

WILLIAM OF SAINT-THIERRY ON THE FOREKNOWLEDGE OF GOD

THE SOUL CONTEMPLATES THE FOREKNOWLEDGE OF GOD, AND
PONDERES THE MYSTERY OF PREDESTINATION AND OF REPROBATION

'O the depth of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgements, and His ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord, or who hath been His counsellor?'¹ For Thou hast mercy, Lord, on whom Thou wilt have mercy, and showest pity on whom Thou wilt have pity. Election 'is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy.' The earthen vessel recoils from the Hand of Him Who made it, of Him Who says by the prophet, 'I have made and I will bear';² deserving of destruction as it is, fit to be crushed and broken, it breaks away from the Hand that holds and carries it and cries, 'Why doth He then find fault? For who resisteth His will?' And it continues, 'Why hast Thou made me thus?'

So speaks the earthen vessel unto Thee, O Thou Eternal Wisdom; so speaks the pot of clay, the vessel of reproach and wrath, made for perdition; when it behoves it rather to tremble before Thee and to pray to Thee, Who out of the selfsame lump hast power to make one vessel for an honourable use, another for reproach. But the chosen vessels, those that are made for honour, they endure. They are the vessels of mercy prepared by Thee for glory; and they do not speak so, but rather acknowledge Thee as their Creator and their Potter, and themselves as clay to which Thy Hand has given form—and woe to them if they fall from Thy Hand, for then they will be broken and crushed and reduced to nothing! They know this, and do not forsake Thy grace.

Have mercy on us, Lord, have mercy; Thou art our Potter, and we are the clay. Somehow or other, we have held together until now; we are still carried by Thy mighty Hand, and we are clinging still to Thy three fingers, Faith, Hope, and Charity, wherewith Thou supportest the earth's mighty bulk—that is to say, the whole weight of Thy holy Church. Cleanse our reins and our hearts by the fire of Thy Holy Spirit, and stablish the work that Thou hast wrought in us; lest we be loosed asunder and return again to clay or nothingness. We were created by Thee for Thyself, and toward Thee our face is set. We acknowledge Thee our Maker and Creator; we adore Thy wisdom, and beg that it may order all our life; we adore Thy goodness and mercy, and beg them ever to sustain and keep us. Thou Who hast made us, bring us to perfection; perfect in us the Image and the Likeness of Thyself for which Thou madest us.³

The earthen vessel destined to return to earth demands of Thee, 'Why hast Thou made me thus?' But the vessel made for honour does not address Thee so; for it believes with the heart unto righteousness and confesses with the mouth unto salvation that Thou art good, and hast done all things well. Even in making one for honour and another for reproach Thou hast done well, in that Thou hast bestowed free-will on both, so that each, acting as he does not of necessity but of his own deliberate choice, should have the degree of merit proper to the virtue he displays. For virtue is precisely the deliberate assent of the good will to what is good.

But, O Eternal Wisdom, since Thou knowest all things, Thou didst foreknow concerning both how they would use that freedom of will, and how they would decide their destiny; and Thou wast ready to bestow Thy grace on one as on the other, if only he would not receive that grace in vain. Yet Thy foreknowledge in no way forces them to be what they will severally be, as though their future were determined by the fact of Thy foreknowing it; rather, Thou foreknowest that they will be so, because they will be so, and therefore Thou, Who knowest everything before it comes to pass, knowest this too; and Thy foreknowledge can make no mistakes. Moreover, Thy foreknowledge, O my God, is one thing with Thy wisdom, which is with Thee from and to all eternity, and so would it have been with Thee, had never a creature existed. In it is the eternal ground of all that happens in time, and by that same foreknowledge do all creatures come to be in their own time. And yet creation was never in the future in regard to Thee; for Life was in Thy consubstantial Word, Who made all that was made; in Him was Life as it was to be in the future, exactly as it was to be, because Life was in Him.⁴ But that Life did not force it so to be; it existed thus in Him, because it would be so.

What then? Does the temporal form of the future determine the Being of God, His very Eternity? For it seems that, if the future were not to be cast in this mould, it could not exist eternally in the Word of God. But Thy knowledge, O God, and Thy foreknowledge are Thy Truth that says, 'I am the Truth.' And as Thou by foreknowing dost not constrain the future to be such as Thou foreknowest, so canst Thou not Thyself be forced to foreknow anything by the mere fact of its futurity. There is no past with Thee, nor future either; but Thou art ever what Thou art, and all that exists in any mode whatever, be it past or present or future, is Life in Thy Word.

