

Notations on the Song Commentary by Bernard of Clairvaux

Introduction

Not long ago I had posted a document which gave birth to the one at hand entitled **Corporeality in St Bernard**. In fact, it was on this site as far as Sermon Ten. After a while the arbitrary choices of passages became more difficult to maintain which contributed to a sagging interest in the project. No longer was it enjoyable to sit down and continue with the document. It became a real chore. A short time into the **Commentary** revealed it shot through and through with references to corporeality in one form or another. More than that, the richness of the text with which I had been familiar became increasingly apparent. To pass over it would be a disservice. Finally it dawned that I'd have to undertake the whole **Song Commentary**, not bits and pieces, which is what we have here.¹

1As for the **Corporeality** text, the introduction to that text is posted here simply not to discard it:

Because the text at hand will be updated for some time to come, always it will remain at the project end. We're all familiar with how we make contact with the outside world or all that which is outside our bodies. Automatically we think the best way of effecting this is through the faculties of seeing and of hearing, with emphasis upon the former. It seems that both filter 99.99% of reality to our brains whereas the senses of taste, smell and touch play a secondary or supporting role. They're even relegated to the back burner except when it comes to things sensual or sexual. In other words, we tend to think of these three senses as means to obtain pleasure. Thus a certain conflict between the so-called higher senses is implied which is quite unfortunate when it comes to discerning things spiritual. This necessitates taking a closer look at these neglected three senses because they provide information that sight and hearing can't come close to offering. They are in immediate contact with reality that's less susceptible to mis-interpretation compared with what we have seen or have heard.

What's special about the three senses is their non-mental, one-on-one contact between our bodies and the outside world. With the exception of touch (for the most part), smell and taste bring the outside world into very ourselves. Generally their impressions last longer than what we've processed through sight or hearing. For example, the smell of burning leaves in autumn bring us right back to childhood. Also we can draw an immediate comparison with the taste of tomato sauce we're enjoying right now with the one grandma used to make, this no matter how long ago she had passed on.

This document examines a number of excerpts from Bernard's **Commentary on the Song of Songs** by St. Bernard of Clairvaux where constantly he employs corporeality as an analogy to describe things spiritual. Quite often he makes use of the senses of taste, smell and touch in a manner which is quite incomparable. Those references, in fact, are the ones we're after here. To be sure, we're wrestling with a paradox but a deliberate one which other writers were quick to get on board. After all, we as humans use all our senses to move around in the world. Thus it's natural for us to employ them for making analogies as to what we perceive as unseen or the spiritual realm.

Bernard's works don't find too much favor nowadays, many people considering him rather goeey or flowery (two good sensory words) compared with more abstract or "spiritual" authors. They are right. However, that impression comes largely from translations compared with the original Latin. Actually when you read him in that language, you're transported into a wholly-other reality. Even after a brief exposure you come away with the impression, how could a human being write like that? Some may disagree with this...perfectly acceptable...that not being an uncommon perception. On top of it, Bernard quotes scripture like crazy. He strings together direct quotes or parts of them one after another. In translation that makes for boring, an almost list-like reading experience. Yet again, the Latin text is a completely different matter.

At the same time the thought of slugging through eight-six sermons (in Latin) was a daunting, even frightening realization. It brought on almost a paralysis of trying to do that which appeared impossible. Nevertheless, love of Bernard's Latin style as well as his familiarity with scripture compelled me to undertake the task. Since this home page is devoted to the practice of *lectio divina*, the task of making notations to **Song Commentary** in its entirety gave both pause and encouragement. I asked myself, what's the rush? Why not simply begin and enjoy the text without worrying whether or not it'll be finished? After all, "doing the text" in the spirit of *lectio divina* at leisure is what it's all about. Such a project has a certain lavishness and uselessness about it but on another level, something profound is transpiring, difficult to articulate. I had gone through the **Commentary** once before, posted other documents related to it, and throughout those projects the time flew by. In fact, I wasn't even aware of how much time was involved. As for worrying about completion of an extended project, just the fact of making some of its richness more available is worth the effort. What has been set done can be projected into the rest of the text.

So there you have the *raison d'être* in a nutshell. As for the process adopted here,² it has the Latin text followed by the English translation. The original Latin contains in parentheses a series of brief remarks about a given word or phrase intended to flesh out the richness of its meaning³. In most cases alternate meanings are given for the purpose of enhancing an understanding of the text even if they don't apply to it directly. Also, the original form of the word is maintained, for example, the very first one being *saeculo* which isn't rendered by the normative *saeculum*. The same obviously applies to verbs and adjectives. As we move deeper into the **Commentary**, certain words and phrases are bound to repeat themselves. Some will be noted, many by their familiarity, and thus no need to give a translation. This dropping off, if you will, of words that have become familiar presumes that one has been reading through the text pretty much in its entirety or at least one sermon in its entirety. Obviously the occurrences of some words can reach a high number when taking into account the **Commentary** as a whole.

