

THE WORD INTO WORDS:
“GRACE AND TRUTH” IN
ST. BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

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“St. Bernard became
a great preacher of grace in his own day:
first, by learning directly from the living Word
in Scripture, but also by learning from
‘inward experience.’”

When, in theology, we try to speak about God, or when we try to “preach the mystery,” often the very thing we want to say in a sentence or in a paragraph, has somehow to be *unsaid* in the next. God eludes all our thoughts and all our words. In a sense, we cannot speak about him at all. And yet we cannot stop speaking. He transcends—even in the reality of his Incarnation—all our categories. “Can any man say enough when he speaks of you?” Augustine exclaims, “Yet woe betide those who are silent about you! For even those who are most gifted with speech cannot find words to describe you.”¹ Reflecting with characteristic energy and scruple on the mystery of the experience of God, and on the difficulty in general of

¹St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, 1,4, trans., R.S. Pine-Coffin (Harmondsworth, 1961), 23.

speaking about God, Hans Urs von Balthasar writes: “For human thought, and still more for human feeling and experience, God’s presence and absence in the world are an unsearchable mystery. It would seem that we can think of it solely in dialectical, mutually invalidating statements.”² In order to underline the point he is making, Balthasar notes the fact that the more immanent God is, the more he is transcendent. “In itself,” Balthasar writes, “this dialectic is correct, but it sounds hollow and is difficult to translate into religious experience.”³ But this *translation*, if I am not mistaken, is precisely what, in the twelfth century, St. Bernard of Clairvaux managed somehow to achieve. And so, one of my aims in this paper will be to look at a number of extracts from the sermons of Bernard in which this translation appears most effective and most vivid.

I. *Mystery into Words*

The text I have particularly in mind is Sermon 74 from Bernard’s commentary on *The Song of Songs*. This particular homily is remarkable for the way it immediately brings to the fore questions which still puzzle us today concerning the experience of God and the preaching of that experience. First, the question, which is undoubtedly the most mysterious of all: What is it like, in practice, for a human being really to experience God in this life? Is an experience of this kind possible? And, if so, are there signs by which we can tell if the experience is genuine or false? And, when it is genuine, can it be described? And is it wise, in any case, to try to communicate something of this experience to others with whom we’re speaking about God or to whom we’re preaching? Is such experience not something that is attained only by a few rare contemplatives in this life? And is it our task, then, simply to proclaim certain truths *about* God—the central dogmas—but, for the rest, to maintain always a necessary silence concerning personal faith–experience?

Apropos of this question, I was struck some time ago by a statement made by John Paul II in *Donum et Mysterium*: “The minister of the Word,” he wrote, “must possess and pass on that knowledge of

²Hans Urs von Balthasar, *New Elucidations*, trans., M.T. Sherry (San Francisco, 1979), 46.

³Ibid.

God which is not a mere deposit of doctrinal truths but a personal and living experience of the Mystery.”⁴ Experience—the *word* “experience”—may seem like a rather obvious word to use in this context, even a necessary word. But, for a good part of the twentieth century—let us say the first thirty or forty years—the majority of Catholic theologians tended to avoid using the term. They did this largely because of its associations with Modernism, and because of the Modernist tendency to set up, over against the authority of tradition, and against even the great common statements of faith and dogma, the authority of individual religious experience. Since the middle of the twentieth century, however, and certainly since the time of the Council, there has been a significant return by teachers in the Church and by theologians to an earlier, more confident use of the word “experience.”⁵

(a) Bernard and “the Book of Experience”

Of all the great Doctors of the Church, Bernard of Clairvaux, the twelfth century mystic and reformer, is probably the one who uses the term “experience” most often, and uses it to the greatest effect.⁶ Speaking, for example, of what happens when an individual believer has received, in profound depth, the grace of the Spirit, and has become “wholly aflame with divine love,” Bernard states—and the strength of his assertion is worthy of note—that “then God is indeed *experienced*.”⁷ But Bernard goes on at once to say that, even here, God is not experienced “as he truly is” (i.e., not

⁴John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery: On the 50th Anniversary of My Priestly Ordination* (Nairobi, 1996), 109.

⁵See, for example, Jean Mouroux, *The Christian Experience: An Introduction to a Theology*, trans., G. Lamb (New York, 1954).

⁶For some modern reflections on the role of experience in St. Bernard, see: Paul Verdeyen, “Un théologien de l’expérience,” in *Bernard de Clairvaux: Histoire, Mentalité, Spiritualité* (Paris, 1992), 557–77; Jean Mouroux, “Sur les critères de l’expérience spirituelle d’après les Sermons sur les Cantique des Cantiques,” in *Analecta Sacri Ordinis Cisterciensis*, 9, 3–4 (1953): 253–67; Michael Casey, “Bernard’s Biblical Mysticism,” in *Studies in Spirituality*, 4, (1994), 12–30; Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism* (New York, 1994), 185–90.

⁷Sermon 50:6, in *On the Song of Songs*, vol. 3, trans., K. Walsh and I.M. Edmonds (Kalamazoo, 1979), 35. Italics mine.

in his *inmost* being), “a thing impossible for any creature.”⁸ Bernard is well aware that at least as challenging as the question of experience, is the question of the communication of experience. And yet, in Sermon 74, he is clearly intent on trying somehow to talk about what he calls “the wisdom hidden in the mystery.”⁹ But how can he do it? How can such an infinite mystery be contained in mere finite words? How can he, an individual believer, and a limited human being, presume to preach the mystery?

