

VENI CREATOR SPIRITUS

A MEDIEVAL MEDITATION

[The following is extracted from Ms. Bodl. 423, a fifteenth-century manuscript containing meditations on phrases from the liturgy. The MS has been dated 1430-40, and the extract here given runs from fol. 156v. to fol. 161.—C.K.]



ND therefore, good Lord, sith it is so that I may not nor can not have no good thought be it never so little a thought but if I have it of thee, as thou sayest thyself: *Sine me nihil potestis facere*. Therefore, Lord, I knowlege well that thou art of my soul both the door and the key, as thy gospel saith: *Ego sum ostium*. And Holy Church clepith thee the key, saying *O clavis David*, O thou Jesu the key of David. And sithen good Lord I am of un-power and thou art the door and the key, therefore my sweet lord now at this time I fall down to thy majesty, knowing that I am not worthy to lift up mine eyes towards thee for the multitude of my sins, but with a meek will I say *Domine labia mea aperies*, Lord thou shalt open my lips with the key of thy mercy, and so come in and let in thyself into mine heart, thy privy chamber, I pray thee Lord. *Cor mundum crea in me Deus et spiritum rectum innova in visceribus meis*. Make in me a clean heart God and renew in my inwards the spirit of rightwiseness. And so good lord, make perfect in me that thou hast grafted in me, the very love of obedience, the clean keeping of chastity and spiritual poverty for thy sake, that I may say with the prophet: *Perfice gressus meos in semitis tuis*. Lord make my passages parfit in thy ways. One of thy ways, Lord, was wilful poverty as thy prophet saith by thee: *Pauper sum ego et in laboribus a iuventute mea*. I am right poor and used in labours from my young age. Another way of thine was lowly obedience, as St Paul saith: *Christus factus est pro nobis obediens usque ad mortem*. Christ was obedient unto the death, and not to the fairest death, but to the most shameful and painful death, *mortem autem crucis*, the death of the cross. Another way was chastity in thought, in word, in deed, having a chaste virgin to mother, chaste disciples and chaste doctrine. And for as much as I have behote, Lord, to thee to follow thee in these three ways, therefore I ask that thou make these three ways perfect in me, that when the fiend of pride, wrath or envy assaileth me, that I may then withstand him with meek obedience after thy teaching. And when the fiend teaseth me by desires of worldly (covetise)

covetousness, then set in me, good Lord, true wilful poverty of heart. And when he ariseth against me by the filth of fleshly-hood within myself or without forth, then, good Lord, arm thou me with thy clean chastity and devout thought on thee. And when thou hast made these ways thus steadfast in me, then good Lord I may the wiselooker pray to thee, and call on thee. But for as much as it is perilous for a feeble brain as I have, to climb to the highest first for dread of falling into presumption, therefore I dare not suddenly pray to thine almighty power, the which is appropred to the Father, nor to his high wisdom that is appropred to the Son, but I dare well and boldly pray to thy grace, that longeth to the holy Ghost. And for there may no power nor wisdom be had without the gift of thy grace, therefore I wretch come to the Holy Spirit, calling to thy grace: *Qui dator est et donum*, the which are both the gift and the giver. And I say homely to thee Lord, *Veni*, come to me by thy gentleness. And why say I thus to thee, forsooth thou art my *Creator*, my maker when I was nought. Who may better help that is amiss than he that made it first good? Thyself Lord madest my soul right good and I have appeared¹ it through my folly, but I can not by myself bring it again to be good, but if² thou help. And why? for thou art *omnium artifex*, the crafty³ lord of all things. And by cause that my disease and need is rather on the part of my soul than of my body, and a ghostly thing may best help another ghostly thing, therefore I call thee *spiritus*, a spirit, for the comfort of my spirit. And why call I thee, Lord, thus? it is for that I would that thou shouldest visit me; *visita*, not with thy fierceness and dread as thou didst the people of Israel as it is written in *Exodus chapter 20*, how they were feared and stonished. But I would be visited *superna gratia*, with thine highest grace that is most needful to me: that is that I may know mine own frail and wretched life, and so to come to very and true contrition, to love weeping, to have holy confession, and to abide in steadfast will and true purpose and joy in thy service, and so to receive thine highest grace, that is my saviour the sacrament of the Altar, my lord, my love, my spouse, my comfort, my joy and the father of my faith. And this is the highest grace that I may have. *Et que tu creasti pectora*. And all the souls that thou hast made may none other joy have but this. For when this Lord is well had, all manner joy ghostly is had. And when he faileth then is there no good thing had, and in such a vain soul is matter of great heaviness. *Paraclitus diceris*. Thou art

¹ made it worse—*ad prior atus* (?)

