

# Why Sermons are Boring

In moving offices recently I found, between my copies of *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*, a long-lost fragment from the unfinished third part of the *Summa theologiae* of Saint Thomas Aquinas. The manuscript, consisting of a single article, was headed *Utrum sermones semper taediosi sint*: “Whether sermons are always boring.” Anyone acquainted with the literary form of the *Summa* will know at once that this title reveals Thomas’s conviction that sermons always are boring. He begins, typically, with arguments (“Objections”) for their being interesting and then shows from Scripture, Tradition, and reason that they are not in fact so. In closing, he replies to the objections by refining or refuting them. Given the importance of preaching and the general conviction that sermons are poor, there is no need for me to stress the relevance of Saint Thomas’s discussion. Documentation, obviously, has been provided by the translator.

## Whether Sermons Are Always Boring

*Objection 1:* By ordination, the priest is another Christ. But Christ was the perfect preacher. Therefore sermons are always interesting.

*Objection 2:* Jesus promised the Holy Spirit would inspire his followers when they needed his assistance: “The Holy Spirit will teach you at that moment all that should be said.”<sup>1</sup> But the faithful need to be instructed. Therefore the Spirit will provide the preacher with all necessary eloquence.

*Objection 3:* The content of the sermon, as based on the text of Scripture, is an extension of the Gospel. Therefore, as

John Henry Newman noted, “all sermons are good.”<sup>2</sup>

*Objection 4:* Because Scripture is infinitely rich there will always be something new and engrossing to say about every text. Therefore sermons are always interesting.

*Objection 5:* An exalted subject matter calls for the greatest eloquence. But our salvation is “the greatest story ever told.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Jane Austen says, “A thoroughly good sermon, thoroughly well delivered, is a capital gratification. I can never hear such a one without the greatest admiration and respect.”<sup>4</sup> There-

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<sup>1</sup> Lk 12.12.

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<sup>2</sup> *Loss and Gain*, ch. 2.

fore sermons, as the most eloquent of all addresses, cannot be boring.

### *On the Contrary*<sup>5</sup>

Jesus said, speaking of religious leaders, “They bind up heavy loads, hard to carry, to lay on other men’s shoulders, while they themselves will not lift a finger to budge them.”<sup>6</sup> Since boring sermons make religious observance itself a burden, Jesus’ words apply most fittingly to preachers. Flannery O’Connor confirms this view: “My cousin’s husband came into the Church last week. . . . We asked how he got interested, and his answer was that the sermons were so horrible, he knew there must be something else there to make the people come.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore Scripture and Tradition alike prove that sermons are always boring.<sup>8</sup>

### *Argumentation*<sup>9</sup>

I reply by saying that sermons may be divided into two categories: the boring and the entertaining. Each of these may

be further subdivided, for a sermon may be boring in two ways or entertaining in two ways.

First, therefore, I say that a sermon may be both boring and good. The origin of boredom is repetition.<sup>10</sup> But repetition will be boring only to an uninterested, idle listener. Where there is affection and engagement, repetition will never be tedious, for a man will enter into a fuller understanding of sublime truths with each hearing. This is demonstrated by Saint John in his old age saying over and over again to his devoted flock: “Little children, love one another.”<sup>11</sup> As a musician never wearies of performing a masterpiece or a scholar of reading the classics, so the devout never tire of hearing the message of Scripture or the Creed repeated in the simplest, most direct language while the casual dabbler in religion will be irritated at a second hearing of even the most sublime mysteries of the faith. Thus good sermons are boring, but only *secundum quid*.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, a sermon may be boring and bad. It will be bad, not because it repeats the Gospel message in familiar language but because the preacher belies his message by his manner. If it convinces the congregation that he himself is bored with what he repeats, his manner of teaching will deprive even devout hearers of that contact with Scripture and Tradition which alone can make their repetition of interest and profit. He commits the further fault of making religious truths seem irrelevant, as Rose Macaulay noted in London at the beginning of the Second World War:

I went in for 20 minutes yesterday to the R.C. church near here, where there

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Fulton Oursler, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (New York: Doubleday, 1949).

<sup>4</sup> Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park*, ch. 34. May I note that Henry Crawford’s being the speaker of these words somewhat weakens their effect?

<sup>5</sup> In “On the Contrary” Saint Thomas cites an authoritative statement from Scripture or Tradition to establish his position, in this case that sermons are always boring.

<sup>6</sup> Mtt 23.4.