In answer to those among his brethren and friends, who had asked that he share with them something of his own interior life and experience, Bernard says: “[Y]ou force me to walk in great matters and mysteries which are beyond me. Alas! how afraid I am to hear the words, ‘Why do you speak of my delights and put my mystery into words?’ Hear me then as a man who is afraid to speak yet cannot remain silent.”¹⁰

Bernard’s most fundamental instinct, as a theologian and spiritual author, is to give attention more to the immediate experience of life around him—and within him—than to abstract theory. But Bernard is by no means unaware of the many ways experience can be deceptive, and how it needs, therefore, to be tested always by the living faith tradition, and measured against the Gospel. If, in the context of seeking God, we rely *only* on the evidence of our senses, for example, that kind of evidence or that “experience,” Bernard says, “is deceptive.”¹¹ We must seek, therefore, what he calls “the surer knowledge of faith, which discerns truths unknown to the senses, beyond the range of experience.”¹² When, however, experience is *faith-experience*, and is manifestly formed by the Word and by the Spirit, that experience for Bernard is nothing less than a mirror image of Gospel truth. And, as a result, the evidence and witness of personal experience, at this level, holds for the saint a very considerable appeal and some real authority. “I relate to you,” he tells his brethren, “whatever I know on this subject from my own or

⁸Ibid.

⁹74:2, in *On the Song of Songs*, vol. 4, trans., I. Edmonds (Kalamazoo, 1980), 86.

¹⁰74:1, 86.

¹¹Sermon 28:8, in *On the Song of Songs*, vol. 2, trans., K. Walsh (Kalamazoo, 1976), 95.

¹²28:9, 95.

from others' experience."¹³ And again, employing what is one of his most striking and original phrases, Bernard declares: "Today the text we are to study is *the book of our own experience*."¹⁴ Bernard distinguishes clearly between, on the one hand, mere academic knowledge about God, the knowledge that we gain from books or from a lecture-hall, and on the other hand, the living knowledge or wisdom that comes from faith-experience. "Instruction," he tells us, "makes us learned, experience makes us wise."¹⁵

When St. Bernard decides to speak directly concerning the experience of his own contemplative life, it is always after considerable hesitation, and only when it is clear that this experience has somehow become eloquent of God's Word, and can be of use, therefore, to his own brethren. Listen, for example, to what he says on the subject in this passage from Sermon 74:

Now bear with my foolishness for a little. I want to tell you of my own experience, as I promised. Not that it is of any importance. But I make this disclosure only to help you, and if you derive any profit from it I shall be consoled for my foolishness; if not, my foolishness will be revealed. I admit that the Word has also come to me—I speak as a fool—and has come many times.¹⁶

What, in effect, Bernard is proposing to do here is to preach the Word of God by relating to his brethren something of his own individual experience of the Word.¹⁷ That experience carries with

¹³57:5, in vol. 3, 100.

¹⁴3:1, in *On the Song of Songs*, vol. 1, trans., K. Walsh (Kalamazoo, 1977; first published, 1971), 16. Italics mine.

¹⁵23:14, in vol. 2, 37.

¹⁶Sermon 74:5, in vol. 4, 89.

¹⁷Whether or not the Sermons, in the form in which they have come down to us, were actually preached by Bernard in Chapter, is a question which has been much discussed by scholars. Everyone accepts that Bernard certainly did, on occasion, preach to his own brethren on the subject of *The Song of Songs*. And, according to Jean Leclercq, "Certain passages . . . approximate, to a greater or lesser degree, the oral style of Bernard's delivery." But most scholars, nowadays, are inclined to the view that Bernard's *Sermons* represent a distinctively literary achievement. The texts that have been handed down to us, although a number were no doubt inspired by actual preaching, were most likely dictated privately by Bernard to a scribe or to a secretary. See Jean Leclercq, "Were the Sermons on the Song of Songs delivered in Chapter?" Introduction to *On the Song of Songs*, vol.2,

it a certain authority, of course, but not one that can be compared, obviously, with the authority of the Word in Scripture. The contemplative experience is, at root, always a response to a visit from the Word. In this unique drama of love, it is the Word which takes the initiative, and the human heart which responds. And so the experience, when it is authentic, can be thought of almost as an echo of the Word, or even a cave for the Word in which to echo, a place or space that welcomes the Word with living faith and with love. But it is not the Word itself.

If we look to Sermon 74, expecting it to open doors for us into a new and wondrous realm of esoteric knowledge, or into an interior universe of strange and vivid psychological states of feeling, we will be disappointed. For the privileged access to Bernard in prayer, which this text affords, allows us to glimpse something which is far more important than any detailed farrago of strange or rare psycho-spiritual experiences. What holds Bernard's attention, first and last, is not the emotion which may or may not accompany his encounter with God, but God himself, or the nature of God as it is revealed in this encounter: "I have marveled," Bernard says, "at the depth of his wisdom,"¹⁸ and "I have experienced his goodness and mercy,"¹⁹ and "I have perceived the excellence of his glorious beauty,"²⁰ and "I am filled with awe and wonder at his manifold greatness."²¹

Bernard speaks first here about wisdom: "I have marveled at the depth of his wisdom." This emphasis on wisdom is by no means accidental. For Bernard, the most crucial problem in spiritual life is not the rarity of special or élite mystical experiences, but rather the lack of living knowledge of God, knowledge of his true nature. And so, when he speaks of those who lack this wisdom, and who refuse to turn to God, Bernard says: "I am certain that they refuse because they imagine this kindly disposed God to be harsh and severe, this merciful God to be callous and inflexible, this lovable God to be

