

Homily for the Solemnity of St Bernard 2010

By Fr Michael Casey

In the late 1960s a French publisher launched a series of books under the rubric **Le mémorial des siècles**, in which the history of each century was presented through one personage considered typical of the period. Thus biographies of Constantine, Attila the Hun, Mohammed, Fredrick the Great, Napoleon and Lenin were used as prisms through which to view whatever it was that happened in the century in which they lived. Mostly those chosen were the great ones of the earth. It comes as something of a surprise, then, to find that for the twelfth century the man of the century was not a king or a pope or a military genius, but a relatively obscure monk from a newly-founded monastery, the one whose memory we also celebrate today, Bernard, abbot of Clairvaux.

What conclusion may we draw from this selection? Perhaps this. If the twelfth century cannot be understood without reference to Bernard, then Bernard cannot be understood without reference to the twelfth century. Bernard's life is married to the age in which he lived; he cannot be divorced from it. Many of the best and worst features we note in the saint are simply reflections of the reality of the world around him or his reactions to it. We sometimes tend to think that the saints are interchangeable, that there is a universal pattern of holiness to which they conform more closely than the rest of us, so that it would be possible to pluck the saints from their own time and relocate them elsewhere. The opposite is true. The saints are those who live most fully in the real world, they are men and women of their own time. They pursue their course within the same constraints their contemporaries experience but, uniquely, they find a way to exploit unnoticed opportunities.

What do we know about the twelfth century, particularly the first half of the twelfth century in which Bernard operated? It was a time when the part of Europe in which Bernard lived and moved was beginning to shake off most of the dullness of the period which we know as "the Dark Ages". During these years Europe changed. Small mud-spattered villages were breaking out from their traditional borders and becoming towns, towns were transforming themselves into cities, some of which endure to this day. Roads began to connect isolated communities. Communication was easier and the reach of central governments became more effective. The brambles that had protected Europe's primeval forests for centuries were cut away and the great trees were harvested for building. As a collateral benefit there were now fewer places for bandits to hide.

Meanwhile more children were surviving and fewer young men were dying in war. Populations grew. It was a time of invention and increasing literacy. In the cities schools were opened which, in the next century, became the universities of Europe. There was more leisure and so culture flourished. In many ways the living was easier.

One effect of these changes was that people became more introspective – and this is where we begin to see how Bernard was truly a man of his time. A concern with interiority developed, an interest in subjective experience which led to a fascination with love as feeling; this not only among philosophers and theologians, but also the writers of chivalric romances and the singers of love songs. It was an age that was in love with love, and this is clearly reflected in the teaching of the Cistercians who belonged to the school of Bernard.

There was, however, a shadow to this interiority. As people began to be more aware of such realities as conscience, intention and motivation, they became more oppressed by memories of their own moral history. Despite its being, on the surface, an optimistic age, there is abundant evidence that the people of the twelfth century were often oppressed by feelings of guilt, and a sense that their lives had been such that they had forfeited any hope of heaven. Their faith in the after-life was strong, but their personal prospects seemed bleak.

There was a felt need for expiation – external works that would counterbalance the wicked deeds of the past, both for the living and the dead. Among such were devotion to saints (particularly those, like John of Beverley or Mary Magdalene who had themselves gone through rocky periods), pilgrimages, the Crusades, Masses for the dead, foundation of monasteries to pray for benefactors. It was at this time that the doctrine of purgatory emerged – not as the threat of secondary punishment for those who had barely missed out on hell, but as a comforting promise of removal of whatever might be an impediment to the full enjoyment of heaven.

Bernard realised that a religion based on fear keeps people in line, but it does not give them the drive to realise their full potential or to do the work that God intended for them. Fear paralyses rather than energises. His response to the widespread feeling of insecurity and dread was to proclaim the abundance of God's mercy with a view to instilling in his hearers an abounding sense of confidence, based not on their own performance but on God's indulgent love. This approach was grounded on three fundamental propositions:

- ★ Created in God's image and called by grace to become ever more like God, there is no limit to our potential, no reason to doubt our powers of recovery after a fall.
- ★ Christ loved us and gave himself for us; it is on his merits that our salvation depends, not on our own. He continues to act on our behalf.
- ★ Christ, through his Church has taught us a life-giving way; by following this we can be confident of reaching the goal for which we were created.

Hope, confidence and trust in God are themes underlying all that Bernard did, all that he wrote and the sermons he preached. Even Martin Luther recognised and admired this. In an age of uncertainty about salvation Bernard proclaimed the unconditional character of God's love manifested in Christ and freely given to those whose hearts are receptive. To the people of his own time Bernard opened the door to a more ample hope. The same message he continues to proclaim to us: do not allow negativity to undermine your confidence in God: Trust in him and he will act.

Therefore my advice to you, friends, is to turn aside from troubled and anxious reflection on your own progress, and escape to the easier paths of remembering the good things which God has done; in this way instead of becoming upset by thinking about yourself, you will find relief by turning your attention to God... Sorrow for sin is, indeed, a necessary thing, but it should not prevail all the time. It is necessary, rather, that happier recollections of God's generosity should counterbalance it, lest the heart should become hardened by too much sadness and so perish through despair. (SC 11:12)