With regard to the critical Latin text, it is in two volumes entitled **Sermones super Cantica Cantorum** (Rome 1957 and 1958). As for the English translation, it comprises four volumes published by Cistercian Publications. The manner of identifying the excerpts are as follows: the first numeral represents the sermon followed by a dash and another numeral. This second numeral represents the paragraph of both the Latin and English translations.

Usually postings aren't put up with such a meager content. However, the Introduction with the first few paragraphs is presented simply as the alternative to the **Corporeality** text. Also it gives the reader an idea of where the document is heading. Future postings will be made regularly until all eighty-six sermons (hopefully!) are complete.

² These introductory words were written slightly into the project and may be subject to alteration as time goes on. That, of course, will be noted.

³ Many, certainly not all, words are noted. Also many words are recognizable clearly; some are omitted whereas others are defined because they have a broader application than the English derivative. All in all this is somewhat arbitrary but geared to reading the text in the spirit of *lectio divina*.

Sermon One

1-1. Vobis, fratres, alia quam aliis de saeculo (world; connotes an age or generation), aut certe aliter (differently, wrongly) dicenda sunt. Illis siquidem lac potum dat, et non escam (difference between milk and food, the latter being a dish prepared for table) [1 Cor. III, 2], qui Apostoli formam tenet (to hold or possess a shape, figure) in docendo (taught, instructed). Nam spiritualibus solidiora apponenda (appointed) esse, itidem ipse suo docet exemplo, Loquimur, inquiring, non in doctis humanae sapientiae (wisdom, discernment, skilled practice) verbis, sed in doctrina spiritus (compare with its opposite, *doctis humanae*), spiritualibus spiritualia comparantes (arrange, appoint, establish); item, Sapientiam (capital S intimates a divine person) loquimur inter (between, among) perfectos (completed, caused) [1 Cor. II, 13, 6], quales vos nimirum esse confido (to trust, rely upon); nisi frustra (in deception, error) forte jam ex longo studiis (extended, prolonged & pursuit, eagerness) estis coelestibus occupati (having been taken possession of, full), exercitati (trained, skilled, disciplined) sensibus, et in lege Dei meditati (planned, worked out) die ac nocte. Itaque parate fauces (throat, gullet), non lacti, sed pani. Est panis apud Salomonem, isque admodum splendidus sapidusque (savory, splendid, wise); librum (bread and book are the same; one is to eat the Song of Songs) dico, qui Cantica canticorum inscribitur: proferatur, si placet, et frangatur (to break, shatter).

The instructions that I address to you, my brothers, will differ from those I should deliver to people in the world, at least the manner will be different. The preacher who desires to follow St Paul's method of teaching will give them milk to drink rather than solid food, and will serve a more nourishing diet to those who are spiritually enlightened: "We teach," he said, "not in the way philosophy is taught, but in the way that the Spirit teaches us: we teach spiritual things spiritually." And again: "We have a wisdom to offer those who have reached maturity," in whose company, I feel assured, you are to be found, unless in vain have you prolonged your study of divine teaching, mortified your senses, and meditated day and night on God's law. Be ready then to feed on bread rather than milk. Solomon has bread to give that is splendid and delicious, the bread of that book called "The Song of Songs." Let us bring it forth then if you please, and break it.

1-2. Nam de verbis Ecclesiastes satis (adequately, sufficiently), ni fallor, per Dei gratiam instructi (equipped, prepared) estis mundi hujus cognoscere et contemnere (to learn, be acquainted, recognize & to scorn, despise) vanitatem (emptiness, nothingness). Quid et Parabolas? An non vita et mores (manner, custom, behavior) vestri juxta eam quae in ipsis invenitur doctrinam sufficienter emendati sunt et informati (corrected & delineated, fashioned, instructed)? Proinde illis ambobus praelibatis (offering, first fruits), quos nihilominus de amici arca praestitos (present, at hand) accepistis, accedite (approach, advance) et ad tertium hunc panem, ut probetis (approve, demonstrate) forsitan potiora. Cum enim duo sint mala (destructive), quae vel sola, vel maxime militant (to wage war) adversus animam, vanus scilicet amor mundi et superfluum (empty & overflowing, unnecessary) sui, pesti (disease, plague) utrique duo illi libri obviare (to resist, hinder) noscuntur (to recognize); alter sarculo disciplinae prava (crooked, deformed) quaeque in moribus (manner, custom, behavior), et carnis superflua (flowing over) resecans (curtailing); alter