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¹⁸Sermon 74:6, 91.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid., 91–92.

cruel and oppressive.”²² Bernard, the monk-preacher, who himself has had deep and intimate knowledge of God, turns to his own brethren and says: “What are you afraid of, you men of little faith? That he will not pardon your sins? But with his own hands he has nailed them to the cross. That you are used to soft living and your tastes are fastidious? But he is aware of our weakness. That a prolonged habit of sin binds you like a chain? But the Lord loosens the shackles of prisoners.”²³ St. Bernard makes these statements with enormous confidence: first, on the authority of God’s Word or on revelation, but also on the authority of his own faith experience. “This is what I say: you do not know God, yet you will not believe what we have heard. I should like you to believe those whom experience has taught.”²⁴

When, in Sermon 69, Bernard asks the question: “What does it mean for the Word to come into the soul?,” he replies at once: “It means that he will instruct it in wisdom.”²⁵ This wisdom, which the Word brings to the contemplative, contains not only a new knowledge of Scripture, but also a new impulse to preach the Word of God to others. Bernard says: “If I feel that my eyes are opened to understand the Scriptures, so that I am enlightened from above to preach the word of wisdom from the heart or to reveal the mysteries of God . . . I have no doubt that the Bridegroom is with me. For these are gifts of the Word, and it is of his fullness that we have received these gifts.”²⁶

(b) The Visit from the Word

In sermon after sermon Bernard makes it clear how much he delights in the joy of God’s coming to him, a joy that is beyond description. But, as I have said, what Bernard yearns for most of all is not the emotion of joy itself, but the cause of that joy. His desire is for God and for God alone. “I assure you, my sons, I find joy in

²²Sermon 38:2, in vol. 2, 188.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., 188–89.

²⁵69:2, in vol. 4, 28.

²⁶69:6, 33.

nothing else if he is not here, who alone gives me joy. And I implore him not to come empty-handed but full of grace and truth—as is his nature—as he did yesterday and the day before.”²⁷ Sermon 74, from which this quotation is taken is, in large part, a meditation on the mystery and meaning of grace and truth. And, of course, the primary source for Bernard’s reflection is Chapter One, verse fourteen, of St. John’s Gospel: “And we saw his glory, glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.”

These words from the Gospel formed the basis of a remarkable homily, preached a century later, by a certain Brother Albertus, described in the medieval account of the story as a “saintly” Dominican. The homily by Albertus is remarkable because the Dominican, we’re told, actually came back from the dead in order to preach it! When he had finished reading the words of the Gospel concerning the Word and the glory of the Word “full of grace and truth,” the text says that Albertus “looked steadily” at the one who was listening to him, and said: “I have seen all these things *with my own eyes*.”²⁸ Here, the Dominican is literally contemplating the Word, face to face, so what he says about “grace and truth” is nothing less than a preaching or a proclamation of an *immediate* experience of God. St. Bernard, in contrast, when he comes to describe something of his own mystical or contemplative experience of the Word, is constrained to say: “The coming of the Word was *not* perceptible to my eyes.”²⁹ Even at the moment of vivid encounter, when the Word is utterly present to Bernard, that presence appears somehow both elusive and strangely intangible.

Although he has come to me, I have never been conscious of the moment of his coming. I perceived his presence, I remembered afterwards that he had been with me; sometimes I had a presentiment that he would come, but I was never conscious of his coming or of his going. And where he comes from when he visits my soul, and where he goes, and by what means he enters and goes out, I admit that I do not know even now. . . . I have ascended to the highest in me, and look! the Word is towering

²⁷Sermon 74:7, 92.

²⁸*The Lives of the Brethren [Vitae Fratrum]*, trans., P. Conway (London, 1955), 236. Italics mine.

²⁹Sermon 74:5, 90. Italics mine.

above that. In my curiosity I have descended to explore my lowest depths, yet I found him even deeper.³⁰

What Bernard discovers in contemplative prayer, is that—this side of paradise—no human thought, no human feeling, can comprehend the mystery of God. But here there is a question that must be faced: if God’s presence is so elusive and mysterious, how is it possible for the contemplative ever to speak about it, or even to know if the experience itself has actually taken place? This question Bernard wisely anticipates. He says: “You ask then how I know he was present, when his ways can in no way be traced?”³¹ St. Bernard answers by speaking not of an immediate experience of God, but rather of experience at another level. He begins to share with us, in fact, some of the discernible *effects* of God’s presence on his own interior life, effects which are both moral and spiritual. What we are being allowed to glimpse, then, with the help of St. Bernard, are the signs of an amazing love: vivid, shining traces of the mystery of grace:

[A]s soon as he enters in, he awakens my slumbering soul; he stirs and soothes and pierces my heart, for before it was hard as stone, and diseased. So he has begun to pluck out and destroy, to build up and to plant, to water dry places and illuminate dark ones, to open what was closed and to warm what was cold; to make the crooked straight and the rough places smooth, so that my soul may bless the Lord, and all that is within me may praise his holy name.³²

Obviously, the coming of the Word brings with it enormous blessing. And so, it is natural to ask if there is some way we can prepare ourselves to receive from God such a gift. Bernard, in his answer to this question, doesn’t talk about the need for new or novel methods of prayer or meditation. Instead, he speaks simply about two very down-to-earth realities: “good works” and “the practice of the virtues.”³³ Bernard even insists, at one point, that “the grace of contemplation is never owed except

³⁰Ibid.

