

## EPIPHANY I

January 13, 2008

University of King's College Chapel, at Mass

Sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them and asking them questions. And all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and his answers. (St Luke 2:46-7)

Regrettably this sermon must begin with an act of impiety. I am forced to tell you that the stained glass window over the altar, the window that will form your memories of this place, has it wrong! It purports to represent the central scene in today's Gospel, but, as you have just heard it read, you know that, in it, Jesus does not stand, he sits. Nor is this the sitting of a teacher—as in the Sermon on the Mount which begins: “and when he was set...he opened his mouth and taught them” (Matthew 5.1-2). There are late medieval depictions of today's Gospel which have the right posture for the youth in the Temple, but the wrong pose, so to speak: in them Jesus has become a university professor, enthroned in his official *cathedra* above his audience, teaching—professors and bishops once sat to teach, a practice the popes continue. Such representations seem to be on the way to modern ones like this in our window where Jesus is not a hearer, asking and answering questions, but a preacher, lecturer, teacher. However, the earlier medievals got the Gospel right; in the temple, the twelve-year-old Jesus is a student, sitting in the midst, as the text is clear, of “the doctors,” that is, the teachers. The Word of God is first a disciple so as also to be a master, according to St John, Jesus, the teacher, testified: “I have given unto them the words you gave me.” (John 18:8). It is unfortunate that those who commissioned our window—presumably professors!—made it depict a teacher rather than a student, especially as today's Gospel links subjection and wisdom. It tells us that Jesus heard, learned, was subject, and, in consequence, in the epistle, we are urged to service and humility—not to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think—so that we might be transformed by the renewing of our minds.

The renewal is absolutely radical, a transformation: no rivalry between teacher and student is really to the point. In fact, when we consider what learning is we must conclude that none of us can really teach each another anything. Jesus reiterated the words of the prophet Isaiah, declaring, as John's Gospel has it: “They shall all be taught by God.” (John 6:45, Isaiah 54:13) To understand this, we must think deeply about what learning is. At stake here is not a sequence, in fact, sequence will be overthrown, nor a hierarchy; *Magisterium*, teaching, ultimately surpasses human mediation, and thus hierarchy. To understand how we are all taught by God, if we were to understand this as St Augustine and the great tradition understood it, we must consider how it can be, that, ultimately, no human teaches any other. By way of his dialogue in the Temple, the boy Jesus, sitting, hearing the doctors, asking them questions, and answering theirs', teaches us what learning is.

The news that St Augustine had a long unmarried “relationship”—as such affairs are now called—and that he separated from his socially inferior companion out of base ambition

(*Confessions* 6.13.23-6.15.25) will shock none of you. Perhaps, however, you will have forgotten the good side of this misdeed: the union bore a well-loved son named, significantly, Adeodatus, "Given by God." At fifteen the boy joined his father in a community at Cassiciacum. There, with a like-minded group, surprising to present day conceptions of religion, Augustine and his son prepared for baptism by philosophical study. Crucially, these studies took the form of dialogues, some of which Augustine made public. Soon after their common baptism, Adeodatus died. As a memorial to him, Augustine published *The Teacher, De Magistro*, of which he tells us in his *Confessions*:

There Adeodatus is in dialogue with me. He was responsible for all the ideas attributed to him as we talked together. He was only 16 when it took place, and I learned many other even more remarkable things than this from him. His intelligence left me astonished. Who, but you God, could be the Maker of such marvels? (*Confessions* 9.6.14)

In the dialogue, by what we would take to be a long and surprising route—the question of the relation between signs and realities—Augustine and Adeodatus uncover the truth of Matthew 23:10 "there is one teacher, *unus magister*, Christ." God, "the teacher who teaches from within" (*De Magistro*, cap. 12) is the only teacher who enables understanding. Augustine mocks the alternative: "What foolish curiosity could ever prompt a man to send his child to school in order to have him learn what the teacher thinks?!" (*De Magistro* 14)

