

by Aldhelm Cameron-Brown, O.S.B.

Blossom like the rose that grows on the banks of a watercourse. Give off a sweet smell like incense, flower like the lily, spread your fragrance abroad, sing a song of praise blessing the Lord for all his works.

(Ecclesiasticus, ch. 39.)

There is a story about two monks who lived long ago and who had taken a vow never to touch a woman. One day they were walking together through the forest, when they came to a clearing. Through the middle of the clearing ran a stream, rather wide and deep, and at this season rather turbulent. By the banks of the stream stood a pretty girl, obviously in some distress because she wanted to cross the stream but was afraid to. Hardly pausing in his stride, the elder and taller of the two monks picked her up in his arms, waded through the water, set her down safely on the further side, and walked on without waiting for her thanks. The younger monk was astounded. He crossed the stream—with some difficulty, because he was smaller—and then bounced along behind his companion, seething with suppressed criticism. At last he could stand it no longer. Catching up with the other, he said, in a voice that showed how deeply scandalized he was, ‘Brother—your vow!’ The elder monk looked round at him in surprise, and then said, rather sharply, ‘What! Are you still carrying that girl?’

Of our Lady above all people it can be said that her spirituality consisted in eating when hungry, sleeping when tired. When it was time to go to church, she went to church, and if her attention wandered when she was there, she didn’t run after it to bring it back, because wherever her attention wandered, it never left God. She didn’t spiritualize her work by trying to think of God while she made the beds; she spiritualized her work simply by making the beds; and the Lord was always with her. In other words, her spirituality consisted in doing what comes naturally; and if we want to see an example of this rather nearer to us, we can look at Pope John. There are all those little stories about the things he said or did, his words or actions so perfectly apt to each occasion, and yet so simple that it seems it would be easy to do the same. But if we try, we cannot, because in our case the words are unnatural, contrived, thought out; we are *trying* to be simple, or good-natured or whatever, whereas Pope John wasn’t trying. His words and actions were spontaneous and natural, flowing from the centre of his being as it sprang from the ever-creative hands of God. That was how it was

with our Lady, too; but whereas Pope John had worked hard at disciplining himself throughout a lifetime of peace and obedience before he could be just naturally himself, our Lady was like that from the beginning. Sin had no hold over her, she never lived in that metaphysical ignorance which is the lack of the true and life-giving wisdom.

And so the Church in her liturgy has often likened Mary to a flower. A flower which grows free and unconstrained, perfectly natural; and yet it is not jelly-like, amorphous, for it follows the law of its own inner growth, implanted in it by God. A flower opening itself to the divine sun, watered by the river of divine grace which is the Holy Spirit. And so, as Teilhard de Chardin saw, Mary is the model of the contemplative, because in her what was important was not what she did, but what she was. Or rather, perhaps we can say that in her there was a perfect fusion of being and doing, as we imply when we call her the immaculate Mother of God. She was immaculate, because she was to bring forth God; she gave birth to the Son who was God because she was free from sin, transparently pure.

And what Mary was, we are to be. Yet what Mary, conceived free from original sin, was, she was by nature, while we are born in sin and have to struggle to become like her. That is why St Benedict, writing a Rule for monks, can start straight off, first with hearing the word, and then with obedience, putting the word into practice. But the object of this obedience is always, as he takes for granted, to allow our own true nature to develop, to unfold, not to produce a mere external conformity to law. Our Lady, of course, being supremely free, obeyed all laws.

So we, like Mary, are to aim at becoming like the flower that grows on the banks of the river, blessing the Lord for all his works, not just in what we do, but above all in what we are; not seeing life and the gifts of creation as something to be given up, as if the flower glorified God by withering as soon as it bloomed (though some flowers do!), but seeing them as leading us to God. This does not, of course, mean that the Christian life is not a life marked with the cross. We must take up our cross with Christ, and if we do not accept that fact we shall never be at peace. Christ's life ended in apparent futility and failure, all the early hope and freshness of his mission turned to dust and ashes, rejected by those who came to him with God's authority: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? We cannot expect our life to be different to his. Yet it was when Christ was most abandoned by God that he was on the eve of his resurrection. Do other people see in us, even in the midst of anguish, a life of joy, of freedom in the Spirit, of creativity, of real love?

All these things, the trials and the joys, our Lady has shared with us. She was never a kind of remote goddess, as St Thérèse of Lisieux, with true spiritual instinct, realized. That is why one hopes that in all the much-needed reforms of Catholic churches there will still be

room for the homely devotional atmosphere of, for instance, the church in Warwick Street, where the walls of the shrine are lined with silver *ex votos*, where on any day you may see the London charwomen storming heaven with all the flower power of their prayer-laden rosaries, and where the late Queen Mary (so it is said) was not ashamed to feel at home. Mary is like the flower that can make the poorest home more beautiful than an old master would, and yet can add beauty to the grandest palace. She is the mystical rose, whose fragrance spreads the good odour of Christ around the world.

And as the lesson for several of her feasts says, our Lady is always at God's side, delighting him day after day, ever at play in his presence, at play everywhere in the world, and delighting, too, to be with the children of men. For Mary is the eternal flower child, dancing before the throne of God, dancing with the London charwomen and Terry Eagleton, dancing with Karl Rahner and Hans Kung, with Cardinal Ottaviani and Pio nono, with Abbot Marmion and the Little Flower; dancing with Gregory VII, who died in exile defending the authority of the Church, and with Joan of Arc, who died defending her conscience against the Church authorities; dancing with Francis and Dominic, with Bernard and Benedict, with Rufinus, Jerome and Origen, with Peter and Paul, John the beloved disciple and John the Baptist, and with her husband St Joseph.

The contemplative life, the contemplative aspect of all Christian life, consists precisely in this: to *realize* that eternity is not something that begins when time ends, or when we die. Eternity has no beginning, it is here and now, we are on the dance floor already. And the throne of God before which we dance is not something terrifying, wreathed in smoke and fire. It is Jesus Christ, in whom God has taken on hands and feet that he might join in the dance himself, so that for all eternity God will look at us from a human face. And as we gaze into the lovely splendour of those laughing eyes, we see in their depths our own true nature, one with the universe, one with our brethren, one with God. And we hear his voice speaking to us across the centuries, in the words of the mystics:

'Come unto me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Fain would I embrace you, fain would I be embraced;

Fain would I be pierced, and fain would I pierce;

Fain would I be borne, and fain would I bear;

Fain would I eat, and fain would I be eaten.

To you who gaze, a lamp am I; to you that know, a mirror;

To you who knock, a door am I; to you who journey, I am the way.

Divine grace dances: dance ye all!¹

Even so come, Lord Jesus.

Mystical rose, pray for us. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death.

Amen, amen.