The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis

A short introduction and study guide

When I was 17 I left school and went to live in Italy. I took only two books with me; others, like the works of Dante and of John Donne and my copy of Decline and Fall, came from a bookshop on the Via Tournabuoni in the heart of Florence and weighted down my return.

The first book was a small goatskin bound copy of the New Testament and Psalter that I had been given a few months before at my confirmation. The covers are so beautifully worked with calligraphic curlicues that a Muslim who caught me reading one night in our hostel in Rome during Holy Week thought that I too was reading the Q’uran; we struck up a friendship there and then based simply on being seen to read about Faith.

The other book, which, judging from its numerous editions, reprints and translations is the most read book after the Bible itself, was The Imitation of Christ by Thomas à Kempis. It was a paperback copy with the face of the Risen Lord from Piero della Francesca’s powerful Resurrection mural (in Borgo Sansepolcro) on the cover. I read it that first Lent when I was living in a monastery.

I returned to it the following year when, as a student at University, I wanted to read something for Lent and although I stopped abruptly when my father died I have returned to it often over the years. A somewhat tatty and dog-eared copy was in my pocket when I first travelled on pilgrimage to see Piero’s works across Umbria and the Marche. Whenever I read any of it I am struck by how modern its observations are and how closely the writer knows his God and his readers.

The Imitation of Christ is an extraordinary little book not least as it invites the reader to become the author and to enter the conversations that the writer had with Christ Jesus in compiling his meditations. That in turn makes the more compelling the little that we know about the author.

Thomas (Hemerken) à Kempis was born at Kempen near Dusseldorf around about the year 1380. He was ordained into the priesthood at the age of thirty three and sometime between 1418 and 1424 (commentators vary in their opinion) he wrote and published anonymously The Imitation of Christ, the Imitatio Christi. (Scholars are reasonably agreed that the
book is indeed his although other, earlier, authors have been suggested at times, including Pope Innocent III and St Bonaventure.)

Thomas à Kempis had been greatly influenced by the piety and spirituality of the Brothers and Sisters of the Common Life, a community in whose school he had been taught, at Deventer. This movement for spiritual renewal had begun in fourteenth century Holland. It was inspired by Geert de Groote (1340 – 1384) and spread across the Low Countries and into Germany.

Sometimes called the Devotio Moderno, the adepts of the movement stressed the inner life of the individual, an emphasis which the Church has not always encouraged. Indeed it is suggested that the reason that Thomas has never been canonised is because of his advocacy of the essentially private religion of an individual’s own mystical interior life.

Outwardly the communities (of both men and women – although they lived apart) observed the apostolic life characterised by the Acts of the Apostles, ii, holding possessions in common, and being content with plain food and clothing without any thought for the day to come.

In adult life (1399) Thomas himself joined a religious order, the Augustinian Canons, at Agnietenberg, near Zwolle where his elder brother was prior and had indeed co-founded the house. In 1406 he took the habit as lay brother until his ordination and it was here that he lived most of his life. He wrote many devotional pieces (collected as Orationes et Meditationes de Vita Christi) and other works designed to inform the inner life of the reader. These were comprehensively published for the first time in 1494 at Nuremberg.

This background – both the community life and his later priesthood - are echoed in much that Thomas à Kempis wrote (although readers will not find any of his writing exclusivist if it is borne in mind that by Baptism we all share in the priesthood of all believers).

As he himself once wrote; ‘Do not be influenced by the importance of the writer, and whether his learning be great or small; but let love of pure truth draw you to read. Do not inquire, “Who said this?” but pay attention to what is said’. May this great spiritual classic help you to keep an holy Lent.
A short note on reading *The Imitation of Christ*

There is every temptation to think that books need to be read from cover to cover. We do that with novels but it would make little sense of, say, a collection of poems. It is usually not how we use a cookery book or a manual and although there are some books of reference that demand being read through they are few and far between.

One of the commonest mistakes made by the politically correct at the moment seems to be in assuring anybody who listens that they have read the Q’uran ‘from cover to cover’. No Muslim would do that, not least as the *suras* are arranged according to length and not always in sequence. Similarly one of the first ways to be put off from reading the Bible is to attempt to start at Genesis chapter One and stumble to the last pages of the Revelation to St John. It will not work.

*The Imitation of Christ* by Thomas à Kempis itself is a work of meditation; it would fill more than a Lent of anybody’s lifetime and is a resource to which returning thoughtfully and prayerfully by turn makes more sense of the author’s intention in writing it. It has, however, an internal logic of its own; it comprises 114 chapters in four books although the title of *Imitatio Christi* is really only pertinent to the first of them. In it we are called to imitate the way of Christ, to learn from his life and virtues so that we in turn might reflect them to others. ‘Let us make it, then, our constant practice to meditate upon the life of Christ’ (1,i).