³¹74:6, 91.

³²Ibid.

³³46:5, in vol. 2, 244.

to the commandments.”³⁴ But Bernard also draws attention, in his teaching, to the vital importance of the emotion—the deep spiritual emotion—of desire. God, he says, will visit the soul “provided it is committed to seeking him with all its desire and love.”³⁵ But why desire? Why is it so important? Bernard explains: “The fire of holy desire ought to precede his advent to every soul whom he will visit, to burn up the rust of bad habits and so prepare a place for the Lord. The soul will know that the Lord is near when it perceives itself to be aflame with that fire.”³⁶ According to Bernard, objective instruction alone is no guarantee of progress in the spiritual life. The commandments and the law must, of course, be given to us. But the inner heart, if it is really to change, needs also to be moved, in some form or other, by grace.

Thus, in preparing for the Word’s coming, the first thing of importance, we can say, is action or the keeping of the commandments. But also important is the drive or the urgency of an interior desire. Many spiritual teachers and directors will say that love—Christian love—exists in action but not in feeling. St. Bernard, however, being (I suspect) uneasy with this rather sharp and extreme *either/or* distinction, seeks to establish or to recover what he calls “a middle path.”³⁷ And, in Sermon 50, he makes bold to declare: “Love exists in action *and* feeling.”³⁸ And then goes on to say: “Among the many great and grievous evils that the apostle ascribes to men I have read this one is reckoned: to be without affection.”³⁹

When Bernard experiences the Word as present in his soul, he is filled with the emotions of delight and joy. But when the Word suddenly seems to disappear, and all is darkness again, Bernard’s prayer becomes a deep and sustained cry of sorrow and longing. He writes: “[W]hen the Word has left me, all these spiritual powers become weak and faint and begin to grow cold. . . . Then my soul must needs be sorrowful until he returns and my heart again kindles within me—the sign of his returning. When I have had such

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵31:4, in vol. 2, 127.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷50:5, in vol. 3, 33.

³⁸50:2, 31. Italics mine.

³⁹50:4, 32.

experience of the Word, is it any wonder that I take to myself the words of the Bride, calling him back when he has withdrawn?”⁴⁰

For Bernard, part of the experience of God—a *major* part—is, paradoxically, the experience of his “absence.” Again and again, both in life and in prayer, we are—or so it seems—left completely on our own, bereft of the sense of God. Reflecting on this fact, Bernard quotes the words of Jesus in John’s Gospel, words intended of course to console us: “A little while and you shall not see me, and again a little while and you shall see me” (Jn 16:16). But Bernard is not consoled. With real exasperation he exclaims: “Oh little while, little while! How long a little while! Dear Lord, you say it is for a little while that we do not see you. The word of my Lord may not be doubted, but it is a long while, far too long.”⁴¹ As soon as Bernard loses sight of his divine Lord, he begins to search for him again in prayer. And, what is more, he begins to speak of this search for God in a number of his sermons. The effect is truly remarkable, for by speaking of God’s “absence” in this way, by revealing to his readers, and to his brethren, something of his own spiritual anguish, the reality of God—the *presence* of God—is made more palpably real, perhaps, than ever before.

Actively searching for God demands that, as believers, we enter step by step into the mystery of God’s Word. And that requires faith. But faith, as it grows, inevitably involves some personal experience of both the absence and the presence of God. Mere information or abstract knowledge about this mystery will never be enough. “[O]nly personal experience,” Bernard says, “can unfold its meaning.” And he adds: “Let those who are versed in the mystery revel in it; let all others burn with desire rather to attain this experience than merely learn about it.”⁴²

The Preacher of Grace and Truth

Already, I hope, something of what St. Bernard means when he talks to his brethren about his own “experience of the Word,” has become clear. But, in order to deepen further our understanding

⁴⁰74:7, 92.

⁴¹74:4, 89.

⁴²1:11, in vol. 1, 6.

of Bernard's experience, and also to further appreciate his way of preaching, I intend now to take up and examine two words which Bernard repeats over and over again in Sermon 74: the word "grace" and the word "truth."

(a) *Bernard and Grace*

By "grace," Bernard means the wonderful experience in faith of coming to know God as "goodness and mercy,"⁴³ as someone "full of joy and radiance"⁴⁴—"festivus et splendidus."⁴⁵ It means discovering for oneself God's great power to soothe and awaken the heart, and it means also perceiving with contemplative love and with wonder, "the excellence of his glorious beauty."⁴⁶ There can, I think, be no doubt whatever that, in the twelfth century, there was no one more than Bernard of Clairvaux who deserved the title "preacher of grace." According to his contemporary and good friend, William of St. Thierry, "The force of his preaching began to shine out especially in the way in which he softened to conversion (*ad conversionem emolliret*) even the hard hearts of his hearers, and he rarely came home without a catch."⁴⁷

We don't know what impact Sermon 74 made on Bernard's contemporaries. But we do know that a comparable sermon which he delivered on one occasion to a group of students in Paris, and then, later, to a larger group of priests in the same city, made an enormous impression.⁴⁸ And no wonder! Bernard, in this homily, finds words of astonishing comfort and consolation for the person—whether priest or student—who knows himself to be "acutely [or morally] sick," but who can find no release from his bondage, no remedy. With great daring Bernard suggests that our

⁴³74:6, 91.

