

THE HOMELY PRESENCE OF CHRIST

BY

'GILES BREWSE'

This small MS (Laud Miscell. 19) provides us with a link between the English mystics of the fourteenth century and the Reformation. It was written in the first third of the sixteenth century by one 'Giles Brewse', probably merely a scribe, for 'Arthur Gauntlet' and formed part of Laud's library in 1636. The author bases his instructions on Hilton's *Scale of Perfection*, to which he refers twice and from which two paragraphs are incorporated. There are reminiscences of Rolle but it is to Hilton, the master of English devotion, who combined high mystical experience with shrewd practical commonsense, that the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries looked for guidance in the way of prayer.—C.K.

BROTHER, if thou desire to have the homely presence of our Lord Jesus Christ ghostly in thy soul in feeling, but how the blessed presence of Jesus is felt, it may better be known by experience than by any writing, for it is the life and the love, the might and the light, the joy and the rest of a chosen soul. And therefore he that once hath soothfastly felt it, he may not forbear it without pain, he must needs desire it, it is so good in itself and so comfortable. What is more comfortable to a soul here than for to be drawn out through grace from the vile noise of worldly business and filth of desires and from vain affection of all creatures into rest and safeness of ghostly love, privily perceiving the gracious presence of Jesus, fully fed with favour of his unseeable blessed face? Soothly nothing methinketh, nothing may make the soul of a lover full of mirth but the gracious presence of Jesus, as he can shew himself to a clean soul; he is never heavy nor sorry. But when he is with himself in fleshliness, he is never full glad nor merry, but when he is out of himself, as, [when] he was with Jesus in his ghostliness, the tasting alone of this joy is more worth than all the joy of the world, which St Austin felt when he said: *O bone Jesu, introducis me, domine, aliquando in affectum multum inusitatum introrsus, et nescio in quam dulcedinem quaesi (?) proficiatur in me, nescio quid aliud sit vita aeterna si illa non est.* That is 'O Jesu good lord, thou bringest me sometime into a marvellous great love not used before within my soul and the sweetness of it is so great that I cannot tell it and if it be made perfect in me, I know not what is everlasting life, if it be not that'. And therefore if thou wilt have the blessed presence of Jesus with thee ghostly, thou must first be reformed by fulness of virtues to the likeness and image of Jesus,

daily using holy prayers and fasting and waking¹ with holy meditations of the piteous and painful passion of our Lord Jesus Christ; how he was scourged crowned and crucified and so forth of other pains and passions that he suffered in his blessed body and his sweet virgins flesh of² our souls. For thou mayst not come to the ghostly light in contemplation of Christ's godhead but if³ thou come first in by meditations, bitterness, compassions and by steadfast thinking of his manhood.

Therefore do as I have said, and then draw thee into some secret place alone, either in the night or in the day, when thou hast most devotion, and then cast holy water upon thee, and upon the place where thou intendest to sit and with thine hand mark thyself with a cross, saying *In nomine patris et filii* and then sitting devoutly upon thy knees say some holy prayer that will stir thee most to devotion either mental or vocal and then have a meditation of the passion of Christ. And that devoutly done, then worship the precious blood and body of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the meditation, giving to him lauds and thanks for his great goodness. And then lift up thine heart, thy face and thine hands with an whole and steadfast mind into heaven, praying in thy thought heartily, first to the Father and then to the Son and then to the Holy Ghost, three persons and one God. But in any wise let not thy mind rest upon them as upon three bodies or upon bodily things, for it may not be so; for this work is ghostly and not bodily, but thou must think that the Father is a godly power, the Son is a godly wisdom, and the Holy Ghost is a godly love, and yet both godly power, wisdom and [love] be in all three persons; but the power is appropriate to the Father, the wisdom to the Son, the love to the Holy Ghost. And how it may be so I shall show thee by an ensample as here followeth. In the sun is heat and shining in one beam, the heat drieth, the shining giveth light, the heat worketh one thing and the shining another and yet the heat and the shining may not be disparted. The shining giveth light and not warmth, the heat giveth warmth and not light and yet the sun, one creature of God doth all this. And so doth the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, they work divers works and yet they be but one God and three persons and in working they be inseparable.

But in anywise when thou art in the most fervent desire to have the blessed presence of God with thee in thy soul, ghostly thinking of his goodness and looking after grace and ghostly comfort, ever

¹ watching.

² for or by our soul's sins.

