Hildegard 4: The Journey of the Soul

Hi, and welcome to session four of *Experiencing the Scivias.* This week, we’ll be looking at Hildegard’s fourth vision, which represents the relationship of the soul to the body, particularly in relation to sin and redemption. In the text itself, there is a section which goes into more detail about the soul and the body in relation to human faculties of intellect and will, and the role these play in action. For the sake of time, we’re going to skip this this week. Feel free to read it in your own time, however!

You know how this works by now, so let’s just get underway.

# Part 1: The splendour

Hildegard sees “a most great and serene splendor, flaming… with many eyes”. It has four corners pointing towards the four “parts of the world”. This signifies the knowledge of God, “radiant in its profound clarity, which extends its all-piercing faze in fourfold firmness to the four corners of the earth”. This knowledge foresees who will be saved and who will be damned, which “shows the mystery of the Celestial Majesty” reflected in the “great loftiness and profundity” of the image.

Within this, another “splendor like the dawn” appears. This contains purple lightning – a colour Hildegard would have recognised as being associated with royalty. This signifies the way God foresaw the Incarnation and Passion, and how His knowledge makes good and evil known.

God then admonishes people for despairing the justice of divine judgment in the face of this foreknowledge, which seems to contradict their freedom. God’s justice is perfect, as evidenced in God’s grace, and to question it is to assert oneself over God, as the devil tried to do. Instead, we ought to turn to God in penitence, and not damn ourselves by rejecting His justice.

He then concludes the digression by condemning idolatry.

# Part 2: The earthen vessels

Hildegard then sees on the earth people carrying milk in earthen vessels, and making cheese from it. The milk has three parts: a thick part, which is sued to make strong cheeses; a thin part, which is used to make weak cheeses; and a part “mixed with corruption”, which makes “bitter cheeses”. The milk represents human seed or “semen”, possessed by “both men and women”, “from which the various races of people are procreated”. This reflects medieval views of reproduction, in which both parents contributed ‘seed’ to the reproductive process.

God states that the thick milk represents “strong semen”. This produces “energetic people” with brilliant spiritual and bodily gifts, and rich in virtue. The thin part, by contrast, represents “imperfectly matured and tempered” semen. This produces “weak people” with little energy or virtue. Finally, the corrupt milk represents semen “basely emitted in weakness and confusion and mixed uselessly” – which is to say, in adultery. This produces “misshapen” people of “bitterness, adversity and oppression of heart” who are “unable to raise their minds to higher things”. However, God does not simply abandon these people to vice. Rather, God states, he sends some of them adversities. They will have “many tempests and troubles in their hearts and in their actions”, and in triumphing over these they will “become useful”, rather than “languid and useless”. This, he states, will eventually lead them to their salvation.

God then also states that “stunted” births are the result of sinful sex, and are sent by God to cause the parents anguish and make them penitent. He also lets them occur so that saints can glorify Him by curing them. However, he concludes by affirming that those couples who bind themselves to virginity are especially glorified – which is to say, whatever may happen with regards to reproduction, it’s still better to be a virgin.

# Part 3: The woman

Hildegard then sees an image of a pregnant woman with a “perfect human form in her womb”. This shows how humans are fully formed in the womb. The form moves “with vital motion”. This shows that the child truly lives in the womb. A fiery globe with no human features “possessed the heart of that form and touched its brain and spread itself through all its members”. This is the soul, which vivifies the body, ruling it, and granting the child the intellect to know heavenly things.

The human form comes forth from the womb and changes colour according to the movements the globe makes in that form. This signifies how the soul is merited according to its actions with the body.

# Part 4: The soul assailed

Many whirlwinds assail one of the globes in a body, causing it to bow to the ground. However, it regains its strength and resists them to rise up. This signifies the way that the soul in the body is disturbed by temptation, but God’s gift of remorse leads them to turn back to God.

The globe then speaks, telling a story of sin and redemption. The globe laments that she is “in the path of error”, with no consolation but that “which pilgrims have”. She states that she should have had a “tabernacle adorned with five square gems” shining with the glory of angels: topaz, for its foundation, and the gems for its structure. It should have been a “companion of angels”, because she is “a living breath” breathed into mud by God, knowing and feeling God. But her tabernacle turned its eyes to the North, where the globe was captured, robbed “sight and the joy of knowledge”, and its “garment torn”; an image associated with mourning, grief and loss in the Old Testament. She was led from its inheritance into slavery, being forced to “eat with swine” like the prodigal son, taken to the desert and fed with “bitter herbs dipped in honey”, tortured, stripped, wounded, hunted with “the worst poisonous creatures”, and mocked.

