

COMMENTARY ON
THE GOSPEL OF ST. JOHN

St. Thomas Aquinas

Lectio 9

15 Ἰωάννης μαρτυρεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ κέκραγεν λέγων,
οὗτος ἦν ὃν εἶπον,
ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος ἔμπροσθέν μου γέγονεν,
ὅτι πρῶτός μου ἦν.

Posita evidentiā verbi, qua ipsis apostolis innotuit per visum, consequenter Evangelista ponit eius evidentiā, secundum quod aliis quam apostolis innotuit per auditum, per testimonium ipsius Ioannis et cetera. Et circa hoc tria facit. Primo enim testis introducitur; secundo testificandi modus innuitur, ibi *et clamat*; tertio testimonium ponitur, ibi *hic erat quem dixi* et cetera.

Dicit ergo: nos quidem gloriam eius vidimus, sicut unigeniti a patre, sed hoc nobis non creditur, quia forte habemur suspecti: accedat illius testis, scilicet Ioannes Baptista, qui testimonium Christo perhibuit; est enim testis fidelis, qui non mentietur; Prov. XIV, 5: *testis fidelis non mentietur* et cetera. Infra V, 33: *vos misistis ad Ioannem, et testimonium perhibuit veritati*. Hic enim Ioannes testimonium perhibet; quasi dicat, perseveranter suum officium implet, quia ipse venit in testimonium. Prov. c. XII, 19: *labium veritatis firmum erit in perpetuum*.

Deinde cum dicit *et clamat dicens*, ponitur modus testificandi, qui fit cum clamore. Et ideo dicit *clamat*, in quantum libere sine timore; Is. XL, 9: *exalta*

LECTURE 9

15 John bore witness to him, and he cried out saying:
“This is the one of whom I said:
‘He who comes after me, ranks ahead of me,
because he existed before me.’”

191 Having given the evidence by which the Word was made known to the apostles by sight, the Evangelist then presents the evidence by which the Word was made known to persons other than the apostles by their hearing the testimony of John. He does three things about this. First, the witness is presented. Secondly, his manner of testifying is indicated. Thirdly, his testimony is given.

192 So he says: We indeed have seen his glory, the glory as of the Only Begotten of the Father. But we are not believed, perhaps because we are held in suspicion. So let his witness come forth, that is, John the Baptist, who bears witness to Christ. He is a faithful witness who will not lie: “A faithful witness will not lie” (Prv 14:5), “You sent [messengers] to John, and he bore witness to the truth” (below 5:33). John gives his testimony here and fulfills his office with perseverance because he came as a witness. As Proverbs (12:19) says, “Truthful lips endure forever.”

193 Then when he says, **John bore witness to him, and he cried out**, he describes the way he bore witness, that is, it was with a cry. So he says, **he**

in fortitudine vocem tuam (...) ecce Deus noster. Ardenter et ex magno fervore; quia, ut dicitur Eccli. XLVIII, 1, verbum eius ut facula ardebat; Is. VI, 3: Seraphim clamabant alter ad alterum, per quod intimior ardor mentis exprimitur. Per manifestationem etiam clamoris ostenditur, quod non sub figuris, neque occulte ad paucos sermo testificantis dirigitur; sed aperte et ostensive declaratur et denuntiatur veritas iam non paucis, sed multis; Is. LVIII, v. 1: clama, ne cesses.

Deinde cum dicit *hic erat quem dixi*, quid sit testificatus subiungit. Ubi duo facit. Primo enim describit continuitatem sui testimonii; secundo describit eum, cui testimonium perhibet, ibi *qui post me venturus est, ante me factus est*.

Fuit ergo testimonium Baptistae continuum, quia non semel tantum sed multoties, et etiam antequam Christus ad ipsum venisset, Ioannes testimonium ei perhibuit: et ideo dixit *hic erat quem dixi*, idest antequam vidissem eum corporaliter, testimonium ei perhibui. Lc. I, 76: *tu puer propheta altissimi vocaberis*. Et hoc ideo quia praesentem et futurum ostendit. Est etiam eius testimonium certum, quia non solum futurum esse praedixit, sed praesentem digito demonstravit, dicens *ecce agnus Dei*. Ex quo insinuat quod Christus corporaliter praesens erat Ioanni; nam solitus erat saepe ad Ioannem venire, antequam baptizatus fuisset.

