

ST ANDREW'S CHURCH GRAFHAM

'THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK'

16th September 2020

The earth which sustains humanity must not be injured. It must not be destroyed!

These words certainly have a contemporary resonance but they were actually written over eight hundred years ago in the twelfth century by Hildegard of Bingen, whom the Church remembers on 17th September, the anniversary of her death in 1179.

Hildegard was born in the last years of the eleventh century and as the tenth child in the family was dedicated to the service of God as a sort of living tithe. At the age of eight she was sent to a religious community and became a nun when she was fourteen. In her early forties she was appointed Abbess of her community which under her leadership moved to Bingen on the Rhine where they built a new abbey.

Today Hildegard is perhaps best known for the music she composed which is unconventional for its time and makes huge demands on the singer's vocal range. But she was also a theologian, a preacher, a visionary, a mystic, a scientist and a physician. A remarkable woman in any century but especially in her own time. She was also a prolific letter writer including kings, emperors and popes among her correspondents and got involved in many of the political and religious issues of her day.

There is so much I could say about Hildegard but as the Church continues to keep the season of Creationtide, I want today to focus on her deep interest in the natural world and her creation-centred mysticism which lay behind much of her theology.

Working in harmony with nature, like many in her time, Hildegard used the healing powers of natural objects. But, unlike others, she wrote complex scientific studies about natural history, the causes and cures of many diseases, and the medicinal uses of plants, animals, trees and stones. Some of her advice might not appeal to us today. For example, she recommends boiled hedgehog with wine, cinnamon and pimpernel as a good health-giving supper. However her advice to eat butter in moderation still finds favour today!

Hildegard had very strong ideas about everything being held in balance, writing that 'Everything that is in the heavens, on earth, and under the earth is penetrated with connectedness, penetrated with relatedness'. However what we would today call her environmental concerns were driven by her theology which integrated God, humanity and nature. It seems to me that perhaps we are most in need of recapturing this dimension today. She believed that human beings were woven into the picture at both a practical and spiritual level and had a very important part to play, 'Humankind, full of all creative possibilities, is God's work. Humankind alone is called to assist God. Humankind is called to co-create. With nature's help, humankind can set into creation all that is necessary and life-sustaining'. One of her key ideas is 'Viriditas' or 'greening' by which she means the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit at work in the world and our lives. She even writes about 'the green finger of God'.

Nevertheless Hildegard is very aware of how easily we can destroy as well as create. In words which are eerily prophetic, she writes, 'Now in the people that were meant to be green there is no

more life of any kind. There is only shrivelled barrenness. The winds are burdened by the utterly awful stink of evil, selfish goings-on. Thunderstorms menace. The air belches out the filthy uncleanliness of the peoples.'

Hildegard encourages us to see that the natural world is worth preserving not merely to ensure our own survival but because it is God's creation and we are part of it. As we appreciate the realities of the world around us we should be drawn to the most fundamental reality of all - to God, who holds everything in existence. Hildegard believed that as we care for the world, we make it beautiful; in making it beautiful, we are made beautiful ourselves; and in becoming beautiful we share in the eternal beauty of God. But it is clear that Hildegard is certainly not encouraging an other worldly spirituality.

I don't think that Hildegard would have been able even to begin to imagine the damage and destruction wrought on our planet by future generations especially the post industrial ones culminating in our own. Yet she speaks directly to us today as she offers us an important theological perspective on our ecological and environmental concerns. And she encourages us to act:

*If we fall in love with creation deeper and deeper,
we will respond to its endangerment with passion.*

With my love and prayers

Camilla

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