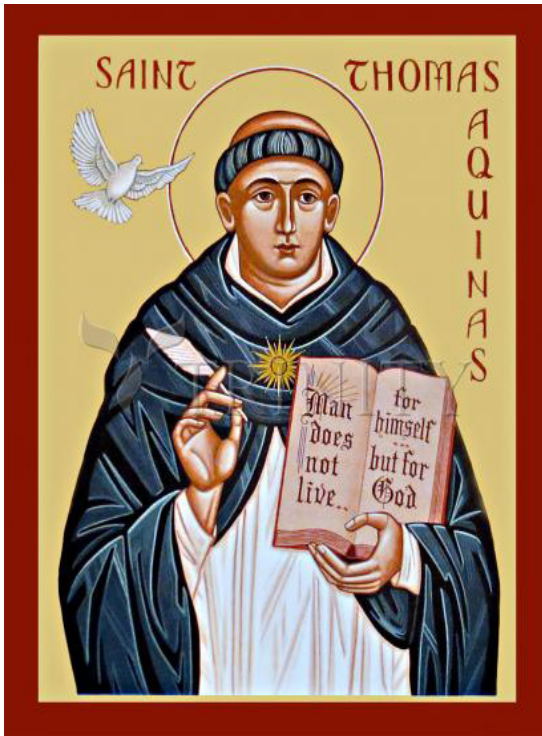


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# The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

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Good morning, St Anne's! As you might know, I became a priest yesterday. [pause] I want to say a big thank-you to the many of you who were able to attend the service; to Jennie, Garrett, Kristian, and Jay, the choir, altar guild, ushers, and many others, for all their hard work in planning and putting on such a lovely service and reception; and really to the entire parish—to all of you—for making yesterday such a special and memorable day for me and my family. My parents thankfully were able to travel from Chicago to be here, and so I just want to acknowledge them right now—Carol and Fred Kimmel.

Now yesterday was, among other things, a pretty scholarly affair: a number of students and faculty members came from Harvard and Boston College, and the preacher—the Rev. Dr. Francis X. Clooney, SJ—has held an endowed professorship at Harvard Divinity School for most of the past two decades. Perched in that catbird seat—or, some might say, ivory tower—Prof. Clooney has written highly erudite tomes on ancient Hindu philosophy, and specifically on the comparative theological insights that can emerge when reading Christian and Hindu texts in light of each other.

Now all of this can well seem rather arcane and abstruse, even irrelevant to life in 2023, and so there's nothing like a good Pauline tongue-lashing to pull us out of our heady reveries and snap us back into the real world. In today's epistle, Paul—with his typically acerbic tone—critiques our flawed human perceptions of what truly constitutes wisdom and foolishness, as he writes: "The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God." Paul then quotes from the ancient Hebrew prophet Isaiah who speaking in the voice of God Almighty promises to "destroy the wisdom of the wise" and to "thwart" the "discernment of the discerning." Paul then poses a series of rhetorical questions, "Where is the one who is wise?...Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" And then he drives home his main point: that while we humans are searching for wisdom on our own terms, "by human standards," according to what seems based on common-sense logic to be attractive and beneficial—things like (in Paul's words) earthly "power" and "noble birth"—while we humans naturally associate these earthly values with wisdom, and define wisdom on these earthly terms, true wisdom—Paul says—is found in what appears to be the utter "foolishness" of God, "foolishness" by human standards, because it is a wisdom totally at odds with our human value-systems and our human ways of thinking, a divine "foolish" wisdom seen most plainly

in God's own Son hanging on a cross, a wisdom of shameful, helpless, sacrificial death, the wisdom of Christ crucified.