Describit autem consequenter eum, cui testimonium perhibet, dicens *qui post me venturus est, ante me factus est*. Ubi notandum est, quod Ioannes non statim praedicat discipulis Christum esse filium Dei, sed paulatim eos ad altiora provehit: primo praeferebat eum sibi, qui tamen tantae famae et auctoritatis erat ut crederetur esse Christus, vel aliquis de magnis prophetis. Comparat autem Christum sibi primo quantum ad ordinem praedicationis; secundo quantum ad ordinem dignitatis; tertio quantum ad ordinem durationis.

Quantum ad ordinem praedicationis, Ioannes praecessit Christum sicut famulus dominum, et sicut miles regem, et sicut Lucifer solem; Mal. III, 1: *ecce ego mitto Angelum meum, et praeparabit viam ante faciem meam. Qui igitur post*

cried out, i.e., freely without fear. “Cry out in a loud voice.... Say to the cities of Judah: Here is your God” (Is 40:9). He cried out ardently and with great fervor, because it is said, “His word burned like a torch” (Si 48:1); “Seraphim cried one to another” (Is 6:3), which is expressive of a more interior eagerness of spirit. The use of a cry shows that the statements of the witness are not made to a few in figurative language or secretly, but that a truth is being declared openly and publicly, and told not to a few but to many. “Cry out, and do not stop” (Is 58:1).

194 Then he adds his testimony. And he does two things. First, he shows that his testimony was continuous. Secondly, he describes the person to whom he bore witness.

195 The testimony of the Baptist was continuous because he bore witness to him not only once but many times, and even before Christ had come to him. And so he says, **This is the one of whom I** said, i.e., before I saw him in the flesh I bore witness to him. “And you, child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High” (Lk 1:76). He pointed him out both as present and when about to come. And his testimony is certain because he not only predicted that he would come, but pointed him out when he was present, saying, **Look! There is the Lamb of God**. This implies that Christ was physically present to John; for he had often come to John before being baptized.

196 Then he describes the one to whom he bore witness, saying, **He who comes after me, ranks ahead of me**. Here we should note that John does not at once preach to his disciples that Christ is the Son of God, but he draws them little by little to higher things: first, by preferring Christ to himself, even though John had such a great reputation and authority as to be considered the Christ or one of the great prophets. Now he compares Christ to himself: first, with regard to the order of their preaching; secondly, as to the order of dignity; and thirdly, as to the time of their existence.

197 With respect to the order of their preaching, John preceded Christ as a servant precedes his master, and as a soldier his king, or as the morning star the sun: “See, I am sending my messenger, and he will prepare the way

me venit, scilicet in notitiam hominum praedicando. Et notandum, quod *ly venit* est temporis praesentis, quia in Graeco ponitur participium praesentis temporis.

Praecessit autem Ioannes Christum duplici ratione. Primo, secundum Chrysostomum, quia Ioannes erat consanguineus Christi secundum carnem; Lc. I, 36: *et ecce Elisabeth cognata tua* et cetera. Si ergo testimonium perhibuisset Christo postquam eum cognoverat, potuisset suum testimonium suspectum habere, et ideo Ioannes venit ad praedicandum, nondum habens familiaritatem cum Christo, ut eius testimonium efficacius esset. Unde dicebat infra: *ego nesciebam eum; sed ut manifestetur in Israel propterea veni ego, in aqua baptizans.*

Secundo quia in his quae de potentia procedunt ad actum, imperfectum naturaliter praecedit perfectum: unde dicitur I Cor. XV, 46: *non prius quod spirituale est, sed quod animale.* Et ideo perfectam Christi doctrinam debuit praecedere imperfectior doctrina Ioannis, quae quodam modo fuit media inter doctrinam legis et prophetarum, quae annuntiabat de longinquo Christum futurum, et doctrinam Christi, quae manifesta erat, et Christum manifeste annuntiabat.

Comparat sibi quantum ad ordinem dignitatis, cum dicit *ante me factus est*: unde sciendum est, quod ex hoc Ariani sumpserunt occasionem erroris. Dicebant enim quod hoc quod dixit *post me venit*, intelligitur de Christo secundum carnem assumptam, sed hoc quod addit *ante me factus est*, non potest intelligi nisi de verbo Dei, quod carni praeexistebat; et propterea Christum, in quantum est verbum, factum esse, et non esse patri coaeternum.

Sed, secundum Chrysostomum, haec expositio stulta est, quia si hoc esset verum, non dixisset Baptista *ante me factus est, quia prior me erat*, cum nullus ignoret, quod si prior eo erat, ante eum factus est; sed potius e converso dixisset: prior me erat, quia factus est ante me. Et ideo, secundum

before me” (Mal 3:1). So, He comes after me, in being known to men, through my preaching. Observe that **comes** is in the present tense, because in Greek the present participle is used.