<sup>7</sup> Flannery O’Connor, *Letters: The Habit of Being*, edited by Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1979), p. 348.

<sup>8</sup> That this “On the Contrary” is longer than most indicates Saint Thomas’s strong conviction on the matter.

<sup>9</sup> The Latin term commonly used for this section of the article is *corpus*, i.e., “body.” I have translated it as “Argumentation” because in the *corpus* Thomas demonstrates his position by reason.

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<sup>10</sup> *Repetitio mater taedii*.

<sup>11</sup> Jerome, *Comm. in epistolam ad Galatas*, 6.10.

<sup>12</sup> I.e., “in a way” or “from one point of view.”

was a sermon going on. It was all about how the Supreme Being had created various orders of Angels, good and bad. I cannot think why we have endured all these centuries all this lifeless nonsense. I thought as I sat there, what if the congregation all rose up and mobbed the preacher, and beat him up, and the women scratched his face and the men kicked him, saying, "We want something to the purpose, not angels & devils: give us bread, not stones." Why don't they?<sup>13</sup>

In theory, entertaining sermons could be either good or bad, and if good they could be so in two ways. The first would occur when a sermon provided some fresh insight into the infinitely rich text of Scripture, as we find in the sermons of Saint Augustine, Bishop Bossuet and John Henry Newman. Jane Austen describes such men: "The preacher who can touch and affect a heterogeneous mass of hearers on subjects limited and long worn threadbare in all common hands; who can say anything new or striking, anything that rouses the attention without offending the taste or wearing out the feeling of his hearers, is a man whom one could not (in his public capacity) honour enough."<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, there are no such sermons today because great preaching ceased with the disappearance of high rhetoric.

There is a second way in which a sermon could be both entertaining and good: if the personality of the priest were to disappear into his role of purveyor of the Gospel. This approach to liturgy would emphasize that Jesus Christ himself is the agent in the sacred action. Hence even the most awkward

presentation of the truths of faith would still engross his hearers so that his preaching could be called "entertaining" in an extended sense of the term. That there are no such preachers now is confirmed by Thomas Day's observation, "Today, 'the priest' is almost gone. He has been replaced by Mr. Nice Guy. . . . 'The priest' develops a stage character. A star is born."<sup>15</sup>

It follows from the above that entertaining sermons will always be bad, and they are so in two ways. In the first sort, the preacher entertains his congregation by propounding novelty from the pulpit. At best his ideas will be idiosyncratic and irrelevant; at worst they will be heretical. And in both cases the priest will have broken his promise to preach, as the bishop's proxy, the Catholic faith, which the faithful have assembled to hear, as is their right. Entertaining sermons will be bad in a second way when the priest draws attention to himself rather than his message, as was described above in the quotation from Thomas Day.

#### *Replies to the Objections*

*To the first*, I say that the sermon of a priest who faithfully conveys the message of Jesus Christ without eloquence will always be of interest to the faithful and so boring only to those without faith. *To the second*, I say that by the grace of ordination the Holy Spirit first assures the validity of the sacramental action. The effect of grace, therefore, is not to make a naturally inept speaker eloquent but to confirm his allegiance to the Gospel. As we have already stated, "Grace does not remove nature but perfects it."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, no eloquence is necessary

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<sup>13</sup> Rose Macauley, *Letters to a Sister* (New York: Atheneum, 1953), p. 95.

<sup>14</sup> Austen, ch. 34.

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<sup>15</sup> Thomas Day, *Why Catholic Can't Sing* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), p. 133.

<sup>16</sup> *Summa* I.1.8.ad 2.

when truth is conveyed, as the Apostle says: "I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."<sup>17</sup>

*To the third*, I say that all sermons are good insofar as they proclaim the Gospel. Therefore, as was stated in "*To the second*," rhetoric is not necessary for good preaching.

*To the fourth*, I say that the riches of Scripture are revealed not only in the words of the sermon but also to the un-

derstanding heart. Hence, whenever biblical truth is presented the well-disposed listener will uncover something new and wonderful, like the man in the Gospel who found a treasure hidden in a field.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, fidelity, not eloquence, is the primary quality of the preacher of the Gospel, as has been noted above.

*To the fifth*, I say that this objection merely states that every preacher worthy of the name will use and even exceed his natural gifts in his high service, not that all will be extraordinarily eloquent.

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<sup>17</sup> I Cor 2.2-3.

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<sup>18</sup> Mtt 13.44.