Now why are we reading this sober passage today? I think this lectionary selection has everything to do with the fact that yesterday (January 28) was the Feast of St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the most learned, influential, intellectually brilliant, and highly lauded theologian-scholars in the history of the Church. Thomas Aquinas was an Italian Catholic priest (specifically a Dominican friar) who lived from 1225 to 1274. After studying as a young man at the University of Paris, Thomas went on to hold prestigious academic posts across Europe before being named theologian to the pope himself. Among his many scholarly accomplishments, Thomas is perhaps best known for his ingenious use of ancient Greek philosophy alongside Christian theology, a major achievement that showed that philosophers like Aristotle need not be rejected from Christian education but actually could be read alongside the Bible in one's pursuit of knowledge. This accomplishment is a major reason why the liberal arts curriculum even today draws upon ancient Greek thinkers like Plato and Aristotle. If it hadn't been for Thomas Aquinas, these household names may well have been eliminated from Christian—and even Western—education altogether, their works banned by a Church wary and uncertain of so-called “pagan” teachings. So because of his brilliant use of Greek philosophy and for his many ingenious writings, Thomas became only the fifth person in the history of Western Christianity to be awarded the title of “Doctor of the Church” by the pope himself.

Now in pairing the feast day of St. Thomas Aquinas—the uber-erudite theologian-scholar—with this morning's rather acute Pauline critique of the so-called “wisdom” touted by earthly “wise men,” the authors of our lectionary communicate a really important point. On the one hand, yes, our Church celebrates learned figures like Thomas Aquinas. Education and scholarship—even the rather arcane scholarship of medieval scholastic theologians—is a basic and cherished value. We in the Church—perhaps especially the Episcopal Church, and perhaps very especially this highly educated parish of St Anne's—we value scholarly, academic learning. There is much to be gained by heeding the intelligent, wise voices coming from our colleges and universities, from our laboratories and research institutes. Even from those sometimes ivory-tower perches such as the one at Harvard Divinity School from which Prof. Francis Clooney analyzes his ancient Hindu texts.

But while we rightly respect and learn from the wise voices of the Thomas Aquinases and Francis Clooneys around us, we in the Church also celebrate that this earthly erudition only scratches the surface of true wisdom. And we therefore heed the truly wise words of Paul

who reminds us that real wisdom, the deepest and most lasting kind of wisdom, the only intelligence that ultimately matters often has very little to do with academic scholarship, earthly learning, and our human ways of thinking, our human value-systems, our human logic. This true wisdom, Paul says, is so different from our normal conceptions of what is right, valuable, and wise that it can only be called “foolishness”: God’s “foolishness,” which is light-years wiser than the most intelligent human logic. And where do we see this brilliant “foolishness” most clearly played out before our eyes?, Paul asks. In the body of Jesus hanging on the cross.

Christ’s crucifixion literally makes no sense to human structures of logic, to human paradigms of wisdom. Being tortured to death shamefully in public seems naturally to us as something best avoided. Why would anyone submit to such a death? Anyone who would consent to such humiliation must be an utter fool, we reason. But in reality, in God’s true wisdom, it is this very humiliation, this loving self-sacrifice, this laying down of one’s self-interests, of one’s agenda, of one’s very life for the sake of others that, while seemingly foolish, is actually the cornerstone of brilliant, otherworldly wisdom.

This wisdom, God’s true wisdom, is the wisdom seen in putting the needs of the poor ahead of our own desires for ever more comfort and ever greater security. It’s the wisdom seen in someone like my father, who when my brother (Nick) and I were little, sacrificed immensely of his time and own interests in order to work three jobs (a full-time job for the Chicago Fire Department and two part-time jobs in emergency medicine and home-health care) so that Nick and I could attend good, private, religious schools—so that I could eventually graduate from the University of Chicago, so that I could eventually graduate from Harvard University, so that I could eventually become a priest in the Episcopal Church. And it’s the wisdom seen in someone like my mother, who when Nick and I were young, sacrificed her own time and interests to sit with us at the kitchen table teaching us from a very young age how to sound out words like “dog” and “cat,” teaching us step-by-step how to read so that we would be well-prepared for kindergarten, so that in the long run we would be well-prepared for college and be prepared for graduate school and, ultimately, for standing before you today as a preacher and a priest capable of reading and discerning the otherworldly wisdom of God’s holy Word.