In the lifetime of Thomas such an attempt at imitating the acts of generosity and piety of our Lord was a commonplace teaching from the pulpit and the ideal by which most communities of monks and nuns lived in lives of poverty, chastity and obedience. At the Reformation many of the Protestants heaped scorn on such a vain attempt by humans to imitate the Divine and deemed the human effort involved to be both arrogant and detrimental to a true understanding of our own unworthiness. In time the teachers of the Reformation saw that a better way was to suggest ‘following after Christ’ – discipleship rather than direct emulation. Our faith is therefore not mimetic but rather lived in following after Christ.
Even though Thomas wrote from such a very different perspective his writings still can serve us and reading them in our own day we will learn more about ourselves and our call to follow Christ. His call is that we should live ethical not heroic lives and that we should adore Christ first.

Any attempt to select passages that should be read in summary (the ‘gobbets’ so rightly rejected by Hector in Alan Bennett’s *The History Boys*) must necessarily fail but reading selectively for oneself has a real virtue about it; dipping into it and reflecting over and over again will be more spiritually sustaining that reading chapter after chapter, however short each of them is.

What follows therefore tries to offer two things; a week by week suggestion for the material that therefore divides the four books up across the course of Lent and a couple of questions or highlights each week that might provoke group discussion.

But even this is not to do justice to the text as Thomas has given it to us.

There are, for instance, clear prayers interpolated that we might find useful in much the way that Thomas offered them:

- Imploring the grace of Devotion III, iii, 6 & 7
- That God’s will be done III, xv, 3 & 4
- Against Evil Thoughts III, xxiii, 4
- For the enlightenment of our Minds III, xxiii, 4
- Of the cleansing of our hearts III, xxviii, 4 & 5
- A prayer of preparation for making our Holy Communion IV, vi, 1 & 2
- A prayer of self offering IV, ix, 1 – 6

Nor do we read in a vacuum; the Calendar goes on and we shall keep our Lenten fast together and the feasts as they occur, reminded that we are very much in the same world that Thomas à Kempis must have known. The sound of ‘distant wars’ in his day would have been that of Agincourt perhaps (1415), at which so many lives were lost that a new Oxford College was formed simply to pray for the repose of All Souls and he would have known quite as much poverty as we perhaps only
learn from reading of the charitable work that the Bishop’s Lent Appeal seeks to support.

Father Nicholas

**The First Week of Lent**

*Book I, i – xvi*

Almighty God,
whose Son Jesus Christ fasted forty days in the wilderness,
and was tempted as we are, yet without sin;
give us grace to discipline ourselves in obedience to your Spirit:
and as you know our weakness,
so may we know your power to save;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

The opening chapters of Book I read almost programmatically, much as we might expect from a diet or a guide book. In our reading of Thomas we shall have good cause to return again and again to them as a ‘working method’.

Q1/ How often do I let what I know stand between me and my real willingness to learn about my faith and my self (I, ii)?

Q2/ ‘In the Holy Scriptures we should look rather for truth than for eloquence’ (I,v). ‘What is truth, said jesting Pilate, and would not stay for an answer’ (Francis Bacon, *Essays* ‘On Truth’). Are we willing to believe that the Bible offers us all truths necessary for our salvation?

Q3/ Are we willing to see temptations as an opportunity from which to learn (I, xiii)?

Q4/ Do we tolerate others (I, xvi) and would it help us to thing in terms of our ‘bearing one another’s burdens’?
The Second Week of Lent
(The Feast of SS Cyril and Methodius falls on 14 February)

Book I, xx – Book II, xii

Almighty God,
you show to those who are in error the light of your truth,
that they may return to the way of righteousness:
grant to all those who are admitted
into the fellowship of Christ’s religion,
that they may reject those things
that are contrary to their profession,
and follow all such things as are agreeable to the same;
through our Lord Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

The second part of the first Book (and the vigilant reader will note
that we have skipped chapters xvii – xix inclusive) and much of
the second Book shows us how clearly it is a great art to be able
to take Jesus as a friend. The chapters are designed to settle us
into our faith, into quietness and silence, into being willing to
contemplate the Four Last Things of Death, Judgement, Heaven
and Hell, which are traditionally the themes of Advent. In later
chapters we will see how Thomas himself falls into conversation
with Jesus as the most normal thing in the world.

Q1/ How might I practice solitude and where might I seek for
silence in the busy world of business (I, xx)?

Q2/ ‘What is the use of living long when we improve so little? A
long life does not always make us better, but often on the contrary
adds to our guilt’ (I, xxiii). Are we willing to recognise this in
ourselves and how might we set about our own re-creation and
refreshment?