Both in the *De Magistro*, and in today's Gospel, we have a youth in dialogue with seniors who express astonishment at his understanding and answers. In setting his memorial dialogue with his son before us, Augustine certainly intends to have us recall, and also to explain, our Gospel, but he also has in mind and is re-enacting a Platonic dialogue, the *Meno*. In it, Socrates showed that no human teaches another virtue. As a result of the discussion, Socrates concludes not only that the virtuous have virtue "by divine dispensation," (100b7), but also—significantly for the *De Magistro*—that we cannot know how we get virtue until we discover what it is in itself. We cannot know the how, until we know the what; we must have the very idea of it, we must genuinely think it. At the centre of the *Meno* is the famous conversation, which will echo throughout the Christian ages, where Socrates asks questions of an uneducated slave boy and gets him to produce mathematical proofs. The slave's astonishing answers convince the witnesses that he has been taught from within, that neither Socrates, nor another human is responsible for his understanding; they are convinced, as Socrates concludes, that his teacher is divine.

Before Augustine shows us by way of Plato and Adeodatus, how we learn and how Christ is our teacher, we must deal with a problem, a problem for those who believe what the Church teaches about Christ, the Son of God, the problem of Epiphany. The Church tells this story in the first Sunday of this season because the astonishing answers of the boy in the temple, engaged with the greatest professors of Israel, the doctors of the law, manifest hidden divinity. The problem is that the doctrine of the Church seems to deprive the story of usefulness for us.

Jesus knows, does he not, because he is the eternal *Logos*, the Mind of God? He has this marvellous knowledge because he has a nature which is not ours. In fact, however, Christian doctrine on the vexed and complex question of “the knowledge of Christ” comes to a simple formula: as God, Jesus Christ knows all things; as a human, he must learn, indeed, experience, everything (see Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 3.9.4, 3.12.1-3, & 3.15.10). This throws us back to the slave boy in the *Meno* and his successors in the tradition who include (only to begin the list) Moses, according to the account of Philo Judaeus (*De Vita Mosis* 1.5.21&22), Jesus in the temple, according to today’s Gospel, and Adeodatus at Cassiciacum doing philosophy with his father. Like Augustine, with Plato in mind, let us return to the dialogue between father and son in *On the Teacher*.

The aim of the questioning ultimately is, and can only be, mutual education, because what both seek is to get from signs to realities, from the exterior to the interior. They desire to think the things themselves. The mutual questioning is not to find out whether you read it—although that may be a preliminary, and Adeodatus had read Cicero, the poets, and the Scriptures—it is not to find out whether you did your homework. Questioning prods thinking, which no one else can do for you. Do we have anything here? Do you have it in your mind? Do we have it right? Has the truth dawned in you and on us? The questioner cannot think it for you. Everything depends on this. He can only think it with you. When both think the same, there is joy, first in the thing itself, and then in the common experience, the joy of communion, and miracle of miracles, of communication. This doctrine opposes every kind of nominalism: ancient, medieval, and postmodern. If there are only signs, and if they signify nothing except each other, then there can be no radical questioning. The professor is only asking “Can you manipulate the signs according to the current convention?” and there is no place of communion. There is another question: if realities can come to be in our minds, what are they? and from whence do they come, these thoughts of our hearts? The truth is that these are the very names of God, his coming forth, the ideas by which he makes, and when we truly think, and thus think truly, we think the thoughts of God. Ultimately there is nothing else to think, no other place to think it except the mind of God. There is no way of thinking what is except by the communion between our mind and his, which God established by making each of us. Because he is our father, and we are his children (indeed, both males and females, we are his sons and heirs), only God can be our teacher.

By this road we come back to this place, this college, this chapel, our work and our prayer in them. Let me reiterate. Questioning prods thinking. No one can do it for you. The questioner is asking: “Is there really anything here? What is it? Do you have it in your mind? Do we have it right? Has the truth dawned in you, and thus on us thinking together?” This questioning is nothing else except the work of the university and, when it does its work radically enough—far too rarely I fear—the light of God is born in our hearts. Because this light is the light from above, everyone from Plato—and before—on down understood that truthfulness requires prayer. The perfect prayer for this work is that with which this Eucharist

began, the prayer which consummately unites God, knowledge and love. To conclude, we pray it again:

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts be open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid; Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee and worthily magnify thy holy Name, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

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