luce rationis in omni gloria mundi fucum (pretense, disguise) vanitatis sagaciter deprehendens (wisely & to seize, overtake), veraciterque (truly) distinguens a solido veritatis (along with the adverb veraciter). Denique universis (whole, entire, collectively) humanis studiis (study, eagerness, desire), ac mundanis (worldly, cosmopolitan) desideriis praetulit (to place before another) Deum timere (to fear), ejusque observare mandata (mandate, law). Merito quidem. Verae etenim sapientiae primum illud, initium; secundum, consummatio (summing up, conclusion) est: si tamen constat (to stand together, to agree) vobis non aliud veram et consummatam esse sapientiam, quam declinare (to bend, turn away) a malo, et facere bonum; itemque recedere (to fall back, retreat) a malo neminem posse perfecte (achieved; adverb) absque timore Dei, nec bonum opus (accomplishment) omnino esse praeter observantiam (observance, remark, note) mandatorum.

1-2. Now, unless I am mistaken, by the grace of God you have understood quite well from the book of Ecclesiastes how to recognize and have done with the false promise of this world. And then the book of Proverbs - has not your life and your conduct been sufficiently amended and enlightened by the doctrine it inculcates? These are two loaves of which it has been your pleasure to taste, loaves you have welcomed as coming from the cupboard of a friend. Now approach for this third loaf that, if possible, you may always recognize what is best. Since there are two evils that comprise the only, or at least the main, enemies of the soul: a misguided love of the world and an excessive love of self, the two books previously mentioned can provide an antidote to each of these infections. One uproots pernicious habits of mind and body with the hoe of self-control. The other, by the use of enlightened reason, quickly perceives a delusive tinge in all that the world holds glorious, truly distinguishing between it and deeper truth. Moreover, it causes the fear of God and the observance of his commandments to be preferred to all human pursuits and worldly desires. And rightly so, for the former is the beginning of wisdom, the latter its culmination, for there is no true and consummate wisdom other than the avoidance of evil and the doing of good, no one can successfully shun evil without the fear of God, and no work is good without the observance of the commandments.

3. Depulsis (expelled, repelled) ergo duobus malis duorum lectione (a picking, selecting) librorum, competenter (suitably, properly) jam acceditur (to come toward, approach) ad hunc sacrum theoricumque (related to observation, consideration) sermonem: qui cum sit amborum fructus (profit, produce, enjoyment), non nisi sobriis (not drunk) mentibus (mind, intellect, reason) et auribus omnino credendus est (to confide in, trust). Alioquin ante carnem disciplinae (teaching, method, instruction) studiis (study, eagerness, desire) edomitam (tamed) et mancipatam (to transfer, sell) spiritui, ante spretam et abjectam (severed, rejected & cast away) saeculi pompam (procession) et sarcinam (package, burden), indigne (unworthily, shamefully) ab impuris lectio sancta praesumitur (to anticipate, presuppose). Quomodo nempe lux incassum (to no purpose) circumfundit (to flow around) oculos caecos vel clausos (blind & closed), ita animalis homo non percipit (to perceive, feel, understand) ea quae sunt Spiritus Dei [ibid., 14]. Quippe Spiritus sanctus disciplinae effugiet (to flee) fictum (feigned, fictitious) [Sap. 1, 5], quod est vita incontinenens (impudent, intemperate); sed nec erit ei unquam pars cum mundi vanitate, cum veritatis sit Spiritus [Joan. XIV, 17]. Quae enim societas (union for common purpose) ei quae desursum (from above) est sapientiae, et sapientiae mundi, quae stultitia (folly, stupidity) est

apud Deum [1 Cor. III, 19]; aut sapientiae carnis, quae et ipsa inimica (hostile, unfriendly) est Deo? [Rom. VIII, 7.] Puto (to value, esteem, judge) autem quod jam non habebit unde adversum nos murmuret (to grumble, complain) is, qui nobis de via venit amicus, cum et tertium istum insumpserit (to spend, apply) panem.

Taking it then these two evils have been warded off by the reading of choice books, we may suitably proceed with this holy and contemplative discourse which, as the fruit of the other two, may be delivered only to well prepared ears and minds. Before the flesh has been tamed and the spirit set free by zeal for truth, before the world's glamour and entanglements have been firmly repudiated, it is a rash enterprise on any man's part to presume to study spiritual doctrines. Just as a light is flashed in vain on closed or sightless eyes, so "an unspiritual person cannot accept anything of the Spirit of God." For "the Holy Spirit of instruction shuns what is false," and that is what the life of the intemperate man is. Nor will he ever have a part with the pretensions of the world, since he is the Spirit of Truth. How can there be harmony between the wisdom that comes down from above and the wisdom of the world, which is foolishness to God, or the wisdom of the flesh which is at enmity with God? I am sure that the friend who comes to us on his travels will have no reason to murmur against us after he has shared in this third loaf.