Meditation on 'Divine Feminine' – Reflections on Hildegard of Bingen

This week, with Fiona's return to normal work activities and ordination training, and with a meditation team member on holiday, we just have a transcript with no video for those at home this week. I have linked some beautiful resources at the foot of this document.

At 7.30pm on Wednesday some of us will be meditating in the physical space of the meditation room at Wisdom Centre. The tradition we meditate in is Centering Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centering Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona Jenvey, one of the group leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate in the Centering Prayer tradition, beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: Eternal God, through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, stability, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Reflections on 'Hildegard of Bingen'

Introduction: This week, on the 17th September, the Church celebrates the feast day of the Benedictine Abbess and polymath Hildegard of Bingen (1098 – 1179), who is also my favourite writer and composer. For me, Hildegard's writings on Wisdom are the bedrock of Wisdom Spirituality. Hildegard spoke extensively about social justice and was firmly focused on the duty of ensuring that every human being, made in the image of God, has the opportunity to develop and use the potential of the gifts and graces that God has given.

Pope Benedict XVI made Hildegard a Doctor of the Church in 2012, recognising her as one of only four women so named in Christian history. At the time, Pope Benedict described St. Hildegard as a woman of Wisdom, "of brilliant intelligence, deep sensitivity, and recognized spiritual authority." He also celebrated her "fearlessness, a feature of every prophet."

Hildegard herself writes:

O Highest Wisdom,
who circles the great circle,
who envisions the whole world
as one living path,
you have three wings.
One soars above the sky,
another moistens the ground with sweat,
while a third flies
everywhere at once.
O Wisdom, we sing your praise.

A woman of immense intellectual stature, Hildegard is known for her musical compositions, theological works and botanical, and medicinal texts detailing 2,000 remedies. She also created a sizable collection of miniature paintings illustrating her visions.

Although considered a Christian mystic, in Germany School children are taught to recognise Hildegard as the founder of scientific natural history. In all her work she presents the fecundity of the natural world and feminine archetypes for the Divine. Hildegard writes:

The earth is at the same time mother,
she is mother of all that is natural,
mother of all that is human.
She is the mother of all,
for contained in her are the seeds of all.
The earth of humankind contains all moisture,
all verdancy, all germinating power.
It is in so many ways fruitful.
All creation comes from it.
Yet it forms not only the basic raw materials
for humankind, but also
the substance of Incarnation.

Born into a noble family, Hildegard entered religious life at a young age, around 8 years old. She was instructed for ten years by the Blessed Jutta. When Hildegard was 18, she became a Benedictine nun at the Monastery of Saint Disibodenberg. Ordered by her spiritual director to write down the visions that she had received since the age of three, Hildegard took ten years to write her Scivias (Know the Ways). Pope Eugene III read it, and in 1147, encouraged her to continue writing.

A respected theologian, and contemporary of the Cistercian, St Bernard of Clairvaux, Hildegard, like St Bernard was a commentator on the Rule of St Benedict, yet in her time, she was a visionary whose mysticism was expressed as the unity of the human self with God and God's creation. Hildegard's vision far exceeded the often limited theological views of her male contemporaries. Hildegard's visions included seeing humans as 'living sparks' of God's love, coming from God just as daylight comes from the sun," she expresses this in Scivias:

"All living creatures are sparks from the radiation of God's brilliance, and these sparks emerge from God like the rays of the sun. If God did not give off these sparks, how would the divine flame become fully visible?" *from SCIVIAS by Hildegard of Bingen*

In contemporary spirituality Hildegard is most well known for her music which functioned as an instrument for her own mystical experience. Within Hildegard's treasure house, there are more than 70 musical works. There are more chants by Hildegard than by any other known composer of her time. Hildegard's compositions were the result of Divine inspiration in the form of a mystical experience. She writes:

"Next I saw the most lucid air, in which I heard . . . in a marvellous way many kinds of musicians praising the joys of the heavenly citizens . . . And their sound was like the voice of a multitude, making music in harmony."