⁴⁴74:11, 96.

⁴⁵See *In Cantica, Sermo LXIV, Opera Omnia Sancti Bernardi*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1839) col. 3129.

⁴⁶74:6, 91.

⁴⁷William of St. Thierry, *Vita Prima*, 1.13.61. Cited by Marie-Bernard Saïd in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Sermons on Conversion* (Kalamazoo, 1981), 14–15.

⁴⁸See the introduction to *Bernard of Clairvaux: Sermons on Conversion*, 12–13.

very wretchedness itself can somehow be the cause, or at least the occasion, of our beatitude. For it is when we have been utterly humbled by weakness that we are most likely to experience the grace of God's mercy. And, in fact, just as a medical doctor needs our sickness in order to heal us of our distress, God's mercy, in some sense, actually needs our human misery.

Let the soul which is in this state harken to the divine voice, and to its own amazement and wonder it will hear it say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Who is poorer in spirit than the man whose spirit finds no rest . . . who is displeasing to himself . . . who hates his own house, that is to say a house full of filth and wretchedness. . . . It is no wonder . . . if he finds it hard to believe what he has heard, if he starts in astonishment and says, "Is it possible for such wretchedness to make a man happy?" Whoever you are, if you are in this frame of mind, do not despair: it is mercy not misery that makes a man happy, but mercy's natural home is misery.⁴⁹

St. Bernard is a Christian mystic. But he is much more than an exalted connoisseur of the higher states and stages of the spiritual life. He is a superb preacher of the Good News. Of course, it is true that, in his commentary on the *The Song of Songs*, Bernard acknowledges that only a few people really search for God "with a desire that is intense, a thirst ever burning."⁵⁰ And to these few contemplatives, Bernard says, "the Word who comes to visit will appear clothed in beauty, in every aspect a Bridegroom."⁵¹ But what of the man "who has not yet been raised to this state"? What of that person, Bernard

⁴⁹"On Conversion: A Sermon to Clerics" in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Sermons on Conversion*, 7.12, 45–6. On one occasion, Pope Paul VI remarked to his Irish secretary, Fr. John Magee: "Do you want to know the secret of my spirituality?" And he went on to say: "The great mystery of God for me has always been this: that in my *miseria* I still find myself before the *misericordia* of God. . . . God the Father loves me, wants to save me, wants to haul me out of this *miseria*, something I'm incapable of doing left to myself. . . . After the grace of being reborn to God's life, my life becomes a tension of love, with God drawing me towards himself. . . . Always, in all of us, there is this tension between my *miseria* and God's *misericordia*. The whole spiritual life of every one of us lies between these two poles." Cited in Peter Hebblethwaite, *Paul VI: The First Modern Pope* (New York, 1993), 696.

⁵⁰32:2, in vol. 2, 135.

⁵¹32:3, 135–36.

asks, “who smarts at the remembrance of past deeds and says to God in bitterness of soul: ‘Do not condemn me.’” What of the man who is still “caught up in the snare of his own evil propensities, still perilously tempted,”⁵² what of him? St. Bernard answers this crucial question with both great wisdom and great common sense. “[T]his person,” he says, “needs a physician, not a Bridegroom; hence kisses and embraces are not for him, but only oils and ointments, remedies for his wounds.”⁵³ Bernard might very easily have placed himself here among the high contemplatives, among those privileged to “meet the Word in the guise of a Bridegroom.”⁵⁴ But, instead, openly and humbly, he identifies himself with those who, at times, still desperately need the grace of healing and the help of God’s forgiveness.

Is not this how we too often feel? Is not this our experience at prayer, we who are tempted daily by our passions and filled with remorse for our past sins? O good Jesus, from what great bitterness have you not freed me by your coming, time after time? When distress has made me weep, when untold sobs and groans have shaken me, have you not anointed my wounded conscience with the ointment of your mercy and poured in the oil of gladness? How often has not prayer raised me from the brink of despair and made me feel happy in the hope of pardon?⁵⁵

Undoubtedly, one of the great secrets of Bernard’s success as a preacher is his way of being able to share something of his own struggles as a man. And, what is more, he never forgets for a moment “the lost sheep” among his hearers. Thus, when proclaiming the Gospel, he is always concerned to give what he calls “breathing space” to those “whose consciences are perplexed.”⁵⁶ Not all preachers take this approach, as we know. Whatever their theological convictions or religious ideology, there are still preachers today who stand up in the pulpit every Sunday, and address the people of God as if their hearts were made, not of flesh and blood,

⁵²32:3, 136.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴32:2, 135.

⁵⁵32:3, 136.