Q3/ Is Jesus my friend or am I afraid to call him into my life (II,
viii)?
The Third Week of Lent

Book III, i - xxv

Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

The burden of the Third Book is about our own inner knowledge and especially how we might relate to others. Recalling that we are made in God’s image has helped many Christians to lead fulfilled lives in which they have learned to put others first and to listen to others as well as to the inner promptings of their hearts. This is the first Book that begins to include a series of prayers. You may wish to close your session with the Nunc Dimittis, from the evening office, or by praying that God’s Will may be done (III, xv, 3 &4).

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace: According to thy word.
For mine eyes have seen: thy salvation;
Which thou has prepared: before the face of all people;
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles: And to be the glory of thy people, Israel.

Q1/ How often do I let love of myself stand between me and my real willingness to learn about my faith and my self (III, xiii)? How can I learn better to trust?

Q2/ As our troops are engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan at this time and as we continue to hear savage news from Palestine, the Sudan, Zimbabwe and so many other war-torn regions of the world, use III, xxv as an exercise to open anew your own dialogue for Peace. Is it helpful to remember that we will not have
peace in the world until we have peace in our own lives and families?
The Fourth Week of Lent
(The Feast of St David falls on 1 March and the Fourth Sunday of Lent is also Mothering Sunday)

Book III, xxvi – lix

Merciful Lord,
absolve your people from their offences,
that through your bountiful goodness
we may all be delivered from the chains of those sins
which by our frailty we have committed;
grant this, heavenly Father,
for Jesus Christ’s sake, our blessed Lord and Saviour,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

Thomas wrote (III, xxxix, 4); ‘Self-denial is man’s greatest gain; and a self-denying man is truly free and full of peace. But the old enemy, hating all that is good, never leaves off tempting us, but day and night weaves his deadly plots to drag the unwary into his deceitful snares. “Watch and pray that ye enter not into temptation”, says the Lord’.

Mothering Sunday may have originated as a ‘Sunday off’ when servants were allowed to return to their families. It still has a very strong sense of being for families (much as Thanksgiving in the USA is a prelude to the preparation for Christmas) but it is also about giving to allow others time and space.

Q1/ How much do we really believe that our self-giving can help others?

Q2/ The Christian understanding of the Holy Scriptures and our willingness to learn from the example of our Lord’s life should encourage us to recognise a path through suffering and to recognise when we are able to counter the world’s values (success, happiness etc) with an inner assurance and strength (III, xlvii). Do we trust in God enough to make this commitment?
The Fifth Week of Lent
(The Fifth Sunday of Lent is observed as Passion Sunday)

Book IV, i – viii

Most merciful God,
who by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ
delivered and saved the world:
grant that by faith in him who suffered on the cross
we may triumph in the power of his victory;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

The whole of Book Four is in essence about Eucharistic Devotion. When I first read it I was a newly confirmed young adult. Its offer of assurance and of participation overwhelmingly convinced me of the rightness, for me, of being a daily communicant and I have never looked back although I have sometimes found myself in places where it has not been possible for me to get to the altar.

If the opening chapters of this book offered Thomas’s ‘working method’ this concluding Book shows what lay at the heart of his understanding of his life in Christ; participation in the very Presence of Christ in the Sacrament of the Altar. That Thomas emphasises so much how we should prepare to receive God (the judicious mention of Noah building the ark is a delightful example (IV,i,4) of how we should use our time aright) is clearly in response to the increasing abuses of his own day but in our own hasty world we would do well to hear him.

Talking about how or when we receive the Sacrament of the Church can be an intensely private matter but at the same time having a sense of discipline should be a desirable goal for us all. Being promiscuous in this, as in anything, is not a commended way for us to live our lives; so rather than_chanceing to go to church ‘as and when’, or turning up late, we should all make a Rule for ourselves, and try to keep to it. We might in the week before the Great Week review what our expectations are of Holy week and of The Triduum.
Holy Week
(Lent ends on the Wednesday of Holy Week)

Book IV, ix – xviii

Almighty and everlasting God,
who in your tender love towards the human race
sent your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ
to take upon him our flesh
and to suffer death upon the cross:
grant that we may follow the example of his patience and humility,
and also be made partakers of his resurrection:
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

The final chapters of the Fourth book offer their own direct aids
to how best we might come to the altar. They can help us to focus
on whether we might make a series of new commitments, about
frequency of attendance, about being prepared (which is not
simply about arriving on time, important as that is) and disciplined
and about how we offer our own personal intercession as part of
the whole Liturgy which is offered on our behalf.

It might help to keep the names of individual friends and family
members written in a notebook somewhere so that you can offer
your own daily prayer for them much as there is a daily ‘intention’
for each Mass which is the Church’s offering and the Diocese as
well as the Anglican Communion worldwide has a regular roster of
prayer each day.

One of the most commonly held mnemonics for our daily prayer is
ACTS – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. It
is in its way a summary of all that Thomas is saying in the last
pages of his classic spiritual book.

The Revd Dr Nicholas W S Cranfield.