And this divine foolish wisdom—the wisdom of self-sacrifice for the good of others, the wisdom of the cross—is also something even seen on occasion in those ivory-tower halls of Harvard Divinity School. While I’ve politely thrown under the bus this morning my highly respected advisor, yesterday’s preacher, Francis X. Clooney for his analyses of arcane ancient texts, I’d like to start wrapping up my sermon

this morning with a brief story about one of the most remarkable acts of humble service I have had the privilege of witnessing during my time at HDS. Out of all the knowledge and human wisdom poured into my brain over the last decade at Harvard, I believe it is the following act of simple kindness—an act rooted in the foolishly humble others-centered wisdom of God—that is the single most poignant memory of my time in Harvard’s hallowed halls.

This event happened one evening about 7 or 8 years ago, when Prof. Clooney and a few other professors were speaking on a panel at HDS about the future of Religious Studies. The panel discussion was held in a large auditorium on campus, and the room was packed wall-to-wall with attendees. In the first few rows sat various HDS dignitaries, with myself sitting in the row behind them. At the far-right corner of the first row there was a single empty chair until just a few minutes before the event began, when a disheveled man, likely homeless, rushed into the auditorium and practically fell into the open seat. Then, shortly before the panel was scheduled to start, Prof. Clooney walked into the room, paused at the entrance, scanned the rows of dignitaries, and then, turning, made a beeline for the disheveled man in the corner. Intrigued, I sat there quietly watching the scene unfold before me: Prof. Clooney introduced himself, warmly greeted the man, and then emphasized how welcome the man would be to attend any events at the Center for the Study of World Religions (where Prof. Clooney was serving as Director). After first ensuring that this homeless man in the corner felt accepted, Prof. Clooney then turned to greet his faculty colleagues and to take his seat on the panel. Witnessing this remarkable event made a tremendous impression on me about the kind of welcome and inclusivity we should share with those we tend to overlook, or perhaps even quietly denigrate or wish would just go away. While many of us—and certainly I myself—possess a well-hewn expertise in vocally endorsing whichever justice initiatives are presently in vogue, I wonder whether I, and perhaps we, are so truly inclusive as to actually welcome the marginalized, homeless stranger before greeting our polished colleagues and friends.

It almost seems downright weird, strange, perhaps even foolish to, let’s say, enter this church on a Sunday morning, scan the room, and then literally walk past all of our old friends to go seek out, first of all, the newcomer, the stranger, the foreigner in the corner. It seems ridiculous, even unwise, to first of all invest our time, talents, energy, and finances in initiatives that benefit others—the poor, the marginalized—and only once they are cared for, to then think about ourselves. It also strikes us as totally weird, strange, and utterly foolish for the Son of God to give up his life on a rugged cross in the hope that some greater good might result for the lowly inhabitants of planet Earth.

But it's in these kinds of examples of "foolish" humility and "ridiculous" self-sacrifice that we begin to catch a glimpse of a divine wisdom so far beyond our own, the wisdom of setting aside our own interests for the good of others, especially those others who are marginalized, who are poor, who are denigrated, who are forgotten; this is the divine "foolish" wisdom that sets us free from our addictions to ourselves and lovingly points the way forward to a whole other, and much better, world.

So as we celebrate the feast of Thomas Aquinas this weekend, as we rightly champion the importance of scholarly learning and academic knowledge, may we hold this value in tension with Paul's astute critique of worldly wisdom, and may we heed his call to seek out the deeper, "stupid" wisdom of God, embracing and imitating (at some cost, necessarily, to our own self-interests) the foolishly brilliant example of Christ crucified.

Now, as I conclude this message, you might well be saying to yourselves, "Well, that's a crushingly impossible task! Christ crucified? Get real! It's all I can do restrain myself from blaring my horn whenever someone cuts in front me out on Route 2. Imitating Christ's sacrificial love? Maybe that's for those super-Christian saints like Paul, but it's just too impractical and impossible for my real world." To that legitimate reaction, I say "yes, you are right; it is impossible"—and it also becomes increasingly possible the less we rely on ourselves. The more we start the day by humbly surrendering to God, inviting the power of the crucified Christ to direct our lives, and the more we return to this position of surrender as we inevitably find ourselves seizing back the reins of control hundreds of times throughout the day, and the more we quietly whisper throughout each day "Christ, have control."—then the more another Power begins to take over, then the more the impossible becomes reality, and then little-by-little the foolishness of God becomes the wise testimony of our lives.

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.