⁵⁶11:2, in vol. 1, 70.

but of stone or paper. They betray, in other words, no hint of their own humanity. “I once heard a preacher,” Emerson the American Transcendentalist tells us, “who sorely tempted me to say I would go to Church no more. . . . He had not one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it. The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned. Not one fact in all his experience had he yet imported into his doctrine.”⁵⁷ Centuries divide Emerson and St. Bernard—and much else besides—but in some obvious ways, Bernard anticipated, by his life and by his preaching, the advice Emerson gives to the minister or religious pastor serving in a parish. Concerning the people, the men and women in the parish, for example, Emerson writes: “[B]e to them a divine man; be to them thought and virtue; let their timid aspirations find in you a friend; let their trampled instincts be genially tempted out in your atmosphere; let their doubts know that you have doubted, and their wonder feel that you have wondered.”⁵⁸

At one point, in the text quoted above from Sermon 32, Bernard turns directly to Jesus, the Word, and says, “[F]rom what great bitterness have you not freed me by your coming, time after time?” This “coming” to which Bernard refers here is clearly different from the coming or the visit of the Word “in the guise of a Bridegroom.” But although it may not be considered, strictly speaking, a mystical experience, it does have its own great importance all the same. For the experience of being healed, or of being forgiven, constitutes the first great initiation into living knowledge of God. And that means, therefore, that it constitutes, in some sense, part of the very foundation of the preaching of grace. Bernard says:

⁵⁷Ralph Waldo Emerson, “An Address,” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed., B. Atkinson (New York, 2000), 71–2. The point is well taken, but given the mystery of God’s revealed Word, it is surely more accurate to say that “the capital secret” of the preacher’s profession is to convert *truth* into *life*.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 76. Compare Emerson’s appeal with the following statement John Paul II made to a symposium of European Bishops in 1985: “We need,” he said, “heralds of the Gospel who are experts in humanity, who know the depths of the human heart, who can share the joys and hopes, the agonies and distress of people today but who are at the same time contemplatives who have fallen in love with God.”

All who have had these experiences know well that the Lord Jesus is a physician indeed, “who heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds.” And those who cannot lay claim to experience must for that very reason put their trust in him when he says: “The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me, he has sent me to bring good news to the humble, to bind up the broken-hearted.” And if they should still be in doubt, let them draw near and put it to the test and so learn by inward experience what this means: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.”⁵⁹

God, in St. Bernard’s opinion, wants us to “breathe freely,”⁶⁰ and to be confident in the knowledge that, when we turn to him in prayer, no matter how great our sins appear, his kindness is even greater. “Sorrow for sin is indeed necessary,” we are told, “but it should not be an endless preoccupation.”⁶¹ Thus, when it comes to private prayer, “the just man,” Bernard notes, “is not always accusing himself.” If, on occasion, he does so, it is “only in the opening words.” But, normally, his prayer will conclude “with the divine praises.”⁶² St. Bernard sees clearly that it is never enough to confront the truth of oneself within the courtroom of private conscience. “As for me,” he writes, “as long as I look at myself, my eye is filled with bitterness. But if I look up and fix my eyes on the aid of the divine mercy, this happy vision of God soon tempers the bitter vision of myself.”⁶³

St. Bernard became a great preacher of grace in his own day: first, by learning directly from the living Word in Scripture, but also by learning from “inward experience.” For those who are called to preach God’s Word in the Church today, it is worth noting that the experience of which Bernard speaks, never arises only out of extraordinary mystical states. Instead, it is, at source, always born from what Jean Leclercq calls, “a dual awareness”:⁶⁴ on the one hand, the grey, everyday mediocrity of an individual man or monk, “bearing the weight of his nature,” and on the other, the

⁵⁹32:3, in vol. 2, 136.

⁶⁰11:2, in vol. 1, 70.

⁶¹Ibid., 70.

⁶²Ibid., 70–71.

⁶³36:6 in vol. 2, 179.

⁶⁴Jean Leclercq, *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian Spirit* (Kalamazoo, 1976), 75.

intense fervor of the Christian man of prayer, “ardently pursuing his vocation.”⁶⁵ Preachers of grace, whether alive today, or in the Middle Ages, may or may not be considered mystics in the strict sense of the word. But, all of them, in the words of Jean Leclercq, are people who, within a community, undergo something of “the same wretchedness and the same grace.” All of them “suffer the same humiliations, and all strive to rise to contemplative prayer.”⁶⁶

(b) Bernard and Truth

St. Bernard was not only a remarkable preacher of grace, he was also a preacher of truth. “The fullness of grace,” he declared, in an astonishing phrase in Sermon 74, “does not consist of grace alone.”⁶⁷ The Word, it is true, delights to come to us as our redeemer and friend, and even sometimes, in prayer, as our bridegroom. But, when he comes, Bernard says, he comes to us as truth as well as grace, as judge as well as friend. “[B]y the movement of my heart . . . did I perceive his presence.”⁶⁸ There is, first of all, then, an awakening to grace and a profound sense of consolation. But there is also, Bernard notes at once, an experience of purification and a new awareness of truth. Things within us, which are opposed to the new life, are “plucked out,” we’re told, and even “destroyed.” And the heart that was as “hard as stone and diseased” finds itself pierced through.⁶⁹ “I knew,” Bernard says, “the power of his might because my faults were put to flight and my human yearnings brought into subjection. I have marveled at the depth of his wisdom when my secret faults have been revealed and made visible.”⁷⁰ Effectively, what St. Bernard is saying here is that if, in prayer, we experience only and always a sustained series of spiritual consolations and delights, but never what he calls “the truth of our

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷74:8, 93.

⁶⁸74:6, 91.

⁶⁹Ibid.

⁷⁰Ibid.

condition in God's sight,"⁷¹ then what we are experiencing is certainly not God. For this reason, in Sermon 74, Bernard implores the Word to come to him "full of grace *and* truth."

