

Sermon

Sunday 24th December, 2006

Lessons Micah 5: 2 – 5a Hebrews 10: 5 – 10 Luke 1: 39 – 55

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Fill us with Your Holy Spirit, O God;
give us the joy of knowing that our Lord is near.
Give us grace to discover Your signs of hope
in women about to give birth; in joyful children;
in the eyes of older friends who show us the way;
in the faces of loved ones that shine like stars;
in candles lit by those who work for peace;
in Your Word that is a lamp to our feet.
Prepare us to receive the Hope of the world,
You Son Jesus, the Christ of great compassion,
who gives us the sign of His cross,
through which He conquers death and despair.
In the name of Christ. Amen.

Mary said, ‘My soul doth magnify the Lord.

Luke 1: 46

Goethe, the German poet and dramatist, said, ‘We are shaped and fashioned by what we love.’ There is a thought worth remembering. We are shaped and fashioned by what we love. Bernard of Clairvaux has been described as ‘Undoubtedly the most dynamic figure of the twelfth century, if not the whole of the Middle Ages.’ Born in 1090, he lived for sixty three years. Though he did not found the Cistercian Order of monks, it flourished in his life time and was based on the principles that he taught. By the time of his death, 350 abbeys had been established. Bernard was called upon to give advice to the King, Louis VI, on many occasions. He travelled widely and mediated reconciliation in the papal schism of that time. One medieval monastic scholar wrote of Bernard’s work:

To tackle Bernard’s own learning is to discover a speculative theologian of wide reading, and great intellectual power; a literary genius of the first order, the greatest master of language in the Middle Ages, who alone

of all this age, has a power equal to that of Demosthenes, Cicero, and of Burke, to carry us along with him on the gale of his eloquence.

Such was the gale of his eloquence and the enchanting lure of his mysticism that Luther found his work irresistible. Lutherans so popularised Bernard that the printed circulation of his works in German far exceeded that of any of the other Church Fathers, including Augustine. To Calvin, Bernard of Clairvaux was a kindred spirit.

Three hymns from the twelfth century have been attributed to the saint. It is unlikely that he wrote them, but their sentiments are certainly his. Let me recite the first verse of each one:

Jesus, the very thought of thee
with sweetness fills my breast;
but sweeter far thy face to see,
and in thy presence rest.

O, Jesus King most wonderful,
Thou Conqueror renowned,
Thou Sweetness most ineffable,
In whom all joys are found!

Jesus, thou joy of loving hearts,
thou light of life, thou fount of grace;
from the best bliss that earth imparts
we turn unfilled to seek thy face.

Are not these sweet words indeed!

Bernard was born into a wealthy Burgundian family. His mother died when he was fourteen. Some years later, he was tempted, he said, to pursue a path of learning for 'vain glory.' One night he had a vision, a powerful dream, in which he heard his mother say to him that 'she had not brought him up with such love and care so that he could adopt this kind of empty existence, and that it was not for the fulfilment of such

worldly ambitions that she had brought him into this world.’ Bernard entered the monastery at Citeaux.

Bernard’s greatest work is entitled *On Loving God*. His writing is written within a monastic setting, which means that it is intended for meditation rather than argument and debate. I would say that that is true of most of the Bible: the narrative and word pictures are intended for meditation; it is written as a medium through which God can speak to those who have ears. Bernard’s writing is intended for slow reading, prayer and reflection. In his sermon on Devotion to Christ, based on the Song of Solomon, he wrote on The Way of Love: A Threefold Progress. It is the intimacy with which he speaks of Christ that is breath-taking.

Bernard quotes a verse from the Song: ‘Let Him kiss me with the kisses of the mouth.’ The saint asks us to examine our conscience. He says:

For I desire you to become aware whether in the deep desires of your own heart, you have ever spoken like the words of our text? For not all people desire to be like this. He alone is able to do so who has received, if only once, the spiritual kiss from the lips of Christ. Then he will incessantly desire a renewal of such a full and sweet experience. For I am convinced strongly that no one who has not experienced this, can ever comprehend what it is like. And he who has tasted, will long for it again.

Spiritual union and communion ooze out of every word and syllable. Bernard goes on to say that the first step is not the kiss on the lips, but the kiss of the feet. Like Mary Magdalene, the penitent, Bernard asks us:

do you also, O unhappy soul, prostrate yourself that you may cease to be unhappy! Prostrate yourself to the earth, embrace his feet, appease them with kisses, bedew them with tears. Not that you may wash them away, but that you may wash yourself. And do not lift up your countenance suffused with tears of shame and guilt until you

hear the words of absolution, 'Your sins are forgiven you.'

The middle stage is the kiss of the hand. 'It shall cleanse you from your stains and then it shall lift you up....The fruits of penitence will fill you with hope of higher things.' The final stage, the spiritual kiss of His lips, is the kiss of His life. 'We are,' said Bernard, 'by His marvellous condescension made to be one spirit with Him.' It is powerful writing. One feels that one is walking on holy ground. In Bernard's writing, there is a personal devotion and commitment to Christ that is rare. The Church is in need of such saintly examples today.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, is likewise an example to the Church because of her devotion to Christ. However one interprets the Birth narratives, it is clear that the evangelist and early Church held Mary in the highest regard. Though not her song, she sings, 'My soul doth magnify the Lord.' She is blessed among women. She is at the foot of the Cross thirty three years later watching in what must be for her an intolerable agony her first-born son die a brutal death. The prophet Micah wrote of the One to come, 'He shall stand and feed in the strength of the Lord.' The author of Hebrews wrote, 'By Christ we will be sanctified through the offering of His body once for all.' It is to this Jesus that Mary, his mother, offers her undying devotion.

The Scottish theologian, John Baillie, said of God and the Birth of Jesus:

God is He with whom we have ultimately to do, the final reality to which we have to face up, and with whom we have in the last resort to reckon....For you and me to face up to God is to face up to Jesus Christ. It is in Christ we see what God is like....It was the coming of Christ that placed men [and women] before the ultimate decision.

The ultimate decision! Bernard of Clairvaux wrote of seeking and practising intimacy with the Divine, desiring the spiritual kiss of life. We are shaped and

fashioned by what we love. With love in her heart, Mary sang, 'My soul doth magnify the Lord.'

This is worship of the Christ Child. This is devotion of the Son of God. Love of God requires all that we have, not only of feeling, but also of intellect and of power. God is to be loved with heart and mind and strength. Loving God is an 'unflickering orientation of the whole self towards Him, ever seeking and finding the Eternal' so much so that our choices and behaviour are shaped and fashioned by love. Goethe said that we are shaped and fashioned by what we love. Let us then be shaped and fashioned by Christ.

Amen.