³ except.

have a sight within thy ghostly eye to the soul, or else he may be in thy soul and thou shalt not understand it. But and (if) thou take heed to thy soul and his grace together, thou shalt sometimes peradventure feel ghostly, not in thy body, but in thy soul, as it were a little flickering or a little stirring or moving, which comforteth the soul more than I can tell; and sometimes a marvellous softness with a great sweetness and sometimes with a great light, and all in the soul and not in the body; and many other ways as it pleaseth God to work, by the which work and comfort thou shalt know verily that God is present with thee and that passeth all worldly and bodily pleasures and so saith Holy Church: *Jesu dulcis memoria, dans vera cordis gaudia, sed super mel et omnia, dulcis eius presencia*. That is, the sweet mind and memory of Jesus maketh all mine heart full of joy and melody, but the sweet presence of Jesus is sweeter to my soul than honey is to my mouth.⁴

Quocumque loco fuero meum Jesum desidero, quem laetus cum invenero, quem felix cum tenuero: 'In what place soever I be, in mine heart I desire my Jesus, how glad shall I be, when I find him, but how merry shall I be, when I have him; as who saith none can tell!

Tunc amplexus tunc oscula, quae vincunt mellis pocula, tunc felix Jesu copula sis in his parva morula; then shall there be embracings and kissings betwixt us two, which shall be sweeter than drinking of honey; then the company and presence of Jesus shall be to me both gracious and happy. But this tarrying with me I think it short, though it were the space of a whole day!

Id quod quaesivi Video, quod concupivi teneo, amore Jesu languero et corde totus ardeo: Then may I say I see that I have sought, then I have that I desired, but when Jesus is gone, then I am sick for love, and in mine heart burn as fire evermore till I have him again, for in his absence is all my pain. And then in the blessed time of the presence of Jesus in a meek and clean soul, all vain thoughts may not appear and if they do, they slip forth⁵ and cannot, nor may not enter. Then give thyself all to devotion either in praying or in thinking and that as meekly privily and softly as thou canst.

But a full clean soul (it) behoveth him to have perfectly clothed with meekness and charity (if) he shall use this work(ing)⁶. But in any wise beware of the enemy and that betimes, for he will work such works sometimes when he is suffered to deceive thee if he can:

⁴ The following verses are not proper to St Bernard's hymn.

⁵ glance aside.

⁶ work, working, mode of prayer.

But thou shalt know him by this and if it come of the enemy thou shalt have no mind to pray, nor to think none other sweet thoughts, but in [those] that pleasure and delight thee therein and in withdrawing thine heart and mind from God. But if it come of God, it will stir thee to more devotion, both in praying and thinking and sometimes weeping for joy and comfort and so giving great laud and thanks to God for his goodness.

And⁷ also thou must know thy soul and the mights thereof. The soul of a man is a life made of three mights, mind, reason and will to the likeness of the Blessed Trinity. Inasmuch as the mind was made mighty and steadfast by the virtue of the father, almighty God, for to hold him without forgetting or letting⁸ of any creature, and so it hath the likeness of the Father; the reason was made bright and clear without error or darkness, as perfectly as a soul in body unglorified might have, and so it hath the likeness of the Son, which is endless wisdom; and the love and the will was made clean burning into God without love of the flesh or of any creature, by the sovereign goodness of God the Holy Ghost which is blessed Love. So that a man's soul which may be called a made trinity, was fulfilled in mind, reason and love of the unmade blessed Trinity which is our Lord God. This is the dignity, the state and the worship of man's soul by kind (nature) of the first making. . . .

If thou wilt know⁹ and see what thy soul is, thou shalt not turn thy thought with imagination into thy body for to seek it and feel it, as if it were hid within thy heart; if thou seek so thou shalt never find it in thyself, for thy soul is no body, but a life unseeable, holding and quickening thy body much more than thy body is, in might and in virtue. Perchance thou beginnest to wonder why I say onetime that a soul is a life, sometimes, a spirit, sometimes a reason, sometimes a will. Unto this I say thus: that when I say a soul is a life or a reason or a spirit, all this is a soul, for all is one, and naught but one. Therefore I may use what word of these that melist¹⁰ after my stirring in this writing.

And if thou wilt know more of this word how thou must be dead to the world and brought in through grace in to a busy rest and a brightsome darkness: look in the second book of Master Hylton¹¹ in the xxiiij chapter xxv and xxvij and there thou shalt find of it substantial matter.

7 For this paragraph see *Hilton Scale*, ii. 34.

8 hindering.

