

extraordinarily clear-sighted. An essay on angels for the Blackfriars edition of St Thomas's *Summa Theologiae* might have been for others an academic exercise; for him it was an exhausting wrestle with fundamental problems of good and evil, the mysteries of choice, the meaning of damnation. His Dominican vocation, followed with unflinching integrity, was never for him an easy one, precisely because it involved this unending intellectual encounter with his own nature and that of God. It was the wisdom, the depth and the humanity which he drew from that wrestling which informed his priesthood, and which made him, to those who knew him, unforgettable.

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## A Sermon

### Robert Ombres OP

*Preached at Blackfriars, Cambridge, on Sunday, 9 February, three days after Kenelm Foster's death, to a congregation that knew him well. The readings for that Sunday were: Isaiah 6:1–8 (the call of Isaiah); 1 Corinthians 15:1–11 (Paul's testimony of Christ's death 'for our sins' and resurrection); and Luke 5:1–11 (the call of the first disciples).*

Kenelm would have been delighted at finding this Pauline reading, if he had been preaching today. He loved St Paul. He was his clear-favourite New Testament writer. Paul, who often spoke in the first person. Paul, who was like a boxer, and not in vain. Paul, who was always arguing, full of polemic and self-polemic. Paul, who could chart in his experience, even on his own body, the workings of grace, of grappling with the Saviour. Paul, who wrestled with meaning. We can even imagine Paul to be like his thought—tough, full of wiry strength. Kenelm had been a boxer at Downside and always kept some of the instincts and reactions of a boxer. Kenelm, who always asked awkward questions, even as a Dominican student; so he was banished to a parish as a kind of punishment, he who was so obviously clever. (But questions were not

encouraged by all in the Study House in those days.) Kenelm on his death-bed, listening to a fellow-friar reading to him Hopkins's poems—but not just listening, arguing about the meaning; getting impatient. Tenacious, dogged in style. You will never understand Kenelm properly unless you read some of his writings. There you will see that he was very analytic, always making distinctions, teasing things out. A favourite line of his was to say that Thomas never spoke without making distinctions. You remember him talking, preaching—how often he said something and immediately added, 'I mean' or 'in the sense that'. But if Paul was a master it was because he had first been mastered by the power and love of God. And in Luke the apostles are fishers of men because they have themselves already been caught by Christ. So with Kenelm.

The Gospel text goes on: 'do not be afraid'. And Kenelm did have his fears, especially of dying. He said so memorably in one of his last sermons. That was part of his attractiveness for others. His great honesty and awareness of the distance between us and the holiness of God. What the first reading talks about; angels and the Temple. A distance not just because we are sinners and God isn't but because we are creatures, finite and fragile, and God isn't. Kenelm always kept a sense of the shock of Christianity for the human mind and senses. As Hopkins said, the mind has cliffs and only he who hasn't hung there will hold them cheap. Kenelm hung there for over fifty years and helped others. Kenelm knew grace to be a gift and never forgot that gifts need not be given. Kenelm never presumed. That's why he never gave pat answers.

Isaiah keeps that sense of human inadequacy but adds the presence of angels, the foreshadowing of the divine. The world of the spirit. For this, too, Kenelm had a very keen awareness. The divine as foreshadowed in beauty, poetry, the artistic, the life of the spirit. The angels. Kenelm knew and loved the life of the senses alright—think of his Distributist background, him digging potatoes or wiping clean the refectory tables every night. He was not disincarnate, particularly about beauty, human beauty. Kenelm's love of precision, how he would tug and pull and tease and chew at meaning, wasn't just a scholar's habit. It was a believer's wish not to lose a single fragment of God's creative goodness showered on the world. Kenelm was interested in the angels partly because they help us to understand ourselves. Because they are different from us. As with angels so with the cat. And you know how fond Kenelm was of our cat. He thought she was very stupid but very pretty. Cat and angels interested him—and there is a connection. You see, Kenelm was interested in differences, in teasing things out lest we don't appreciate each aspect of God's creativity. The cat as animal, the angels as spirits. And we as a kind of bridge being.

So Kenelm probed and kept a sense of the distance. He was terribly

honest. He never forgot the distance between us and God. He never forgot especially the fearful paradox of Hell, which, as Dante said, had written over it 'The primal LOVE made me'. It was a fearful paradox because of that love. I think one of the things Kenelm was most proud of, what cost him most, took him to the limits of his intelligence, was a piece he wrote on Satan at the back of his edition of St Thomas on the angels. How could an angel so perfect, so close to God, want to sin? I suppose we are attracted to certain things or people because they help us to see ourselves to some extent. Kenelm's last book was on Petrarch, and he soon spotted in Petrarch the habit of self-disclosure and the convergence of ambiguities. We who lived with Kenelm every day saw the self-disclosure and the ambiguities in him too; as we see them in each other. But we are not here solely to praise Kenelm and he would not have wanted that. On hearing he was going into hospital, he immediately asked for his breviary, Hopkins's poems and Dante's *Purgatorio*. We here are to pray for Kenelm because he still needs us.

How do I remember him best? As every inch a friar, a Dominican. And what it cost him to keep his vows for fifty years. What sacrifices for that superb mind of his having to crash continually against God's truth that cannot be understood fully. And what it cost him in terms of chastity, he who was so aware of beauty. His last book is dedicated to a woman. In Isaiah we read, 'Here I am, send me.' And Kenelm could always be sent. He was always keen to say Mass, preach, hear confessions. He never took it lightly. He would agonise over any sermon, even a three minute one in the morning for a sleepy congregation. (Well, it could be twelve rather than three minutes with him.) He insisted on preaching last Sunday night even though three people came to my room during the Mass to say how concerned they were. He was like that. At 5 o'clock on Monday afternoon, as he was in the ambulance, his favourite pupil, now professor, read out the lecture on Dante that Kenelm was to have given then. In the ambulance Kenelm characteristically started to explain about Dante and Aquinas to the ambulance man. Kenelm, then, who was always reading or writing or answering letters and not sleeping much at night, reminds me of St Thomas—his beloved Thomas's last words or so as he lay dying. When the sacrament of Christ was brought, Thomas said: 'For your sake I have studied and toiled and kept vigil. I have preached you and taught you. Never consciously have I said a word against you'.