

ably such a life of contemplation lived in the world. To develop this habit of recollection in the midst of the occupations and noise of everyday life would be one of the principal tasks of the formation given. Among other subjects for training would be the right use of corporal penance, the question of relaxation, indispensable for a balanced contemplative life, and the relations to others, the handling of which will require much tact so that sufficient time and solitude for prayer might be secured without offending against charity. As on all these points and many others the needs of the individual differ greatly according to the special circumstances of each one's life (in contrast to the uniform life of a Community), much care and psychological insight will be required on the part of those responsible for the training.

But the labour spent on this training of 'contemplatives in the world' would be well worth while. For our paganised contemporaries have practically no means of coming into touch with contemplatives in monasteries, and so lose all the benefit of personal contact with just the type of person they most need. But to have genuine contemplatives, distinguished in nothing by their external appearance, and hence approached without prejudice, in every walk of life—this would really be a leaven that might be expected to leaven large lumps of indifference and even hostility.

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## PROLOGUE

TO THE

COMMENTARY ON ST JOHN'S GOSPEL

BY

ST THOMAS AQUINAS<sup>1</sup>

*I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and elevated: all the earth was full of his glory: and his train filled the temple. (Isaias 6, 1-3.)*



THESE are the words of a contemplative and we may almost put them into the mouth of John the Evangelist as a perfect description of the purpose of this gospel. For as St Augustine says: 'While the other Evangelists tell us about the active life, John in his gospel raises our minds to the contemplative life'.

In the words of our text John's contemplation is described in three

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by Bernard Delany, O.P.

ways according to John's threefold manner of contemplating Jesus. He tells of things that are

1. *lofty and elevated* (i.e. sublime, glorious and heavenly)
2. *full* (i.e. spacious and abounding in goodness and glory)
3. *perfect*.

1. The lofty things are described in the words, *I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and elevated*;

2. The full and abounding things are suggested by the words, *all the earth was full of his glory*;

3. And the perfect things in the words, *and his train* (i.e., all the things that are under him) *filled the temple*.

Concerning the first we must bear in mind that the loftiness and sublimity of contemplation consist chiefly in the contemplation and knowledge of God. *Lift up your eyes on high and see who hath created these things*. (Is. 40,26). The eyes of a contemplative are lifted up on high when he sees and contemplates the very Creator and Supreme Lord of all things. John's spiritual vision transcends created things, he sees high above the mountains, pierces the heavens, and reaches even beyond the angels to the very throne of the Maker and King of all things (as St Augustine says), and therefore his contemplation was clearly the highest and noblest of all. Hence could he say, *I saw the Lord*.

Now John says in his Gospel: *These things said Isaias when he saw his glory* (namely Christ's) *and spoke of him* (12, 41), therefore *the Lord sitting upon a throne high and elevated* is Christ. John, in his contemplation of the Incarnate Word, shows forth a fourfold loftiness or grandeur: (1) *of power* when he says: *I saw the Lord*; (2) *of eternity*, when he says, *sitting*; (3) *of dignity* or nobility of nature, when he says, *upon a high throne*; (4) *of incomprehensible truth*, when he says, *and elevated*. By these four ways the ancient philosophers arrived at the knowledge of God.

1. Some by God's *power* came to know him, and this is the most efficacious way. For we see things in nature acting with an intelligent purpose and achieving definite useful ends, and since these things have no intellect, they could not act in so enlightened a way unless they were moved and guided by some directing mind. Hence it is that the very movement of natural things according to a plan and towards a definite end points to something higher which wisely directs and governs all nature. Therefore, since the whole course of nature is guided by something outside itself and works harmoniously towards an end, we are forced to admit the existence of some higher directing

Mind. The Lord who governs is God and this governing power is shown to be the Word of God when he says, *the Lord*, wherefore in the Psalm it is said: *Thou rulest the power of the sea: and appeasest the motion of the waves thereof* (Ps. 88, 10); as much as to say: thou art the Lord and thou rulest all the universe. John shows that he has this knowledge of the Word when he says, *He came unto his own* (John 1, 2), i.e. into the world, because all the world is God's very own.