'The wicked walk round in a circle.'⁵ Betake yourself, O Man, away from the circumference of error to the centre of Truth. When the earthen vessel turns to clay again, it does so under no compulsion from the fact that God foreknew it would do so and that its future was not hid from Him; and yet, because God knew that this would happen, He foreordained it to destruction. God's

foreknowledge is at the same time His goodness, which He is eternally ready to bestow on all, although not all are ready to accept it. Who will accept and who will not, this also is within the field of God's foreknowledge which, if it be equated with His goodness, as I said just now, was ready for all from all eternity, even had nothing ever been created. For this goodness is the Holy Spirit, co-eternal with the Father and the Son. Wherefore it is written that, at the creation of the world, the Spirit moved upon the waters⁶—that is to say, He was offering Himself to all and showing Himself to them by doing good and providing things needful for their use, as it is His function to do; but at the same time He was fleeing from the soul that was ill-disposed, into which wisdom can effect no entrance.

Foreknowledge concerning things created, therefore, is foreknowledge on the part of God; but, when viewed in regard to men, it is predestination, which term includes election and reprobation equally. That is why He tells us, 'Ye have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you.' Predestination is at once the preparation for grace and the result of it.⁷ And why one should be taken into grace and another rejected, is a question you had best not ask, unless you wish to go astray. If a man is proud, the fact of his pride is no secret to God; and you do not escape the providence by which He has foreordained you to the punishment made ready for proud men. 'For God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace to the humble.'⁸ Pride, therefore, is at once the thing that merits reprobation and the sign of it, just as humility is that which both deserves election and denotes it.

If, then, the earthen vessel says, 'Why hast Thou made me thus?'—that is to say, 'Why hast Thou foreordained me to destruction?' the Truth will answer, 'To speak in your own terms, it was because I knew beforehand that you would be a vessel of wrath meet for destruction, a fool who neither knew salvation nor desired it, a soul so proud that you would scorn humiliation. Because I knew all that, I lodge no further complaint, but you will go irrevocably to destruction. You do not stay the operation of My will, since My will is that My mercy should be very near the wretched—to those, that is to say, who know their wretchedness, but that those who are mighty in iniquity should suffer mighty pains. Only on the humble will I show My pity; it is on the merciful that I have mercy. Ask Me no more, "Why didst Thou not give me humility?" I gave you a greater gift than that—free-will. And you have waxed mighty in iniquity by the use of that very gift; you have loved malice more than kindness. What is more, you have tried to make Me responsible for your ill deeds; for so determined are you to excuse yourself that you have laid the blame for them on Me! You refuse to admit the hatefulness of your iniquity; therefore shall you go to your own place, vessel of wrath that you are and meet to be destroyed.'

NOTES

¹ Romans 11:33–34. What follows is based on Romans 9:15–23. In v. 19 ‘Quid adhuc quaeritur?’ means rather ‘What more does He want?’ The Douay version, ‘Why doth He then find fault?’ presupposes *queritur* (from the deponent *queror*) in place of *quaeritur*, and that is what the Greek, Τί ἔτι μέμφεται, requires. For the figure of the potter and the clay, see Jeremiah 18:1–6.

² ‘Ego feci, ego feram,’ Isaiah 46:4.

³ Genesis 1:26–27. The restoration of the Image of God in man is a favourite theme with the Fathers.

⁴ See Saint John 1:1–4.

⁵ Psalm 11:9 (DV), cf. 12:8 (RSV-CE).

⁶ See Genesis 1:2, and cf. Wisdom 1:1–7.

⁷ ‘Praedestinatio autem est gratiae praeparatio. Gratia vero, ipse est effectus.’ Is *ipse* a misprint? It seems *ipsa* would give a better sense.

⁸ Saint James 4:6.

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SOURCE OF TEXT

William of Saint-Thierry (between 1070 and 85–1148), Cluniac Abbot of Saint-Thierry or Theoderic, later (from 1135), Cistercian monk at Signy, meditation 1 of his *Meditations* (*Meditativae orationes*, written between 1128 and 35, meditation 13 (known as ‘Meditatio’) towards 1145), translated from the Latin by a Religious of CSMV, i.e., Ruth Penelope Lawson (1890–1977), published by A. R. Mowbray & Co., London, in 1954, and republished by Stephen Plustwik, Greensborough, Vic, in 2015, pages 13–17.

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