

## A SERMON BY MEISTER EKKHART

*Translated by E. C. STOPP*

[The translation is taken from the Middle High German text from the authoritative edition of Josef Quint. Few of the sermons have as yet appeared in this edition so that the choice was limited; moreover these sermons are for the most part reconstructed somewhat disjointedly from verbatim notes. In reading this sermon therefore one should be careful to remember that here only a portion of the mystic's thought is given, and that it stands out of its context. But in view of the immense importance of Meister Eckhart in the subsequent development of mystical theology almost any words of his have a tremendous significance. At risk of misrepresenting the author this excerpt is published as being of considerable interest to those who study the development of mysticism.]

## EKKHART

*'In hoc apparuit caritas Dei in nobis' (1 John iv. 9).*



HAT has revealed the love of God, where we are concerned, is that he has sent his only-begotten Son into the world, so that we might have life through him' (that is with him and in him); for all who do not live in the Son, are surely on the wrong road'.

Suppose there were a rich king who had a beautiful daughter, and he gave her to a poor man's son, then this man's whole family would be raised and honoured. According to a master's words: 'God was made man, and this has raised and honoured the whole human race'. Well may we rejoice that Christ, our Father, ascended by his own power above all the choirs of Angels, and sits at the right hand of the Father. This master has spoken well, but I do not find his words really helpful. What good would it do me if I had a brother who was rich, and I myself were poor? What good would it do me if I had a brother who was wise, and I myself a fool?

But I want to stress something else that is nearer the point: God was not only made man; but rather, he took human nature upon himself.

The masters agree in their opinion that all men are equally noble by nature. But I say further: all the goodness that has been in all the saints and in Mary, God's Mother, and in Christ's human nature, all that is in me, my own, my nature. And now you may ask: as in my nature I own all that is in Christ's humanity, how is it that we look up to him and honour him as our Lord and our God? That is because he was God's messenger to us and brought us our bliss. The bliss that he brought us was ours. When the Father bears his Son from the depths of his essence.

then this nature comes into being. But the essence is one and simple. Here in this world something definite may appear or adhere in it, but that is not this one and simple essence.

I say something further and something difficult: He who is to dwell in the bareness of this essence and be in direct contact with it, must have won detachment from all creatures, so that he is as well disposed to the man who is beyond the seas and whom he has never seen as to the man who is near him and is his dearest friend. While you wish more good for yourself than for the man you never saw, you are surely on the wrong road and you have never even for a second gazed into that abyss of simple essence. You may have seen the truth in an image or in a dim reflection: but you have never known the best.

And secondly you must be pure of heart, for that heart alone is pure which has destroyed all creatures within it. And thirdly you must stand above all self-contradiction. What is it that burns you in hell? All the masters say it is self-will, but I say it is self-contradiction that burns you up in hell. Let me illustrate. Supposing a burning coal were laid on my hand. If I were to say that the coal is burning my hand I should be very wrong. But if I am to say what does burn me, it is the contradiction, the 'not', because the coal has in it something that my hand has 'not'. And behold this same 'not' burns me. But if my hand were identical with the coal in content and function, then it would be wholly fire by nature. If then someone took up all the fire that ever burned and threw it upon my hand, that could not hurt me. In the same way then, God and all those that stand before his face and in full bliss have something that the others who are parted from God have not. This 'not', this absence alone tortures the souls that are in hell more than any self-will or any fire. And indeed I say: as long as you are bound up in this 'not', in this self-contradiction, you are imperfect. Therefore if you would be perfect, you must be freed from all inner strife.

And further, the text which I told you at the beginning says: 'God sent his only-begotten Son into the world'; this you are not to understand as the outer world, in the way that he ate and drank with us: you are to take it as meaning the inner world. As surely as God begets his Son's human nature out of his own simple essence, as surely he begets him in the hidden depths of our spirit, and that is the inner world. Here God's abyss is my abyss and my abyss is God's abyss. Here I live from a point beyond my own self, as God lives from beyond himself. The man who has had a moment's glimpse into this abyss counts a thousand talents of gold as a bad farthing. Out of the knowledge of this abyss you are to do all that you do and do it without question. Indeed I say: while you do your works in order to gain Heaven, or God, or your eternal bliss—that is, for outer reasons, you are on the wrong road. You may pass, but this is not the best. Indeed, if you imagine you can get closer to God by solitude and introversion, in devotion, in

sweetness, and in extraordinary graces, than by the kitchen fire or in the stable, then you are no better than if you took God and wrapped his head in a cloak and pushed him under a bench. He who seeks God by ways and means, lays hold of the means and loses God who is hidden in the means. But he who seeks God immediately, lays hold of God as he is in himself; and he lives with the Son, and is life itself. If for a thousand years one were to ask life: 'why do you live?' were it to answer it would say: 'I live because I live'. That is because life lives and wells from out of itself; it lives without a 'why' because it lives out of itself. If you ask a sincere man who works from out of himself: 'why do you do your work?' were he to answer aright he would say: 'I work because I work'.

