

They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun strike upon them, nor any heat; for the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them unto fountains of waters of life: and God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes.—Apocalypse 7, 14-17 (R.V.)



## SERMON FOR OUR LADY'S BIRTHDAY

ST BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

*Translated by a Monk of Mt St Bernard's Abbey*

**M**ARY, virgin yet a mother. Here on earth we can only hold her memory sacred while heaven rejoices at her presence. And in the same way heaven is the true home of every good which we on earth can only imagine to ourselves, we, who have to be content with a mere foretaste of that bliss which will satisfy every desire. In heaven there is true life, here life only in name. Lord, you endure for ever, your name is not forgotten as generation follows generation to the grave—generations of men, not angels, So if we want to know why a name and a memory is all we have while the reality is present in heaven, we turn to the Gospel where our Lord says: 'This, then, is to be your prayer: Our Father who *art* in heaven, hallowed be thy *name*'. Faith speaks here, reminding us in the very first words that we are the adopted children of God, and that our life on earth is only a pilgrimage. Realizing then, that as long as we are not in heaven we are still on our way to God, we groan in our hearts, waiting to be adopted into the family of God and brought into the presence of the Father. Jeremias, too, says expressly of Christ, 'Christ our Lord goes before us as a mighty spirit, and under his shadow we shall live among heathen folk', for in the bliss of heaven we shall not live under his shadow but in the splendour of his glory: surrounded by the splendour of the saints the Father himself says: 'You are my Son born before the day-star rises'.

But, as we know, Mary did not give birth to this same Son surrounded by the splendour of the saints: she brought him forth amid the shades of this world, overshadowed, but by the power of the Most High. Similarly the Church militant—not yet triumphant and resplendent in heaven but still on its earthly pilgrimage—aptly takes to herself the words: 'I rested under the cool shade of him for whom my heart longs, and his fruit was sweet in my mouth'. She had asked to be shown the pasture ground of the beloved under the noonday heat, but her request was not granted in full and for the time being she was given shade instead of the noonday sun, a mere taste of food that did not satisfy her hunger. She wished to rest in him, not just in the protection of his shadow, and sought not the shade but the brilliance of the noonday sun, the dazzling splendour of him who is the light of true light. 'And his fruit was sweet in my mouth', she cries out—sweet to the taste. How long must I be content merely to taste and not possess the graciousness of the Lord? He is indeed pleasing to the taste, sweet to the palate of the soul, and even for this foretaste the bride may well break out into songs of praise and thanksgiving.

Not in this life, then, shall we be told, 'Eat your fill, lovers; drink, dearly beloved, and drink deep.' The saints shall keep festive holiday, but in God's presence, and it is only when God's glory dawns that the psalmist will be fully content. Christ himself said to his apostles, 'You are the men who have kept to my side in my hours of trial: and, as my Father has allotted a kingdom to me, so I allot to you a place to eat and drink at my table'. 'Where shall this be?' we ask. 'In my kingdom.'

Blessed, then, is the man who feasts in the kingdom of God, and in the meantime, dear Lord, 'hallowed be thy name' that is now dwelling in the hearts of all those who call upon it with confidence. 'Thy kingdom come'—let the fulfilment of all truth come and sweep away our imperfect glimpses of it. St Paul tells us: 'You have a harvest in your sanctification, and your reward is eternal life': life everlasting, an unfailing spring watering the whole of paradise, a stream bordered with gardens, giving abundance of water to all as it comes tumbling down from the heights of Lebanon; it is that deeply flowing river that enriches the city of God.

This fountain of living water is Christ himself. Christ is

your life, and when he is made manifest, you too will be made manifest in glory with him. He it was who dispossessed himself and gave himself to us to be our justification, our sanctification and our atonement, though not as yet showing us clearly that he is our life, glory and eternal happiness as well. The waters of this stream have reached even us, and, though strangers may not drink of them, they flow through the public streets, carried down from heaven as it were by an aqueduct which gives to our parched and withered souls some few drops of grace. It is not indeed the source of grace, but is full of grace, giving more to one, less to another, so that out of its abundance all receive some measure of that fulness which it alone enjoys.