² except

³ in the old sense, 'skilful'.

called a comforter and thine office is to call again such souls that have gone astray from thine highest grace by divers sins, that they should not fall into the worst sin that is called desperation. In thee, Lord, trusted much David the King, when he had sinned, that he not fall into the sin of desperation saying: *emundabor a delicto maximo*. I shall be cleansed from the greatest sin. And there where the greatest sin has had mastery, it were necessary that there should come the highest remedy. And sith remedy is there none, Lord, but thyself, for thou art called: *donum dei altissimi*, the gift of the highest God. Oh! if I should receive a gift of an earthly king, it were greatly to be worshipped. If it were a gift of an angel of heaven, it were more to be worshipped. But the gift of the highest God ought over all things to be most worshipped and had in most dainty.⁴ For it is not given to one person or two or three only, but to all persons and in divers wises, and therefore, dear Lord thou art called: *Fons vivus*. O well of life that spreadest thy rivers to every country, to every land, to every kingdom, to every man as him needeth. As to some thou givest water of great wisdom and wise counsel giving, as holy church singeth of thee: *Aqua sapientiae potabis illos dominus*. Our Lord drinketh to them⁵ the water of wisdom. To some thou givest the water of gracious preaching and teaching. And to this water thou callest all people as Isaiah saith, the 55th chapter: *Omnes sitientes venite ad aquas*: all folks that thirst ghostly comfort, come they to the waters of preaching of God's word. To some thou givest the waters of penance as to thine apostles, and many other saints. To some the water of great devotion, as many of thy privy and tender lovers, that can not hear nor speak of thee but if their heart weep for joy, by holy contemplation and desire, as the prophet saith: *Sitivit anima mea ad deum fontem vivum*. My soul hath thirsted to my Lord God, the well of life. And this great desire in thy servants thou turnest to a charitable fire, and so thou art called *ignis caritatis*. And thus wert thou showed on Pentecost day to our blessed Lady the queen of heavens, and to the Apostles all in tongues of fire, in token that through their preaching all good people of the world were warmed by devotion and charity, in so much that they would all the world had been in that same grace that they had, although they had many adversaries that withstood them and diseased them. For it is all day seen that among clean wheat grow evil weeds, and among fair herbs creep adders, snails and other venomous worms. And so, good Lord, among good creatures thou sufferest the angry adders of

⁴ *dignitatem*, esteem.

⁵ giveth them to drink, cf. 'drench'.

proud and envious people, to disease the good people, the snails of slow folk and the venomous worms of lecherous and gluttonous folk, and the wasteful wolf of covetous people. And why dost thou thus? for sooth for the good folk, seeing the mischief of such sins, should the more be stirred to thanking of thee, that they never fell in such sins. Also that they should have the more pity on sinners, and the more fervently turn to devout prayers for them. And this is the charitable fire of thee Lord. And so such hardhearted people thou art *spiritalis unctio*, a ghostly anointing. Good ointment easeth hard botches⁶ and achings of bones. And so, good Lord, thyself,⁷ to hearts that have long lain in custom of horrible sins, and therein have hardened their hearts through shame of telling in confession, and for dread of penance doing in satisfaction, that they feel greatly aching in conscience and maketh them full dry from the sweetness of devout prayer in almsdeeds, and this disease continueth in them long times and many years, so forsooth, that many be damned wilfully through presumption of the mercy of God, rather than they would accuse themselves to their lawful curates. But, good Lord, against such pains of sins, thou art an wholesome ointment, for to such people thou profferest other while, oil of forgiveness to them that will turn toward thee, and grantest them grace of good life, and after their decease, the rewards of bliss everlasting.⁸ And if the ache be so great in conscience that they will not turn for this oil, then thou layest on the fretting corrosive of the pains of hell, and the loss of bliss, and of all other saints and of their good works. And so Lord I doubt it not, but with these two ghostly ointments, thou bringest perilous and great sicknesses into great ease and perfect health. And so this leechcraft [be]longeth well to thee Lord. For why? *Tu septiformis munere, dexteræ dei tu digitus*. Thou art the finger of the right hand of God, by a sevenfold gift. I know-ledge well by example that out of the body cometh an arm, and out of the body and arm cometh a finger and that the body, arm and finger all three make one body. By the body that hath great strength, I liken the Father. By the arm that cometh of the body, I liken the Son, and through the Father and the Son, cometh the Holy Ghost, that is the finger. And as the body, arm and finger make but one body, so the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, three persons, make but one God and one Lord. And so whatever the finger doth, the body and the arm doth. And therefore blissful

⁶ swellings, 'bosses'.

⁷ an omission here?—give thyself?

⁸ An omission is marked and written into the margin in another hand. '—is thyn esy oy that helpyght ma a sinfull soule—'?