Where the creature ends, there God begins. All God asks of you is to go out of yourself as a creature and to let God be God in you. The least creaturely image that is formed in you is as great as God. Why? Because it robs you of a whole God. As soon as the image enters, God departs, and all his Godhead. But when the image goes, God enters. God's desire for you to go out of yourself as a creature is as urgent as if it were his whole bliss. Well then, dear man, what harm will it do you to let God be God in you? Go wholly out of yourself for God's sake, and God will come wholly out of himself for your sake. When both go out of themselves, what remains is wholly simple and one. In the deepest well of this simplicity God bears his Son. Then the holy Ghost comes to flower, and a loving will is engendered in God which belongs to the soul. While the will is untouched by all creatures and by all that is created, it is free. Christ says: 'No one returns to heaven but he who comes from it'. All things are made out of nothing: therefore their real origin is 'nothing'; and in the measure in which a man's noble will goes out to creatures, it dissolves with creatures into their nothingness.

Now there is one question: can this noble will dissolve in such a way as never to regain itself? The masters say, that in so far as time has carried it away it does not return. But I say: when your will turns away from itself and from all creatures and returns even only for an instant to its fountainhead, then the will is free and right again and in this one moment all lost time is redeemed.

Often people say to me, 'Pray for me'. And then I think, why do you search outside? Why do you not stay within and use your own wealth? For the essence of all reality is within you.

That we may remain within ourselves in such a way as to come to all truth without means and without distinctions, in true bliss—to this may God's help lead us. Amen.

*Fragments.* (Edition Pfeiffer—page 600, Nos. 10, 12, 13.)

Meister Eckhart says: He who is at all times alone within himself, is worthy of God; and God is ever present to him who is

always at home within himself; and in him who lives at all times in an eternal 'now', God is ever bearing his Son anew.

God lets nothing befall us which is not meant to entice us to himself. I will never thank God for the fact that he loves me, for he cannot do otherwise. His nature forces him to love; I will thank him because in his goodness he does not *stop* loving me.

The highest that the human spirit can achieve in this body is to have in all a steady dwelling place which lies beyond all. To dwell beyond all, is to dwell in recollection and in mere sufferance of one's self and of all things. To dwell in all, is to dwell in constant stillness, that is, in an intuition of the eternal image, where the image of all things glows in simplicity and in oneness.

---

#### REVIEWS

WHATSOEVER HE SHALL SAY: The First 'Theophila' Correspondence.

By Fr F. Valentine, O.P. (Blackfriars Publications; 5s.)

Those who so easily say: 'Such things are too high for me!' will thank *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* for making known this encouraging book. It all grows out of the first letter. 'Theophila' writes that she has no 'spiritual difficulties'—but perhaps because she has no spiritual life at all! 'Deep down', she wants to give everything to God—but how? Not in a convent! (She is indeed just now explaining to St Joseph exactly the kind of husband she wants . . .) 'To *give*'? Just now she wants to *get*! Is she merely 'using' our Lord and our Lady? Our Lady called herself God's handmaid: Theophila fears it may be she who wants to be waited on. Her parish priest, preaching on: 'Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth', said that perhaps most Catholics pray: 'Hear, Lord, for thy servant speaketh'! Happy the soul whom Fr Valentine indeed 'directs': he is no mere inquisitor, or dissector, nor 'manages' a soul as they propose, today, to 'manage' the masses who can't do it for themselves!

He goes to the root of the matter. 'God has made us'—so says the Catechism: but God *is making* us, and from within, and the more powerfully when we let him have his own way. (See Fr de Caussade.) But this means not merely 'do not interfere'—it means 'loving co-operation'. (St Francis de Sales; St Jeanne de Chantal.) This certainly implies Prayer: but *how* pray? Prayer is not talking to, or even thinking about, *Self*. Fr Valentine, far from despising 'vocal' prayer (inadequate epithet, really; but by now stereotyped), regrets the disuse of prayer-books (and shows how spiritual reading must *feed* prayer): he stresses the value of 'petition' and the need of protecting 'loving spontaneity' by Reverence (Abbot Marmion), itself often to be safeguarded by the use of 'formulas'. (A Roman chauffeur, pleased that I had spoken to an even poorer man in polite formulas, said to