You have already realized, I am sure, whom I mean, who it is that has been able to receive these unfailing waters at their very source in the Father's heart and has passed them on to us, not in their full flood-tide, but to each in his own measure. You know who was found worthy of the greeting, 'Hail full of grace', and we stand amazed to see this mighty channel of all graces formed out of poor human nature. The head of this our aqueduct is not content with reaching up into heaven like Jacob's ladder, but pierces the heavens themselves, and reaches up to the very source of those living waters that are beyond the heavens. Solomon, dismayed at the greatness of the task, cried out as if in despair, 'Who shall find a valiant woman?' and the human race went without these heavenly graces for so long a time precisely because the gulf between God and man was not yet bridged in this way. Nor shall we be surprised that the period of waiting was so long if we remember how many years that just man Noe worked at building the ark, in which a few souls, eight in all, found refuge, and, what is more, for only a brief space of time.

The gulf to be bridged was a mighty one, but Mary's burning desires, wholehearted devotion, and utterly selfless prayer reached up to the source of all grace; the prayer of a just man pierces the clouds, and Mary, from whom arose the Sun of Justice, can claim that title before all other creatures. She made her way into the presence of that unapproachable majesty by knocking, asking, searching; at last she found what she sought: 'You have found favour in the sight of God', she heard the angel say. But if she is already full of grace, how can she find still more favour?

She could seek such a gift, and was worthy to find it because her own fulness was not enough for her; she was not content with merely her own sanctification, but begged a superabundance of grace to save all men, since 'they who drink of these waters shall thirst for more'. That is why the angel said: 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you'—yes, and pour out upon you his precious graces in such profusion that their gracious influence is spread abroad on every side. And that is just what happens, as we who are strengthened and refreshed by it can testify. Her very name spoken soothes the heart like the flow of oil, and generation after generation holds her memory sacred. Nor is her store of grace wasted in being spread abroad, for it attracts virgin souls to the love of her Son; the perfume, running down from the head, makes both beard and tunic fragrant.

How deep are God's plans, how full of wisdom and loving-kindness! All the ground is to receive heaven's dew, but first he saturates the fleece alone. When he wished to redeem the whole human race he put in Mary the price for the whole work. Why? Perhaps so that Eve should find pardon through her daughter, and man's accusing finger should be pointed at women no more. Adam can no longer say to God, 'The woman you gave me to be my companion, she it was that offered me fruit from the forbidden tree', but rather 'The woman you gave me has given me heavenly food to eat'. This is God's plan, and already we see his lovingkindness; perhaps there is more to it, a fuller meaning yet to be discovered. It is true as far as it goes, but I feel it does not satisfy you: it is only milk fit for babes; if we would have butter we must labour a little longer.

With what whole-hearted devotion, then, did God wish us to honour Mary when he adorned her with the fulness of every heavenly gift, so that if there is in us a spark of hope, any stirring of grace or promise of salvation, we can be sure that it comes from her who has mounted on high adorned with heavenly favours. She is like some enchanted garden upon which the soft south wind breathes gently, rather, over which the breath of the Holy Spirit loves to brood, enriching it with the fragrance of his graces. Without the sun in the heavens to give light to the world, there can be no day; and without Mary our star to shine over life's vast and far-flung sea, we are all plunged into enshrouding gloom and the shadow of death: a night of utter darkness.

Let us honour Mary from the bottom of our hearts with the full vigour of mind and will: that is what God wants, since he wills that everything should come to us through her hands. That is what God wants, yes, but only so as to help us. For God looks after us his poor children in all our troubles, turning them to our advantage: he calms our anxious fears and stirs up confidence and trust, with him at our side hope revives and drives out uncertainty and doubt; the fainthearted find courage once again. In Adam we were all afraid to approach the Father: terrified at the mere sound of his voice we hid among the trees, and so he gave us Jesus to be our mediator. What limits can there be to the gifts that so filial a Son will obtain from so fatherly a Father? His piety will win him a hearing: the Father loves the Son. Can we be afraid to approach him, our Brother, our own flesh and blood, he who has been through every trial, fashioned as we are, only sinless, so that he could feel for us?—and it was Mary that gave us this Brother of ours. Yet, although he has become man, perhaps we stand in awe of the majesty of the Godhead that dwells on him—for he is still God—and want some advocate to plead our cause with him as well. Mary is our refuge: she is a creature pure and simple: pure from every stain and simple in her single nature. There can be no doubt that her piety too will win a hearing—the Son will listen to his mother, and the Father to his Son. Little children, this is the sinner's ladder; in it I put all my trust, it is the source of all my hope. Surely the Son can refuse his mother nothing, nor in his turn be refused, deny her a hearing or be denied. The angel said: 'You have found favour in the sight of God', and happily so: she will always find favour, always be full of grace, and grace is the one thing we need. Mary—the really prudent virgin—did not seek wisdom as Solomon did, nor yet riches, honours or power, but grace, the one thing alone by which we are saved.

