

Let us pray.

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts do honour and glory to you, O God. Amen

The term “nominative determinism” was first coined by a contributor to the magazine *New Scientist* in 1994, and it refers to the phenomenon whereby people’s occupations or dominant character traits seem to have been dictated by the names they bear. Mr Sparrowhawk the pest-controller, lots of judges called Judge and clergymen called Priestly --- there are thousands of examples, none of which rises above the mildly amusing to the level of the noteworthy, except, apparently, to the readers of *New Scientist*, who continue to send them in even though its editors have repeatedly told them to stop.

There are, of course, millions of people, like me, called Thomas, and we can’t all be guilty of the shameful literal-minded scepticism with which the Apostle Thomas has been branded in the popular imagination because of the passage from John’s gospel we heard this morning. When I was a child the term “Doubting Thomas” was perhaps more current than it is now, but also used rather sloppily to mean “awkward squad”, or “wet blanket” or “smart

Alec”, as well as “untrusting”. Maybe I was all of those things; or maybe the regular jibe from teachers who thought themselves witty helped to make me sceptical of the smug atheism that pervaded the 1970s of my adolescence. Still, the case for the aptness of my surname remains tenuous.

For a much better example, though, we have only to go back eight centuries, to perhaps the greatest Christian philosopher of them all, Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican friar who studied the early fathers of the church who had adapted the philosophy of Plato to their faith a thousand years, give or take, before him, but was also in thrall to Aristotle, that other intellectual giant of classical Greece, who had been recently rediscovered and restored to western scholarship.

We might notice that in our second reading this morning Peter uses two kinds of argument; the force of the eye-witness account, from himself and the other apostles, and the argument from authority, in his invocation of King David. Aquinas doesn’t do this, he does not cite scripture to back up his argument. Rather he constructs an argument that leads to a water-tight logical conclusion that itself proves the truth of scripture, and he clearly loves doing it. In 13th

Century Europe you would have had to look under an awful lot of stones before you found an atheist. The existence of God was held to be self-evident through creation and scripture; and yet Aquinas still felt it necessary to come up with, not one, but five logical proofs for the existence of God. One of these basically boils down to this; everything that moves is moved by something else; but for the cosmos to get started in the first place, there must have been a mover that was itself not moved. That is God the unmoved mover, and I'm going to come back to that one in just a little while.

So we can see a certain aptness in the name of Thomas Aquinas, just in the sparing account of the apostle given to us by John, who, although his loyalty has already been established after the raising of Lazarus, sets him up as the literal-minded smart Alec or awkward squad in Chapter 14 verse 5, when he says to Jesus "Lord, we don't know where you're going, so how can we know the way?" And in Chapter 20, the eye-witness account of his friends isn't good enough for him, and he only believes when the risen Christ again appears, and invites him to touch his wounds and remove all doubt. But then we see another dimension to this "doubting Thomas". Yes, he

has his proof of the Resurrection; but in his exclamation of “My Lord and my God!” he has suddenly grasped the mind-blowing cosmic truth of what the Resurrection means, and that is a leap of faith that leaves logic standing. For Aquinas also maintained that there were two ways of arriving at the truth; one by logical inquiry, the other through divine revelation, and in his thumb-nail sketch of the apostle Thomas, John shows us a man who has taken both.

In his line-by-line commentary on St John’s Gospel, Aquinas also pays some attention to the aptness of the name Thomas for the apostle. Like all the gospels, and Acts, John was written in the colloquial Greek that had become the common language of the Roman Empire, and we’re told that Thomas was called Didymos, which means “the twin”. This was probably because Thomas also meant “Twin”, in Syriac and Aramaic, and so Didymos was just his real name translated into Greek as a nickname among Greek speakers. But Aquinas puts a different spin on it, using the idea of duality or ambivalence, because Didymos could also mean an abyss (a great gaping gulf with two sides), and one who doubts accepts a

proposition while fearing that the opposite might be the case. Well, that's about as Greek as you can get, this conjunction of two sides, this "on the one hand and on the other" - it's a constant feature of classical Greek literature, oratory and philosophy -, so let's chase it a bit further.

Because it is John who introduces Greek thought into the Christian message, and he does it right up front, at the start of his gospel. "In the beginning was the Word", the logos, cosmic reason, the spoken thought of God. When you give voice to a thought, that thought becomes concrete and real, no longer an abstraction, but an agent in time and space. That's one of the reasons we are not content just to believe, but recite what we believe in the creed, to speak the thought and get it out there, to spread The Word, the tool of argument, the active expression of the latent and innate. So God speaks, and begins the proof of Creation. And in those opening lines, John begins the long relationship between Christian faith and rational inquiry that led to Christianity becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire, and in the time of Aquinas the unquestioned and universal faith of western civilisation and the basis of all its

scholarship. Later, of course, that strain of rational inquiry would lose touch with its roots, and turn against the faith that fostered it; though I can't help thinking that a debate between Aquinas and that aggressive atheist Richard Dawkins would look like a matador facing a tin of corned beef.

But, at the same time and in the same words with which John introduces our faith to Greek philosophy, he also gives us the beginning of Christian mysticism, the spiritual communion with God through His revelation. And the conflict between cosmic reason on the one hand and spiritual revelation on the other is reconciled in his brief treatment of the Apostle Thomas, called Didymos, the twin.

In John 20 the passing detail, which the evangelist repeats, that the doors were locked, is hugely important when the apostles are being shown the truth of Christ's physical resurrection, wounds and all. For this is not a ghost, this is not an apparition, this is not a hologram, this is not some mist that can pass through a crack and re-form into the appearance of a human body; this is Jesus himself suddenly standing there among his disciples and saying "Peace be with you." The point is that when

the Word is made flesh, the conceptual becomes the physical, the physical becomes the transendant, and cosmic reason becomes subjective. So you can't tell John that this or that event he witnessed or describes is physically impossible, because Jesus is a walking rule-book, and the time and space around him bend and stretch to his will. Water *can* suddenly turn into wine, Lazarus *can* walk from his tomb four days after he died, and have his very real bandages unwound and removed by the hands of his family; five loaves and two fish *can* feed five thousand men; and Jesus *can* appear in a locked room without walking through the walls to get there. He *can* be physically there, and greet his friends, and commission their ministry, without having crossed the space from somewhere else, because he *is* that unmoved mover posited by Aquinas.

Well, so much for logical proof. Let us just pray that when we are huddled together in a room with the doors locked against our enemies, Christ will appear among *us*, and say "Peace be with you".

Two years ago today, I was in a pretty little village in Wiltshire in England, attending the funeral of my dear

friend of more than 30 years, Bertie Watts. From his name you might picture him as a big, bluff Englishman in a tweed jacket, with a ruddy complexion and a carrying voice, and you'd be right. He was all of this, and a loyal and generous friend and a devoted husband, and four years my junior. He lived a life full of colour and anecdote, and he had the wit and good taste to pass on Easter Sunday, when we shout our defiance and repudiation of the Pit, and was buried on this St George's Day, attended as it were by England's patron saint, so that his very passing became another good story in the course of a continuing narrative. The man had style.

His laughter still rings in my head, his arm still grips my shoulders. And I sometimes wonder why people struggle with the idea of resurrection, when it can be so very hard to believe in death.

Amen