

Meditation 15th February 2022

Saint Hildegard (1098 – 1179) - A Feather on the Breath of God”

“ The earth which sustains humanity must not be injured. It must not be destroyed”

“ All living creatures are sparks from the radiation of God’s brilliance, emerging from God like the rays of the sun”

“ Glance at the sun. See the moon and stars. Gaze at the beauty of earth’s greenings. Now, think. What delight God gives to humankind with all these things. All nature is at the disposal of humankind. We are to work with it. For without we cannot survive”

Wise words, prophetic words - they could have been written recently - but they are quotes from a truly inspirational woman , Hildegard of Bingen, a German mystic and visionary born just 32 years after the Norman Conquest ! It made me think how much wisdom we can learn from saints through the ages, how much we can learn from their insights.

Christopher Page described Hildegard as “one of the most accomplished women in the history of Christianity ... the precursor to many of the great women mystics” Her accomplishments are simply mind blowing. Hildegard was the tenth child of noble parents and was brought up by an anchorite (a religious recluse) called Jutta, in the Benedictine tradition. She experienced visions from a very early age but did not write about them until she was in her 40’s. She then wrote a trilogy of theological works which included records of her visions and her explanations of scripture. Her theology was founded on the harmony of the created world and its relationship with God. She wanted to celebrate celestial harmony in heaven and on earth and to reveal her knowledge from God to others. Hildegard became an abbess, a prolific writer, composer, dramatist ,poet, adviser to rich and poor alike, preacher, scientist, activist and healer. She even invented an alternative alphabet . She corresponded with major political figures of the time, with people like Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, Frederick Barbarossa ,bishops and the Pope. They all sought her advice. Hildegard reminded the powerful to show compassion to the poor.

She wrote books and treatises on medicine and natural history. One book was about healing , exploring how plants and gemstones could be used in healing. She wrote about natural history at great length in a very scientific manner. Another subject she wrote about was nutrition, advocating moderation and balance in one’s lifestyle in an attempt to prevent disease. They were very progressive ideas.

Music was vitally important to her. It was a form of prayer but more than that she claimed it was given to her directly from God and it was apparently a totally unique style. There were complicated melodies and a very wide vocal range , well suited to her nuns. Music for her reflected the songs of angels , a point where earth and heaven met , where mankind could catch a glimpse of paradise and her songs were designed as a form of contemplative prayer. Mankind was created to live in harmony with the music of heaven all around. She supervised the copying of her complete musical works – her chants and hymns included.

She was always eager to tell others about the origins of her creativity . She wrote “ The marvels of God are not brought forth from one’s self. Rather it is more like a chord, a sound that is played . The

tone does not come out of the chord itself , but rather, through the touch of the musician. I am of course, the lyre and harp of God's kindness"

She hammered this point home in her preaching tours around Germany and France . In a famous letter written to Odo of Paris in 1148 she called herself " a feather on the breath of God, not gifted with great powers or education, nor even with good health, but I rely completely on God" That is a beautiful image which to me sums up how we must trust God, how God is invisible but his presence is with us all the time, how we can rely on Him.

She supervised paintings of her visions in later life and these were also unlike anything else in medieval art. She expressed her experiences of God as being " like a wheel, a circle, a whole, that can neither be understood, nor divided, nor begun nor ended, just as a circle embraces all that is within it, so does the Godhead embrace all , you are encircled by the arms of the mystery of God"

Hildegard believed in the concept of viriditas – or greenness – a type of vigour and youthful freshness and the life renewing work of the Holy Spirit. This was a theme through all her poetry and writings.

She was a truly extraordinary person, her own person, who devoted her entire life and works to God and God alone . Her letters and actions show how she refused to be dictated to by kings, abbots or by church authorities , trusting in God implicitly. Because of this , although she was honoured locally as a saint she was not officially declared a saint of the Roman Catholic Church until May 2012 by Pope Benedict XVI . A few months later he named her a Doctor of the Church (her teachings are recommended doctrine) . She is only the fourth woman to be so honoured after Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Siena and Terese of Lisieux.

A few more of her sayings

"Humanity, take a good look at yourself. Inside you've got heaven and earth, and all of creation.

You're a world – everything is hidden in you"

" The soul is not in the body; the body is in the soul"

"Love abounds in all things, excels from the depths to beyond the stars, is lovingly disposed to all things. She has given the king on high the kiss of peace"

" A human being is a vessel that God has built for himself and filled with his inspiration so that his works are perfected in it"

" Like billowing clouds. Like the incessant gurgle of the brook. The longing of the spirit can never be stilled"

" Trust shows the way"

" There is the music of Heaven in all things"

“ The fire has it’s flame and praises God. The wind blows the flame and praises God. In the voice we hear the word which praises God. And the word, when heard, praises God. So all of creation is a song of praise to God “

On you tube

“ A feather on the Breath of God “ Emma Kirkby . Malcolm Guite wrote a sonnet on “Hildegard of Bingen”

Malcolm Guite : A Sonnet

A feather on the breath of God at play,
You saw the play of God in all creation.
You drew eternal light into each day,
And every living breath was inspiration.
You made a play with every virtue playing,
Made music for each sister- soul to sing,
Listened for what each herb and stone was saying,
And heard the Word of God in everything.

Mother from mother earth and Magistra,
Your song revealed God’s hidden gift to us;
The verdant fire, his holy harbinger
The greening glory of viriditas.
“Cherish this earth that keeps us all alive”
Either we hear you , or we don’t survive.