I need both of these: I need truth that I may not be able to hide from him, and grace that I may not wish to hide. Indeed, without both of these his visitation would not be complete, for the stark reality of truth would be intolerable without grace, and the gladness of grace might appear lax and uncontrolled without truth.⁷²

Clearly, all that applies to prayer in this context, applies also to preaching. Bernard is well aware that, in the hands of the preacher, truth without grace is a harsh, fundamentalist weapon. But he is also equally aware that grace without truth, is a mere sentimentality. "How many people," he writes, "have received grace without profit because they have not also accepted a tempering measure of truth? In consequence they have luxuriated in it too much, without reverence or regard for truth . . . To them it could be said . . . 'Go, then, and learn what it means to serve the Lord in fear, and rejoice in him with awe.'"⁷³ The linking here of the word "fear" with the word "rejoice," is striking. Bernard has in mind, I have no doubt, that "holy fear" which, Scripture tells us, is the beginning of wisdom.

Fear! One of the most notable characteristics of St. Bernard's spirituality is that, at every stage of the spiritual journey, our deepest human emotions—fear and desire, sorrow and joy—far from being eliminated, are seen to play a vital role in the search for God. Thus, in the very earliest stages of conversion, even fear can be used by grace to help us in our awareness of God, and sometimes in a way that is far more effective, Bernard says, than the knowledge we receive from books or from a lecture hall. "You fear God's justice," he writes, "you fear his power; and so you experience God as just

⁷¹37:6, in vol. 2, 185.

⁷²74:8, 92–93. The phrase "lax and uncontrolled" is my own translation of the Latin word "*dissoluta*." In the Irene Edmonds' version of this passage, the word "*dissoluta*" is translated as "intolerable." But the word "*onerosa*," in the same passage, is also translated by Edmonds as "intolerable."

⁷³74:8, 93.

and powerful because fear of him is itself an experience.”⁷⁴ But then, almost at once, Bernard goes on to suggest that this notion of an “angry God”⁷⁵ can be surpassed, and be replaced by the image of God as Bridegroom. Love is God’s very nature, and so it is clearly not wise to keep thinking of him only as a “judge” or as a “teacher,” or to keep looking for him always at the “bar of justice” or in “a teacher’s auditorium.”⁷⁶

Throughout the course of our spiritual lives, Bernard says, we can expect a “twofold help from above”: the first help we receive is “correction,” but the second is “consolation.” He writes: “The first imbues us with the fear of God, the latter tempers that fear with the joy of salvation.”⁷⁷ Fear, then, considered as the beginning of wisdom, is an experience of correction. But, what comes at the end of wisdom—the consolation of union—is clearly an experience of quite extraordinary joy and peace, a true haven of rest. Nevertheless, in St. Bernard’s opinion, concomitant with that rest, the contemplative also experiences, and even at the highest stages of union, a mysterious restlessness, and a deep spiritual longing. Reflecting on the stage which he himself has reached, for example, Bernard says: “This is a remote and secret place, but not a place of repose.”⁷⁸ It seems that, even as God pours out his wonderful gifts of joy and rest, he also actively wounds the heart with love, and “in a way that is wondrous yet delightful, he teases the awe-struck seeker until he reduces him to restlessness.”⁷⁹ Effectively, what this means is that God, as “grace and truth,” is somehow always testing the heart of the one who seeks him. And this happens even in the very early stages of our conversion.

Sometimes, in the spiritual life, we like to imagine that, with our thoughts and feelings, we can reach out and *directly* touch or experience God. But, on the evidence of the Old and New Testaments, our human “experience” of God, although it does quicken, for a time, real depths of spiritual emotion, is never as important or as

⁷⁴23:14, in vol. 2, 38.

⁷⁵Ibid.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷21:10, in vol. 2, 11.

⁷⁸23:11, in vol. 3, 35.

⁷⁹Ibid.

sacred as the call to loving obedience, for example, or to daily surrender. God is the one, we have to say, who desires to “experience” us. And thus, when we encounter his “truth,” or when he comes to us as truth, this is not merely an abstract code against which our thoughts and deeds are being judged. It is, rather, the reality of a profound touch probing and testing our hearts.⁸⁰ What the Word asks, when he comes to an individual in prayer, is not, “Do you *experience* me?” but “Do you love me?”, “Do you keep my Word?”, “Do you listen to my Word?”, “Do you put it into practice?”

As we read through Bernard’s homilies, one thing emerges very clearly: an authentic preacher of the Gospel cannot be a preacher of grace only, or of truth only. The Word which Bernard proclaims, and the Word which he encounters in prayer, comes to him always “full of grace and truth.” Unfortunately, in the actual practice of preaching, there has been a tendency, in almost every age, to emphasize one aspect of the mystery, and to ignore the other. Preaching, in the early part of the 20th century, for example, was characterized by an active and robust preaching of moral and dogmatic truth. God was the giver of the commandments, and the upholder of Church law. But, often, there was little or nothing said about God’s prodigal kindness and compassion. In contrast, preaching in the second half of the 20th century marked a return to a Gospel emphasis on God’s astonishing grace, and to a renewed focus also on the humanity of Christ. But with this renewal—inspired, I have no doubt, by God’s own Spirit—there was a tendency at times to speak almost exclusively of the grace of God, and of the mercy of God, but to say nothing or almost nothing about God’s truth or God’s law. The end result was that, for many in the Church, including many young people listening to school talks on religion or to Sunday homilies, even the great sacred words such as “grace” and “compassion” began to lose their salt and their savor.