Grace, then, is the only thing worth striving for: we must seek it, and seek it through Mary, since she always finds what she seeks and can never be disappointed. This grace that we seek is that which wins favour in God's sight, not in the fickle judgment of men: others may seek the approval of their fellows, but we the approval of God. What is the truth of the matter: that it is his grace that has brought us here, and it is only his mercy that preserves us. What manner of men are we? All in some degree

guilty of perjury, adultery, murder, and theft—the refuse of the world; and each one, if he is honest, must admit that where once was guilt in full measure, grace has now been bestowed more amply still. Mary, then, did not rely upon her own worth, but upon God's favour, the gift of his grace, and did so with such utter humility that she was much perplexed at the angel's greeting, and cast about in her mind what she was to make of it, thinking herself unworthy. Perhaps she said to herself 'How have I deserved to be thus visited by the angel of my Lord?' Mary, do not be afraid, do not be surprised that an angel should visit you. One greater than any angel is coming, and the Lord of the angels is with you. After all, it is only right that you, living the life of an angel, should see one, be visited by him and greeted as a fellow citizen and member of God's household. A virgin leads an angelic life: they who neither marry nor are given in marriage shall be as the angels of God.

Mary, you see, this aqueduct of ours, reached the fountainhead of all grace not by prayer alone but by her purity too, which makes a soul draw near to God. She was a virgin intent on holiness, holiness of body and holiness of spirit; she could say with greater truth than anyone else that her true home was in heaven. Body and spirit, both were holy: there must be no room for suspicion where she is concerned; loftiness is there but utter integrity as well. She is like a garden hedged all about, a spring shut in and sealed, she is the living temple of God, the chosen dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit. She is no foolish virgin, she takes oil with her and has in her vessel a plentiful supply. She has set her heart on an upward journey, and it is her holiness of life and her prayer that bear her upwards. We read too that she rose up and went with all haste into the hill country and greeted Elizabeth, staying with her to help her for about three months. Then Mary could say to Elizabeth what Jesus later said to John, 'Let it be so for the present, it is well that we should thus fulfil all due observances'. Of Mary it can be said that her justice stands firm as the everlasting hills, and this journey of hers into the hill country shows the third way in which she reaches up to God; it is the third strand of the triple cord that is not easily broken. It was the bright flame of charity that led her in her search for grace, her spotless virginity made even her body beautiful, and it was the most sublime humility that made her offer her services

to Elizabeth. Everyone that humbles himself shall be exalted: what can be more sublime than humility? Elizabeth was astonished to see her and said: 'How have I deserved to be thus visited by the mother of my Lord?' Her astonishment must have increased, when she learnt that Mary, like her Son, had not come to have service done, but to serve others. It was of her that it had been written long before, 'Who is this, whose coming shows like the dawn of day? Fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army in battle array.' She rose far above the children of Adam, reached the choirs of angels, left them too beneath her, and found a place in heaven higher than any other creature: clearly she had to rise far above the angels if she was to draw from the source of living water and give to men to drink.

*(to be concluded)*



## ROSA RORANS BONITATEM:

### St Bridget of Sweden

ERIC COLLEDGE

**T**HERE can be few saints of the late Middle Ages whose lives are so richly documented or so curiously varied as that of St Bridget of Sweden. A contemporary of St Catherine of Siena, she lived in Italy for a quarter of a century and played politics almost identical with those of Catherine, yet the two women never met; but their lives resemble each other at many points. Both of them were in their lifetime openly venerated as saints, a circumstance which must have been a further affliction to women each of a profound humility. Both of them were surrounded by 'families'; and in either case it appears that only the family's devotion to its mother held it together. Just as Catherine Benincasa seems to have given most of her trust to the English friar-hermit, William Flete, so the favoured son of St Bridget's largely Swedish 'family' was a Spaniard, the hermit ex-bishop Alphonse of Pecha; and Alphonse seems after Bridget's death to have suffered some of William Flete's neglect at the hands of the other devotees.