

NOTES ON THOMAS AQUINAS, *SUMMA THEOLOGIAE*

There is one key aspect of Aquinas's discussion which should be highlighted: the notion of 'fittingness' or, in Latin, *convenientia* (from which, of course, we have 'convenient'). Why is this important?

You will remember that Anselm had discussed whether God brought salvation through the incarnation as a matter of necessity. Aquinas nuances this discussion. He wants to argue that God's actions are neither a matter of mere caprice (as if the incarnation were some kind of divine whim, or just one amongst a host of options open to God to which he's largely indifferent) nor of forced necessity. In other words, God did not *have to* bring salvation through the incarnation, but neither was the incarnation some random choice. Rather, Aquinas describes the incarnation as 'fitting'. What does this mean?

Aquinas states that there are two kinds of necessity which one must consider in relation to the incarnation. The first is that kind of necessity which is absolute, and Aquinas gives the example of food as a necessity for nourishing the body. Put simply, there's no other way of sustaining the body. The second kind of necessity refers to one course of action which is simply much more expedient or appropriate than others. For example, I could walk from Lampeter to London, but it would be better to take the train. It is this second kind of 'necessity' which Aquinas thinks pertains to the incarnation. God could have saved us by means of his omnipotence without the need for the incarnation. This would be a matter of divine decree. Yet Aquinas argues that it is better – and in this sense 'necessary' – that God bring about our salvation by means of the incarnation. In article 2 above, he enumerates two sets of five reasons for the 'fittingness' of Christ's incarnation.

This is significant because Aquinas introduces not a logical justification for the incarnation, but an aesthetic understanding of its necessity. In other words, Aquinas thinks that God brings about salvation in the most 'beautiful' (or appealing) way possible. This is the sense of the Latin term *convenientia*. The English terms 'convenient' or 'fitting' are a little weak in this context. The sense of Aquinas's Latin is that God's incarnation in Christ draws us to the salvation he offers by its strange beauty. For those of us who celebrate Christmas, Good Friday and Easter, we perhaps know something of this strange beauty.