Now John preceded Christ for two reasons. First, according to Chrysostom, because John was a blood relation of Christ according to the flesh: “your relative, Elizabeth” (Lk 1.36). Therefore, had he borne witness to Christ after knowing him, his testimony might have been open to question; accordingly, John came preaching before he was acquainted with Christ, in order that his testimony might have more force. Hence he says, “And I did not know him! And yet it was to reveal him to Israel that I came baptizing with water” (below 1:31).

Secondly, John preceded Christ because in things that pass into act from potency, the imperfect is naturally prior to the perfect; hence it is said in 1 Corinthians (15:46): “The spiritual is not first, but the animal.” Accordingly, the perfect doctrine of Christ should have been preceded by the less perfect teaching of John, which was in a certain manner midway between the doctrine of the law and the prophets (which announced the coming of Christ from afar), and the doctrine of Christ, which was clear and plainly made Christ known.

198 He [John] compares him to himself with respect to dignity when he says, he **ranks ahead of me** [*ante me factus est*, literally, he “was made before me”]. It should be noted that it is from this text that the Arians took occasion for their error. For they said that “He who comes after me,” is to be understood of Christ as to the flesh he assumed, but what follows, “was made before me,” can only be understood of the Word of God, who existed before the flesh; and for this reason Christ as the Word was made, and was not coeternal with the Father.

According to Chrysostom, however, this exposition is stupid, because if it were true, the Baptist would not have said, he “was made before me, because he existed before me,” since no one is unaware that if he was before him, he was made before him. He rather would have said the opposite: “He was

Chrysostomum, intelligendum est de prioritare dignitate, idest mihi praelatus est, et antepositus. Quasi dicat: quamvis Iesus post me ad praedicandum venerit, tamen factus est ante me, idest dignior, et superior auctoritate, et hominum reputatione; Iob XXVIII, 17: *non adaequabitur ei aurum* et cetera. Vel *ante me factus est*, idest coram me, ut habetur in Glossa, et littera in Graeco hoc sonat. Quasi dicat coram me, idest in conspectu meo, quia mihi apparuit, et innotuit.

Item comparat eum sibi quantum ad ordinem durationis, dicens *quia prior me erat*. Quasi dicat: ipse est ab aeterno Deus, ego ex tempore homo fragilis; et ideo, licet eum praedicando praecesserim, tamen rationabiliter praelatus est mihi in fama et opinione hominum, qui sua aeternitate praecedit omnia. Hebr. ult., 8: *Iesus Christus heri et hodie, ipse et in saecula*; et infra VIII, 58: *antequam Abraham fieret, ego sum*.

Potest etiam exponi quod dictum est *ante me factus est* ut referatur ad ordinem temporis secundum carnem. Christus enim in instanti suae conceptionis fuit perfectus Deus et perfectus homo, habens rationalem animam perfectam virtutibus, et corpus omnibus lineamentis distinctum, non tamen secundum quantitatem perfectam; Ier. XXXI, 22: *mulier circumdabit virum*, scilicet perfectum. Constat autem quod Christus ante fuit conceptus quam Ioannes esset natus, et perfectus homo; et ideo dicit *ante me factus est* quia ipse prius fuit homo perfectus, quam natus fuisset ex utero.

before me, because he was made before me.” And so, according to Chrysostom, these words should be taken as referring to his [Christ’s] dignity, that is, he was preferred to me and placed ahead of me. It is as though he said: Although Jesus came to preach after me, he was made more worthy than I both in eminence of authority and in the repute of men: “Gold will not be equal to it” (Jb 28:17). Or alternatively: he is preferred **ahead of me**, that is, before my eyes, as the Gloss says and as the Greek text reads. As if to say: Before my eyes, i.e., in my sight, because he came into my view and was recognized.

199 He compares him to himself with respect to their duration, saying, **because he existed before me**. As if to say: He was God from all eternity, I am a frail man of time. And therefore, even though I came to preach ahead of him, yet it was fitting that he rank before me in the reputation and opinion of men, because he preceded all things by his eternity: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Heb 13:8). “Before Abraham came to be, I am,” as we read below (8:58).

If we understand this passage as saying that he “was made before me,” it can be explained as referring to the order of time according to the flesh. For in the instant of his conception Christ was perfect God and perfect man, having a rational soul perfected by the virtues, and a body possessed of all its distinctive features, except that it lacked perfect size: “A woman shall enclose a man,” i.e., a perfect man (Jer 31:22). Now it is evident that Christ was conceived as a perfect man before John was born; consequently he says that he “was made before me,” because he was a perfect man before I came forth from the womb.