2. Others came to the knowledge of God by means of his *eternity*. They saw that everything in nature is changeable and that the more noble a thing is, the less it has of changeability, for instance the inferior bodies are changeable both in substance and according to place, the heavenly bodies which are nobler are unchangeable in their substance and only move according to place. Hence we can gather from this that the first and supreme principle and the noblest of all things must be immovable and eternal. And this eternity is hinted at by the prophet when he says, *sitting*, that is to say devoid of all movement, overlooking all things in his changeless eternity, *Thy throne O God is for ever and ever* (Ps. 44, 7), *Jesus Christ, yesterday, today and the same for ever* (Hebr. 13, 8). John shows forth this eternity when he says: *In the beginning was the Word*.

3. Some again arrived at the knowledge of God from the dignity of God himself, and these were the Platonists. For they considered that whatever is by participation is reduced to that which is essentially so. For instance all fiery (or burning things) (which are fiery by participation) are reduced to fire which is fiery by its very essence. Since therefore all things that *are*, participate *being*, and are beings by participation, it follows that there must be *something* at the topmost summit of all things which is BEING by its very essence, i.e. Something whose ESSENCE IS ITS EXISTENCE and this we call GOD, who is the most sufficient, the most worthy and most perfect cause of all being; from whom, all things that are, participate their being. The dignity of this Supreme Being is shown in the words, *upon a high throne*, which, according to Denis, refer to the divine nature. *The Lord is high above all nations* (Ps. 112, 4). John shows forth this dignity when he says: *And the Word was God* (1, 1).

4. Others again came unto the knowledge of God by means of the *incomprehensibility of his truth*. For all truth which our intellect can grasp is finite, because according to St Augustine, 'everything that is known is limited by the understanding of the knower', and if it is limited, it is determined and particularised, and therefore it is necessary that the first and supreme truth (which is above every

intellect) should be incomprehensible and infinite: and this is God; wherefore in the psalm (8, 2) it is said: *Thy magnificence is elevated above the heavens*, i.e. above every created mind, whether of men or angels. And the Apostle gives the reason for this when he says: *He dwelleth in light inaccessible* (1 Tim. 6, 16). The incomprehensibility of this truth is shown by the word, *elevated*, i.e. above the knowledge of any created intellect. John describes this incomprehensibility when he says: *No man hath seen God at any time* (1, 18). Thus, therefore, John's contemplation (of which he treats in his Gospel) was lofty and sublime as regards the power, the eternity, the dignity and the incomprehensibility of the WORD.

But his contemplation was also *full*. Contemplation is said to be full when the contemplative can see in a given cause all the effects of that cause, that is to say, when he knows not only the essence of the cause, but also the dynamic power or force that works within the cause impelling it to diffuse and spread itself abroad into a multitude of activities. Of this diffusion it is said in Ecclesiasticus (24, 35): *Who filleth up wisdom as the Phison and as the Tigris in the days of the new fruits*, and in the psalm (64, 10) : *The river of God is filled with water*. The divine Wisdom has no limit to the height of its knowledge of all things, *Thy wisdom with thee which knoweth thy works which then also was present when thou madest the world* (Wisd. 9, 9). John the Evangelist was raised up in contemplation of the nature of the divine Word when he said, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God*, and immediately, in order to show the power of the Word to diffuse itself in all things, he says, *All things were made through him*. Thus was his contemplation full. He was like the Prophet Isaias who, after saying: *I saw the Lord sitting*, adds concerning the power of God, *all the earth was full of his glory*, that is to say, all the fullness of things and the splendour of the universe are from the glory and power of God through whom all things are made and in whose Light are enlightened all men coming into this world. *The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof*. (Psalm 23).

His contemplation was also *perfect*. Contemplation is said to be perfect when the contemplative is drawn up and lifted aloft to the height of that which he contemplates. For if he should remain down below, no matter how sublime and high are the things he contemplates, his contemplation is not perfect. In order that it be perfect he must mount up and, as it were, clutch the very end of the thing contemplated, dwelling in and assenting to the contemplated truth with a prompt will and a ready mind. *Knowest thou the great paths of the clouds* (i.e. the contemplations of preachers) *and the perfect*