Despairing, she cried out to God, lamenting its exile in this “Babylon”. And whenever she thought of God or “Zion”, she became horrified by her situation. She resolved to flee her captors, and did so by a “narrow path” onto a mountain, eventually hiding itself from the North in a cave. There she wept for her loss, and her tears “soaked all the pain and all the bruises” of her wounds. Suddenly she received the consolation of a “most sweet fragrance, like a gentle breath” of her mother, Zion, and she cried out in lament. However, her enemies heard her lamentation and sought to trap her.

To escape her captors, the globe attempted to climb higher to where she could not be seen. However, her captors placed a “sea of… raging heat” before her, preventing her from climbing. The only way over was a bridge, too small and narrow to cross. Then on the shores of the sea, a mountain range appeared; too tall to climb.

The globe despaired, but was also granted some strength by its consolation in the cave. She turned East and continued along the narrow path, struggling through thorns and thistles which obstructed it. Exhausted, she eventually reached the summit of the mountain. She then attempted to descend the other side into a valley, but found her way barred by many venomous creatures. Crying out to her mother for help, she heard her mother’s voice telling her that God, whose power none can resist, had given her wings, and to use them to fly over the obstacles.

Flying over these obstacles, she eventually came to a tabernacle, with an interior of steel. In the tabernacle, she did “works of brightness”. At the north she placed a “column of unpolished steel”, and hung it with “feathers which moved to and fro”. She found manna and ate it. At the East, she built “a bulwark of square stones” and lit a fire within it. She then drank wine mixed with myrrh and grape juice; a drink which recalls Christ’s on the cross in the Gospel of Mark.At the South, she built “a tower of square stones” and hung red shields on its walls and placed ivory trumpets at its windows. In the tower, she mixed honey and spices, producing a fragrance that filled the air of the tower. However, at the west, she “built nothing, for that side was turned towards the world”.

While she was doing all of this, her enemies shot arrows at the tabernacle, but they were resisted by the steel, and she was so absorbed in her work that she did not notice them. Her enemies then sent “a tremendous flood of water” to wash away the tabernacle, but it failed. She taunted them, stating that the tabernacle was built by an architect “wiser and stronger than they”, and that she had been protected from them throughout all of her travails.

Hildegard then sees the whirlwinds attempt to throw down another globe, but it resists strongly. This signifies how a soul, fortified with “celestial inspiration” can resist the devil’s deceptions. However, it still laments, stating that it is “the living breath in a human being”, placed in the tabernacle of flesh, the senses of which are a source of sinful desire and delights, through which the devil ensnares her. She perceives the “dire wounds” of sin in herself, and laments her situation to God. Her reason reminds her that she was created by God, which in turn leads her to think of Adam, who hid in shame. Consequently, she flees to hide from God in shame herself.

The globe then laments the corruption of the fall, and declares herself a pilgrim in her attempts to resist her carnal desires. Then she states that a whirlwind arises within her and tells her “lies in many voices” – that she is doomed to unhappiness, does not know whether her “work is good or bad”, and that it would be better for her not to exist. Once they have risen up, she begins to “tread another path that is hard for [her] flesh to bear”: that of righteousness. But then she feels this is useless, and seeks to do more than she is capable, which paradoxically saps her motivation and only leads her to despair and doubt. When the devil returns to torment her, she is then especially vulnerable to his lies. He convinces her that “all the felicity and all the good which is in Man as well as God will be to [her] harmful and oppressive, offering [her] death rather than life”, corrupting her intellect such that she no longer fears God and becomes unafraid to sin, and taking away her spiritual joy so that she comes to despair and doubt of her possibility of salvation.

Yet amidst this, she remembers that God created her, and becomes resolved to struggle against the body’s weakness rather than to yield to it. When anger tries to consume her body, she will “look to the goodness of God, Whom anger never touched”, feeling God’s goodness and finding spiritual joy. When feeling hatred, she remember Christ’s mercy and the martyrdom, feeling Christ’s mercy and acknowledging Him. When pride leads her to vanity,, she will remember her dependence on God for goodness, and flee to the Virgin Mary, remembering God’s humility and the “sweetness” of the virtue.

Hildegard then sees a third globe, which frees itself from its human form, stating that it shall leave its tabernacle to go through “dreadful and fearsome paths” to judgment, which it fears greatly. This signifies how souls, when the time comes for them to die, leave the body to be judged by God on the basis of its works. Then spirits both light and dark, “who had been its life’s companions according to its behavior” come to lead it away with them according to her deeds. These are witnesses to its deeds, and lead the soul to where it has been consigned by God’s judgment.

