on your journey from this place.

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