*knowledges?* (Job 37, 16) (i.e. perfect in so far as by mind and heart they cleave to and assent to the supreme truth). John not only taught how Christ Jesus, the Word of God, is God high and elevated above all things, and how all things were made by him, but also how through him we are all made holy, cleaving to him by means of the grace he showers upon us; therefore he says, *Of his fullness we have all received, grace for grace* (1, 16). Thus was his contemplation perfect and this perfection is shown in the words, *And his train* (i.e. all those things that were under him) *filled the temple*, for as it is said (in 1 Cor. 11, 3), *the head of Christ is God*. The things that are under Christ are the sacraments of his humanity by means of which the faithful are filled with the fullness of grace. Thus *his train* (i.e. the things that are under him) *filled the temple* (i.e. the faithful who are the holy temple of God, as it is said in 1 Cor. 3, 16, inasmuch as through the sacraments of his humanity Christ's faithful all receive of the fullness of his grace).

John's contemplation then was full, lofty and perfect. It must be noted that the different sciences in different ways divide up among them these three modes of contemplation. Moral Science has the *perfection* of contemplation because it concerns the ultimate End; natural science, which considers those things that come forth from God, has the fullness of contemplation; and among the physical sciences the *height* of contemplation is reached by metaphysical science. But John's Gospel contains wholly and altogether what these aforesaid sciences have separately, and therefore it is most perfect.

Thus do we gather up the material of this Gospel. While the other Evangelists treat chiefly of the mysteries of Christ's humanity, John above all penetrates into his divinity, without however putting aside the mysteries of his humanity. He does this because, after the other Evangelists had written their Gospels, there arose heresies concerning Christ's divinity, declaring that he was merely a man, as Ebion and Cerinthus falsely taught. Hence John the Evangelist who had absorbed the truth of the divinity of the Word when he reclined on the breast of our Lord, moved by the entreaties of the faithful, wrote this Gospel in which he taught the doctrine of Christ's divinity and refuted all heresies.

The order and arrangement of this Gospel are shown in the words of our text. He tells us in the first part of *the Lord sitting upon a throne high and elevated* when he says, *In the beginning was the Word*; secondly he shows us how *all the earth was full of his glory*, when he says, *All things were made through him* (1, 3); and thirdly he shows how his train (all things that were under him) *filled*

the temple when he says, *The Word was made flesh* (1, 14). The aim of this Gospel is that the faithful should become the temple of God and be filled with God's glory; wherefore John himself says, *These things are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God* (20, 31); hence the theme of this Gospel is the knowledge of the divinity of the Word.

What manner of man was the author of this Gospel is shown with regard to (1) his name, (2) his virtue, (3) his form and (4) his privilege.

(1) John was the name of the author of this Gospel; and John is interpreted, *In whom grace dwells*, because none can see the secrets of the divinity save those who have the grace of God, wherefore it is said (in 1 Cor. 2, 11), *The things that are of God no man knoweth but the Spirit of God*.

(2) On account of his virtue John saw the Lord sitting on a throne because he was a virgin. *Blessed are the clean of heart for they shall see God* (Matt. 5, 8).

(3) As to his form John is always symbolised by an eagle. The other three Evangelists, being chiefly occupied with the things Christ did in his human nature, are depicted as animals which walk upon the earth, namely a man, a calf and a lion. But John is the eagle that flies high above the clouds of human infirmity and beholds with the divinely inspired eyes of his heart the clear light of unchangeable truth, and directing his flight to the very Godhead of our Lord Jesus Christ, he strives to communicate that Godhead to us in so far as the limits of faith will allow. Of this flight of John it is said: *Will the eagle mount up at thy command?* (Job 39, 27) and again, *His eyes behold afar off* (Job 39, 29), because it is with the eye of his mind that he beholds the very Word of God in the bosom of the Father.

(4) As to privilege, John was singled out from among all the apostles to be the best beloved friend of Christ. As he himself says (John 21, 20), without mentioning his own name, he is *that disciple whom Jesus loved*. Secrets are revealed to friends, as we read (in John 15, 15), *I have called you friends because all things whatsoever I have heard of my Father I have made known to you*. To his specially beloved disciple he trusted special secrets. Wherefore we read (in Job 36, 32-3), *In his hands he hideth the light . . . he showeth his friend concerning it, that it may be his possession*. To John it was given to penetrate more deeply and more excellently into the light of the Incarnate Word, of which Light John himself says: *That was the true light which enlighteneth every man that cometh into this world* (1, 9).