~ Hildegard of Bingen

In the music world, Hildegard was the only known female composer of her time," The revived interest in her music coincided with "the 'new age' chant craze in the mid-1990s,"and it continues to move listeners—of faith and no faith—who hear in her song celebrations of the divinely feminine and the wonders of the natural world. Hildegard writes:

O Beloved,
your way of knowing is amazing!

The way you recognize every creature
even before it appears.
The way you gaze into the face
of every human being
and see all your works gazing back at you.
O what a miracle
to be awake inside your breathing.

from SYMPHONIA by Hildegard of Bingen

So what can we learn from Hildegard today?

Contemporary Benedictine and former Prioress, Sr Joan Chittester believes Hildegard has a lot to teach us about social justice. Recalling a struggle with the Church, Chittester recounts a famous story of Hildegard burying in the monastic cemetery a man who had been censured by the local bishop. The man had been excommunicated, so the bishop demanded that she dig up the body and take it out of blessed ground. Instead, she led her community to the cemetery and they scraped off the tops of every grave with their walking sticks so that nobody would be able to tell where the new grave was. She refused to dig up that young man just because a bishop had condemned him to hell. [Hildegard's] community suffered as a consequence. That bishop put them under what the Church calls interdict, meaning that they couldn't receive the sacraments, they couldn't have Mass, and they couldn't sing the Divine Office. But that community stood together and went on living their religious life under these difficult conditions. The people around them knew that the interdict was wrong, and when a new bishop came in, the interdict was lifted. But it is that dogged determination to make the Gospel plain, even in the face of individuals claiming law over love, that is at the very heart of Hildegard's story.

While Joan Chittester focuses on the social justice she finds in Hildegard, Another Benedictine Sister, the late Macrina Wiederkehr, has often drawn on Hildegard for mystical inspiration. Like Hildegard, Wiederkehr's vision of God was a joyful one, concentrating on the abundance of the world and mother earth rather than on the sorrowful and self-sacrificial Christ.

One of Hildegard's most famous visions describing her relationship to God goes like this:

Listen: there was once a king sitting on his throne. Around him stood great and wonderfully beautiful columns ornamented with ivory, bearing the banners of the king with great honour. Then it pleased the king to raise a small feather from the ground and he commanded it to fly. The feather flew, not because of anything in itself but because the air bore it along. Thus I am . . .A feather on the breath of God.

The feather metaphor is one used by Joyce Rupp and Macrina Wiederkehr in their book, *The Circle of Life*, they suggest "Let us pause to be attentive to our breath, to the air that is vital for us. The authors describe how the mystic Hildegard of Bingen described herself as a feather on the breath of God and suggest how meditators might join together in a breath meditation.

Breathing in: I am a feather; Breathing out: on the divine breath.
You might like to include this in our meditation this evening….and so we begin

Beginning Meditation: Before beginning our meditation, you may wish to adjust your posture, you may wish to pay particular attention to the rhythm of your breath, taking a calming deep breath in through your nose, and a slow breath out, letting go fully. Then repeat this a few times. If you have a sacred word you might notice its rhythm, perhaps noticing how your word is in time with the breath.

Bell Sounds…25-minute meditations begins…Count down timer starts (or use your own watch or meditation timer app)

Bell Sounds…Meditation ends

Reflection after meditation

Beyond the beauty of the meadows

I, the fiery life of divine essence, am aflame beyond the beauty of the meadows. I gleam in the waters. I burn in the sun, moon, and stars. With every breeze, as with invisible life that contains everything, I awaken everything to life. I am the breeze that nurtures all things green. I encourage blossoms to flourish with ripening fruits. I am the rain coming from the dew that causes the grasses to laugh with the joy of life. - by Hildegard of Bingen

Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…**Amen**

Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon.

Resources:

To get an idea of the magnificence of Hildegard's Scivias see this link:
https://www.facsimiles.com/facsimiles/liber-scivias

Hildegard's music makes a wonderful accompaniment to meditation. Please do listen:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ei88J4lERbk

For meditation groups, prayer groups, spirituality, wellbeing, retreats, workshops and our labyrinth garden, please visit our website: **wisdomhouseromsey.co.uk**



Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.