

century of debilitated physical and nervous constitutions, there is no one who could not aim at this: 'Through her apostolate of charity she won more souls to God than many famous preachers of her time'.



A SERMON BY SERLO OF SAVIGNY

preached in chapter to the Monks of Fontenay

Translated by JOHN HIGGENS, O.S.B.

Serlo was Abbot of Savigny in Normandy from 1139 to 1153 when he retired to Clairvaux; he died in 1158. He was a contemporary and admirer of St Bernard; and it was no doubt largely owing to St Bernard's influence that in 1147 Serlo submitted the whole group of Savigniac houses to the Cistercian Order. Among these were several in England, including Buckfast and Quarr. Serlo had a reputation as a preacher. Of his thirty-four sermons known to survive—not all of them, however, are complete—the greater part were included in the sixth volume of the Bibliotheca patrum Cisterciensium, edited by Tissier in 1664. The rest remain apparently still in manuscript. An exception is that translated here, which was published by Dom Wilmart in the Revue Mabillon, tome XII (1922), pp. 26–38. The following is a rather free rendering of the Latin. A third section on prayer seems to be wanting. Perhaps time ran out and it was never delivered.

'SERVE ye the Lord with fear, and rejoice unto him with trembling' (Ps. ii, 11).

Good men should be exercised in three ways: in bodily labour; in attentive reading; in devoted prayer. Bodily labour afflicts the flesh; attentive reading instructs the mind; devoted prayer brings one to contemplation.

In bodily labour we suffer tribulation, but are not distressed; we are cast down, but perish not; bearing about in our body the mortification of the Lord Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our bodies (2 Cor. iv, 8–10). For Christ's sake we endure these things, in labour and painfulness, in many watchings,

in hunger and thirst, in many fastings (2 Cor. xi, 27), mastering the flesh and strengthening the spirit. For he who nourishes the flesh, nourishes a foe. This is why the prophet says: O daughter of Babylon (Ps. cxxxvi, 8), and so on. The daughter of Babylon means the flesh; its works bring us to confusion. He is blessed, then, who repays it in its own coin. Since for the good we showed the flesh it has repayed us evil, so we must try to repay it with mortification, affliction and parsimony, things which seem opposed to it; and so we may dash in pieces its little ones, that is its suggestions, on the love of Christ.

After bodily labour comes attentive reading. As we read, God speaks to us, while when we pray, we speak to God (as it is written: who prays, speaks with God; who reads, God speaks with him). For in our reading God shows us his will, puts his commands before us, promises rewards, rebukes our negligence, threatens punishment. But in prayer we show him our own will, make plain our misery, display our love, and demand his pardon as our remedy. There is as it were a firm agreement between us and God, and if we wish to be heard as we pray, we should listen to him and obey him as we read. For he says to us, Why call you me Lord, Lord, and do not the things that I say? (Luke vi, 46); and in Solomon, He that turneth away his ears from hearing the law, his prayer shall be an abomination (Prov. xxviii, 9). And in Isaias also God says to the Jews, When you stretch forth your hands, I will turn away my eyes from you; and when you multiply prayer, I will not hear; for your hands are full of blood (Is. i, 15). These are the people that honour God with their lips, and their heart is far from him (Matt. xv, 8); who knowing God's law and doing it not, shall be beaten with many stripes (Luke xii, 47).

In what way we should profit from reading is shown us on the authority of scripture. We read of Jonathan, that when he saw David his soul was knit with David's soul. Whereupon he stripped himself of his coat and put it on David; he gave him the girdle he had around him, and finally furnished him with bow and arrows (1 Kings xviii, 1-4). For the same reason after shooting three arrows he found him as he hid in the field, and there they embraced, not without sighs and tears (ib. xx, 35ff).

David stands for Christ. Jonathan (whose name means gift of the dove) is the mind that is teachable and skilled in understanding

the scriptures. As it reads, it sees David; knows his power, loving-kindness, mercy and charity. His power: for whatever he would, he carried out. Loving-kindness; for by the example of his goodness he restrains all our evil-doing. Mercy, for he mercifully aids us in our miseries, by forgiving our sins. Charity, with which he loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood (Apoc. i, 5).

The soul of Jonathan is knit with David's soul as the reader considers that his mercies are over all his works (Ps. cxliv, 9). He puts off his coat and clothes him when he puts off the old man and puts on the new, which is created according to God (Ephes. iv, 22, 24). He gives him the girdle that girds him, when he keeps chastity for his love's sake. Now chastity is kept by three kinds of continence: of the members, of the senses, of the thoughts; of the members, when we refrain from unlawful acts; of the senses, when we avoid ill-advised looks; of the thoughts, when we cut short an evil inclination.

Jonathan gives David his bow and arrows when as he reads he directs all his care to delighting in him. By the bow we understand holy scripture; by the arrows, God's thoughts and words. In a bow are two things: the wood and the cord. By the wood, which is useless alone, we understand the old testament; by the cord, the new. As the cord makes the wood useful, so too the new testament makes the old flexible. The arrows, God's words, wound the hearts of the hearers; as the Bride says: I am wounded with love (Cant. ii, 5, LXX).

After shooting three arrows, Jonathan found David. There are three senses in holy scripture: historical, moral, allegorical. The historical recounts what took place; the moral shapes the life and conduct of the hearers; the allegorical signifies Christ and his Church. It is in this allegorical sense, as at the third arrow-shot, that Jonathan, who is the good monk, finds Christ hidden. For he is hidden in the figures of the allegory and in the divine mysteries. This finding stirs up compunction and devotion, uttering of sighs and weeping of tears. This is why it is said they embraced and wept together.

So a monk profits by reading. But may it never happen to him as to Jonathan, who, after he had gone back to Saul his father, was dead in Mount Gelboe (1 Kings xxxi, 2). So a monk who despises the delights of reading often returns to delight in a worldly

life and dies there in the mountain of pride and by the waters of self-indulgence. Such as these Jeremy laments when he says, The noble sons of Sion and they that were clothed with the best gold, how are they esteemed as earthen vessels, the work of the potter's hands? (Lam. iv, 2.) The sons of holy Church, who at first were devoted to the contemplation of things to come, clothed with finest gold, adorned, that is, with spiritual wisdom, who first were golden vessels, vessels of wisdom, have become earthen vessels, of the clay of concupiscence. Formerly one could drink from them the wine of true delight; now the gall of asps and the bitter juice of labour. They are reckoned vessels of earth like the potter's handiwork; suddenly as brittle clay they are shattered, with a blow from the ancient enemy. Just so those who once fed delicately, who were once delighted with the fair sayings of the scriptures, have perished by the way, in the broad paths of worldly desires. Those who were fostered in rich array, that is in the fervour of charity, have grasped at the dung-hill, which is a love for the uncleanness of the flesh.

May God remove such disaster far from our brothers. Rather let attentive reading lead them on to devoted prayer.



GAMALIEL

Q. Not a long time ago my children asked me the following question, which I ask you: 'Genesis i, 1-31 tells us about God's work of creation. But imagine that there is no earth, sun, stars, or moon. So before God's work of creation there existed only space. The question is: What was space before being space?'

PATERFAMILIAS, *Mexico.*

A. The question can be answered in one word; Nothing. It is the Christian faith that God created all things *ex nihilo*, from nothing. Is space nothing? Strictly speaking, no. The idea of space, like that of time, only has meaning in relation to material things. If there are no material things, earth, sun, stars, or moon, there is no space.