Once preaching is no longer based on the full Gospel message, and no longer grounded on what St. Bernard calls “inward experience,” then the Word itself becomes somehow de-based, and sacred truth degenerates into mere ideological conviction. On the

⁸⁰In Sermon 74:3, Bernard notes that, on occasion, Christ would *try the faith* of his apostles. And, concerning the Word in general, Bernard says: “He comes and goes according to his own good pleasure, visiting the soul at daybreak and then suddenly *putting it to the test.*” 88. Italics mine.

one hand, then, we have the extreme proponents of a false rigorism, and on the other, the no less extreme proponents of what might be called cheap or easy grace. What I find so enormously impressive in Bernard as a preacher, is the way he is able to go beyond these opposites. His words bear the full weight of the mystery of God, the paradox, that is, of a truth which lets us off with nothing, and of a grace which lets us away with everything.

Conclusion

Bernard's answer to the question concerning his own faith-experience of the Word, is not one that will satisfy a merely rational way of thinking. The core of the experience, the very grace of contemplation itself, remains for Bernard always a great mystery, a wound of blessing, a secret deeper even than the self, a love utterly present, and yet utterly hidden. Nevertheless, in spite of a certain bewilderment of thought created by these paradoxes, Bernard's words never leave his readers confronting simply a "hollow dialectic." His preaching points us always to a way of action, or to a path of life, which is as simple and straightforward as it is profound. And thus, even the "visit" from the Word is accompanied by very distinct signs of change, both moral and spiritual. And these signs or traces of the Word, St. Bernard describes in his homily with great vividness. For Bernard, the grace of the Word's coming does not consist so much in new or strange "experiences," but rather in a radical transformation of life, and in an ever more profound awareness of the nature of God. And this knowledge, although based on "inward experience," is grounded first and last on living faith in the Word of God as revealed in Scripture, and also on the inherited wisdom and practical experience of tradition.⁸¹

⁸¹With respect to tradition, it is worth pointing out here that even Bernard's description, in Sermon 74, of his own contemplative experience of the Word, is significantly indebted to a passage from Origen. The great Alexandrian writes, for example: "As God is my witness, I have often seen the Spouse coming and resting in me and then leaving quite suddenly: and I could no longer find him whom I sought. Then I desired his return and occasionally he did come back. . . . This has happened many times." Cited in Jean Leclercq, *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian Spirit* (Kalamazoo, 1976), 74.

Needless to say, then, the “inward experience” out of which Sermon 74 is preached, is not something esoteric. Even at its most profound, the experience is different only in degree but not in kind from the faith-experience of the ordinary believer. And both experiences are, in St. Bernard’s opinion, always under the Word. “Grace and truth,” he notes in an earlier sermon, “have come through Jesus Christ.”⁸² And then, without a pause, he adds: “In our own time every Christian can discover by experience that this is true.”⁸³

What matters finally, for Bernard, is that all those to whom the Word of God is preached, should begin to see or to experience in faith God’s true nature. He writes: “This vision of God is not a little thing. It reveals him to us as listening compassionately to our prayers, as truly kind and merciful, as one who will not indulge his resentment. His very nature is to be good, to show mercy always and to spare. By this kind of experience, and in this way, God makes himself known to us for our good.”⁸⁴ Truth, then, is fundamental to prayer, in St. Bernard’s understanding, but grace is *essential*. The idea or the hypothesis that, at some stage, the Word might come to Bernard, *only* “as a judge,” but not as a friend, not as “a bridegroom,” that he might come as truth, therefore, but not as grace, prompts Bernard to exclaim: “God forbid that this may ever happen!”⁸⁵ Bernard, as a preacher, is well aware that “Truth is bitter unless seasoned with grace.”⁸⁶ So, in the concluding words of Sermon 74, he prays that the Word of God would not approach merely “with the stern gaze of truth,” but would enter, rather, “as one who brings peace, joy, and gladness.”⁸⁷

May he come [in the form of grace] as a leaping fawn and [in the form of truth] as a sharp-eyed roe to pass over my offenses and look at them only with pity and forgiveness. May he come

⁸²Sermon 2:4, in vol. 1, 11. Here, Bernard is obviously echoing Jn 1:17.

⁸³Ibid. There are always two elements in Bernard’s theological method, according to Jean Leclercq: “the effort of the intelligence reflecting on the objective facts of faith, and the recourse to his own personal life as it confronted these revealed truths.” See *Bernard of Clairvaux and the Cistercian Spirit*, 75.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵74:11, 96.

⁸⁶74:8, 93.

⁸⁷74:11, 96.

down as from the mountains of Bethel, [*“festivus et splendidus”*] full of joy and radiance, descending from the Father, sweet and gentle, not scorning to become and to be known as the Bridegroom of the soul who seeks him, for he is God, blessed above all forever. Amen.⁸⁸

These final words of Bernard are words born of a profound faith-experience. They are wise and sacred words, deeply imbued with that sure hope which comes from faithful prayer, and from a profound knowledge of the Word. It is true, of course, that as a preacher, Bernard tells us he is “afraid to speak.”⁸⁹ Nevertheless, again and again, he dares to put “mystery into words.” Burdened with the joyful knowledge of God’s nature, he “cannot remain silent.”⁹⁰ His whole desire, as a man of living faith, and a humble initiate of the Gospel, is to proclaim the knowledge of God in Christ, not as “a mere deposit of doctrinal truths, but [as] a personal and living experience of the Mystery.”⁹¹ □

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⁸⁸Ibid.

⁸⁹74:1, 86.

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery*, 109.