God’s voice then declares that the Incarnation brought truth by which souls could be lead back to God.

# Part 5: An admonishment

Finally, God concludes by admonishing humanity to obey the divine law. He notes that people say they want to do so, and promises that those who subjugate their flesh to the rule of their soul and follow His commands will have their prayers for deliverance answered. However, he notes that some people say that they cannot conquer themselves, and instead trust to God’s goodness to make them good instead. God says that this is “unjust wickedness”: God has given us all of our powers, equipping us to resist our sinful desires, and will delight in and aid us in this effort. But when we simply refuse to subdue our flesh, we simply “free it from the bridle of the feat of the Lord”, which would otherwise curb it.

This is illustrated with a really great ironic discourse that’s worth reading out in full here:

“But you, O human, say “I cannot do good works!” I say you can. And you say “How?” And I say, “By thought and action.” And you answer, “I lack decision.” And I answer, “Learn to fight against yourself!” And you say, “I cannot fight against myself unless God helps me.! Hear then how you can fight against yourself. When evil rises up in you and you do not know how to get rid of it, then, touched by My grace, which reaches you in the paths of your inner vision, at once cry out, pray, confess and weep so that God will help you, and remove evil from you, and grant you strength in good. For this good is yours by the knowledge that lets you understand God by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. If you were someone’s workman, oh, how often you would have to do what your body found difficult! Would you not bear many trials for the sake of your earthly wages? The why do you not serve God, Who gave you both soul and body, for the sake of heavenly wages? For if you wanted to possess a temporal object, oh, how you would labor that you might have it quickly!”

(no. 30)

At the heart of the problem, according to God, is that we are asking God for help while refusing to use the tools that He has already provided. He says:

“…you, O human, are blind when you need to see, deaf when you need to hear and senseless when you need to defend yourself, since the intellect and the five bodily senses God gave you are no more to you than filth and emptiness. Do you not have intellect and knowledge?”

(no. 30)

In short, we need to stop messing around and get serious. As God puts it, “The Kingdom of God can be bought, but not acquired in jest”.

God offers a medical metaphor for this process of ‘getting serious’ through repentance and penance: the sinner must “recognize his pain and seek a physician before he falls dead”. God, the physician, will “show him the bitter medicine that can save him”, which is to say, “bitter words”, in the process testing whether or not his penitence is sincere and “comes from the root of his heart”, as opposed to someone who would rather just neglect penance and cover up their wounds instead. That is, God speaks words of condemnation and makes demands of painful penance. Confronting this, rather than simply ignoring them, is the first step towards actually taking one’s medicine and being healed. This is the test which qualifies the person for actually taking these medicines and thereby attaining mercy. If they fail, and would rather simply hide their sin and neglect penance, they will die. However, if they pass, God will give him “the wine of penitence…and the oil of mercy”, which clean and anoint his wounds – which he will have to keep taking. He notes that some only accept penance with difficulty; however, God will aid them and change the bitterness of penitence into “sweetness” so that they can bear it.

God then admonishes people to believe in the Trinity, stating that rejecting any one means rejecting the others. He especially draws attention to the relationship between the Father and the Son: “For the redemption of humanity the Father send the Son into the world and then took Him back to Himself, the way a person send out the thought of his heart and then recalls them to himself”. This is a critique of Catharism, which (depending on the location and whose accounts you read) denied the ‘orthodox’ account of the Trinity, in which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are paradoxically distinct Persons, even as they are still one ‘substance’.

# Part 6: Questions

That’s it for Hildegard’s vision. Here are three questions for you to think about

1. In the section about the earthen vessels, God talks about various types of people, some superior to others by virtue of the ‘seed’ from which they were formed. He also talks about children born with congenital disabilities or disorders as the product of poor-quality seed, produced out of sin, or as a trial sent by God. How ought we to respond to these ideas today?
2. How did you find the story of the soul’s escape from captivity? How does it represent sin and redemption? Has it changed the way you think about these themes? Is there anything it fails to capture?
3. God’s admonishment of humans to obey the divine law seems like a bit of a ‘tough love’ approach to mercy – we have the tools, so we should stop looking for excuses and use them. How does this reflect Hildegard’s broader portrayal of God and His relationship to humanity? And what do you make of it?

Thanks for listening – take a look at the reading, and I’ll see you later!

# Reading

Book 1, vision 4; vision 5 *except* no. 17-26\*

\*feel free to read this section anyway – I just didn’t cover it in the lecture