Holy Ghost thou art well called the finger of the right hand, that is the Son Christ Jesus and of God the Father. And with this finger thou servest thy lovers, with a seven fold service, as Isaiah re-
 hearseth; the service of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and of strength, pity and kunning,⁹ and the last with the dread of God serving: *Timoris domini*. And as a good cook tempereth and seasoneth discretely all his meats with salt, and assayeth them with his finger, so thyself Lord temperest with the finger of thy grace and dread all thine other gifts. And as all other meats be unsavoury but they be measured with salt, so all manner wisdom, kunning, understanding, pity or counselling or strength, and all other good works, they be unsavory but they be tempered discretely with the dread of God, as Solomon saith: *Initium sapientiae timor domini*. The beginning of wisdom is the dread of God. And this salt of dread bringeth in holiness, as David saith: *Timor domini sanctus*: the dread of God is holy, for it bringeth folk to holiness. The fiend our enemy, waiteth ever night and day to take away from us these seven gifts given to us by the finger of grace, by his seven cursed gifts of the seven deadly sins, but, good Lord, against his cruel malice. *Tu rite promissum patris sermone ditans gutturi*. Thou makest rich our throats through the behest of thy father. Experience telleth well, that out of the breast cometh the throat, and the mouth is the end of the throat, and he that speaketh of the middle of a thing, he understandeth there in both ends. Therefore, good Lord, I understand not else but when our enemy assaileth us, to put us aside from thy grace, then is it thy will, that we should make our breasts, throats and mouths rich with holy prayers and devout thoughts on thy painful passion and death, that made us rich from everlasting bondage, and so to scomfit¹⁰ the battle of the devil, the world and the flesh, by the precious and rich blood and the water that thou gavest for us. But yet, good Lord, that we be so frail, that we ground us not steadfastly on the times of temptation, but we fault; as thyself bearest witness in thy gospel. *Ad tempus credunt et in tempore tentacionis recedunt*. At a time we believe well but when time of temptations cometh, then we fall off from the work of good purpose, and therefore against this default of unsteadfastness, blessed Lord, Holy Ghost: *Accende lumen sensibus, in funde amorem cordibus, infirma nostri corporis, virtute firmans perpetuum*. In three parts, Lord, standeth our grievance and therefore we ask of thee true sovereign remedies. The first grievance is in our bodily wits, the which bringeth oft

⁹ Knowing, knowledge.

¹⁰ discomfit.

times great storms of uncleanness to the soul, as be unclean hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting and feeling, and these wits be contained in the head. And therefore we pray thee *Accende lumen sensibus*: Kindle light in our wits from beastly desires, for to these wits the devil maketh sudden saults and lusty, by consenting to sin. And therefore, Holy Ghost, *hostem repellas longius*. Put away with thy light the darkness of the fiend. The second grievance is in our ghostly wits, the which be troubled by waxing weary, and sloth of good and honest thoughts and works, and these wits be contained in the heart, and therefore we pray: *Infunde amorem cordibus*. Put love in our hearts, that we may grow, *de virtute in virtutem*, by virtue to virtue. And against the devil that is maker of envy and grudging, Holy Ghost, *pacem dones protinus*. Grant us peace hastily that the fiend have none anchor to disturble us. The third grievance is in our own fleshly pricking and this running over all the body and therefore we pray thee: *Infirma nostri corporis virtute firmans perpetim*, make steadfast the sickness of our body, for our enemy busieth him to defile our body, by consenting, by dreaming, by touching and other unclean means. Wherefore we pray thee: *Ductore sic te praeviso vitemus omne noxium*. Be to us such a for-leader, that we may be ware of all evil and only to take heed to thee, for thou art the leader in the true knowing, for *per te sciamus da patrem*, by thy grace we may know thee Father of bliss, *noscamus atque filium*, by thee we may know the Son, that is Lord of our redemption. *Te utriusque spiritus credamus omne tempore*. Grant that we may believe thee for the spirit of them both, one God, one lord, and one majesty, to whom angels give praising, with joyful singing without ceasing, *sanctus pater, sanctus filius, sanctus spiritus, domine deus sabaoth*. God and Lord of the great hosts in heaven, in earth and in hell, with whom all we may say: *sit laus Patri cum filio, sancto simul paraclito*. Praising with heart and mouth, with voice and will, be to the Father and the Son and also to the Holy Spirit. And when we have most need, *In hora mortis succurre nobis, domine*. In the hour of death help us so, good Lord, then *nobis ut mittat filius carisma sancti spiritus*, that our aller¹¹ Saviour Jesus Christ send to us the grace of the Holy Ghost. Amen. Amen.

¹¹ the Saviour of us all.