9 *Hilton, Scale*, Book ii, 30.

10 'I like'.

11 *Scale of Perfection*.

[The Scribe continues with short instructions which appear to be disconnected adaptations of parts of Hilton's work.]

[On the seeking of Jesus when he is lost] fol. 15.

'*Quae mulier habens dragmas decem, etc*'. . .

What woman is it that has lost a dram¹² but she will light a lantern and seek till she find it as who saith, 'none'! and if thou wilt find thy dram Jesus, cast out of thine heart all manner sins and sweep thy soul clean with the besom of the dread of God and with the water of thine eyes wash it and so shalt thou find thy dram Jesus. This dram will not be found so lightly as it is said, for this work is not of one hour nor of one day, but many days and years, with much sweat and swink of body and travail of the soul and if thou cease not but seek busily, sorrow and sigh deeply, moan stilly and stoop low till thine eyes water for anguish and for pain, for thou has lost thy treasure Jesus, at the last when he will, shalt thou find thy dram Jesus and if thou find him . . . if thou mayst in cleanness of conscience feel the homely and the pitiful presence of that blessed man Jesus Christ, as a shadow or a glimmering of him, thou mayst call all thy friends to thee for to make mirth with thee and melody. . . .

(Fol. 16V) . . . If thou feelest a great desire in thy heart to Jesus Christ by mind of this name Jesus, or in prayer or in any deed that thou dost, which desire is so much that it putteth out as it were by strength all other thoughts and desires of the world and of the flesh that they may not rest in thy heart, then thou seekest well thy Lord Jesus¹³; and when thou feelest this desire to God holpen and comforted by a ghostly might insomuch that it is turned into love and affection, ghostly savour and sweetness into light and knowing of God, so much that for that time the point of thy thought is set upon nothing that is made nor it feeleth no stirring of vainglory, nor of itself nor of none other evil affection, (for they may not appear that time), but only (it) is enclosed, rested, softened, anointed in Jesus; not him as he is, but a shadow of him, for the better that thou findest him the more shalt thou desire him.

Then by what manner prayer or meditation or occupation that thou mayst have greatest and cleanest desire to him and have most feeling of him, by that occupation thou seekest him best and best findeth him. But wit thou well, what thou feelest of him be it never so much, yet though thou wert ravished into the third heaven

¹² dram = drachma.

¹³ Compare the following with Hilton, *Angels' Song*, last section. (*Cell of Self-Knowledge*, p. 70).

with Paul, yet hast thou not found him as he is in the joy¹⁴. Know thou or feel thou never so much of him, he is yet above it. And therefore if thou wilt fully find him as he is in the blessed[ness] of loving, cease thou never while thou livest of ghostly desiring. Thus I think is best, do better if thou canst, and Jesus be thy speed. Amen¹⁵. . .

And if it come thus to thy mind, that if the blessed presence of God be with thee, how may it be with other lovers [in] that time, by this example thou shalt know. If an hundred men hear one Mass at one time, when mass is done every man may say, he hath heard Mass and true it is and yet it was but one Mass; and so in like wise and our Lord be with thee and with an hundred or a thousand more, every man may say that God is with him; and yet there is but one God, which is in heaven with all his saints and with us all in this world, when he will, where he will and with whom he will. Thus may our Lord do, thus can he do, and thus will he do to meek souls which be his darlings and homely of his household, and [ar]rayed in his livery that is meekness and charity, and to none else. Amen.

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Fol. 21. And if thou wilt know what prayer thou shalt use afore this working and after, and what meditation thou shalt use. If thou wilt thou mayst have a little short treatise of prayer and meditations somewhat according to this work, which beginneth: 'Sweet Jesu mercy and grace etc.' In the meditation thou shalt remember the Circumcision of our Lord and so forth as the book teacheth; and if thou have another that liketh thee better, take that and leave this, and so I think is to the best. And if thou wilt know, how thou mayst be reformed by fulness of virtues to the likeness and image of Jesus, look for a book called *Scala Perfectionis*, of the making of an holy Father. called Walter Hylton, and in that shalt thou have all other necessities most convenient and profitable to this work, of whose soul¹⁶ Jesu have mercy. Amen.

14 in bliss, heaven.

15 The next paragraph is taken bodily from the *Scale of Perfection*, ii, 17, and is here omitted.

16 Walter Hylton died in 1396. His book was first printed in 1494 and became very popular. It may be that this author refers to the printed copy.