

I – BONAVENTURE AND THE BIBLE

2. Wisdom and Love

Bonaventure was first and foremost a biblical theologian whose competence may be measured by reference to his several remaining commentaries and also to his many sermons. All that he taught had its root in Scripture and the *Collations on the Hexaëmeron* are essentially an extended Bible study, a disciplined demonstration of method as well as a powerful exposition of the spiritual meaning of the biblical text. His Franciscan contemporary from England, Roger Bacon, painted a scathing picture in his *Opus Maius* for Pope Clement IV in 1267 of the near anarchy that afflicted much biblical teaching in the University of Paris as it had developed over the previous forty years. He regarded the Paris version of the Vulgate as seriously corrupt. In his *Opus Tertium* he further denounced Franciscan teachers who corrected the text as they pleased, as did the Dominicans and the other secular clergy. One correction provoked another to the extent that confidence in the original text of Scripture was being seriously undermined. Even the imperfect Paris Bible was better than this shambolic practice. He accused them of permitting every *lector* to make whatever changes suited him. Such a chaotic practice flew in the face of sound scholarly learning based on knowledge of the original languages and careful comparison of manuscripts. Only Jerome's version of the Vulgate should be regarded as normative and Bacon hoped that the Pope would rule accordingly. Unfortunately Clement died in 1268 and Roger Bacon himself died in 1292.¹ In some ways Roger Bacon's, at times, turbulent, career, with its wide intellectual interests and concerns, mirrored that of Bonaventure, and Bacon's writings certainly shed light on the great challenge at that time of anchoring Christian theology in the universities in an accurate understanding and handling of Scripture. In his *Collations on the Hexaëmeron*, Bonaventure brought into profound focus his own manifold understanding of Scripture.

Christ the Wisdom of God

The pursuit of wisdom is a recurrent preoccupation in Bonaventure's thought throughout his many writings. He associated it closely with sanctity or holiness. This only comes about under the transforming influence of divine grace and it is the true goal of all Christian prayer and theology. This transformation is not something that human beings can achieve on their own, however, but it results in the development of a new and growing spiritual capacity to perceive and receive the truth of God as revealed in Christ.² Without this, human beings contemplating the created world or Scripture itself are like illiterate people handling a book.³ In the case of the *Collations on the Hexaëmeron*, Bonaventure was concerned to demonstrate how Christ as the wisdom of God provides the only credible basis for secure philosophical thought, while at the same time anchoring all Christian theology and morality in the events of his incarnate life and death. He believed that the Incarnation revealed the turning point of human history, *sub specie aeternitatis*, while at the same time enabling humanity to return to God within history and also in eternity. Christian spiritual experience is thus a spiral process of development, circling around and focusing upon the incarnation of Christ, while at the same time progressing ever deeper into the reality and mystery of God by consciously and willingly returning to Him. By this approach and teaching, Bonaventure also wished to address and challenge the pretensions of some philosophers in the universities at that time, who were claiming an independent authority and truth for thought derived from Aristotle and his Islamic commentators. Bonaventure wished also to correct those among his brethren, who were being seduced by the prophetic and apocalyptic claims emanating from the teaching of Joachim of Fiore. These predicted a coming third age of the Church to be comprised of 'spiritual' men and women, who would be led by the Holy Spirit. This would supersede the present era of Christianity that was rooted in the historical coming of Christ, just as the era of the New Testament had superseded that of the Old Testament.⁴

In his teaching about Christ the wisdom of God, Bonaventure could claim good precedent and authority, most evident in the theology of Augustine, which was itself founded upon certain key New Testament texts. The most important of these occurs in the prologue of John's gospel, which describes the Word of God

as 'with God in the beginning: through him all things came to be and without him no created thing came into being. In him was life, and that life was the light of humanity . . . the true light which gives light to everyone was coming into the world.'⁵ In many ways, these words give the foundation for all that Bonaventure taught. They were corroborated by similar words of Paul in his letter to the Colossians where he described Christ as 'God's secret, in whom lie hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge'.⁶ Elsewhere, in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul spoke about this secret (or mystery) in connection with the Cross of Christ, which revealed Christ as 'the power of God and the wisdom of God . . . for God has made him our wisdom'.⁷

The deeper roots of this distinctive element of early Christian theology lay in the personification of divine wisdom evident in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha, to which Bonaventure often referred.⁸ Thus, the key text which opens the *Collations on the Hexaëmeron* is found in Sirach 15.5. Bonaventure's use of such wisdom texts is always highly revealing, as he consistently related them to the mystery of Christ himself as the incarnate wisdom of God. The last verse of the prologue of John's gospel encapsulated Bonaventure's belief and approach, and it can be translated thus: 'No one has seen God at any time; God the only begotten, the Son in the heart of the Father, he has expressed him'.⁹

How does Christ express the nature of God? The third collation of the *Collations on the Hexaëmeron* provides a crucial definition that governs the whole way in which this remarkable work of Christian theology unfolds. Bonaventure said that: 'the key to contemplation is a triple understanding: of the uncreated Word, through whom all things are made, of the incarnate Word, through whom all things are restored, and of the inspired Word, through whom all things are revealed'.¹⁰ This threefold definition can be tracked back throughout Bonaventure's writings.¹¹ In his second collation in the *Collations on the Hexaëmeron*, Bonaventure completed the discussion about the nature of divine wisdom that he had begun in his earlier course of lectures on the Holy Spirit, given in Paris in 1268.¹² There he described the origin of wisdom and its dwelling in terms of: 'light "descending from the Father of lights"^[13] into the soul, which by shining within it makes the soul deiform [or God-like] and a dwelling of God'.¹⁴ Paul spoke in I Corinthians about the human body becoming a sanctuary of

the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ The transforming impact of this work of divine grace was described by Bonaventure as making the intellect beautiful, the affective power of love delightful and the energy of the soul robust. In essence, the image and likeness of God, which is the defining character of a human person, is thus being fulfilled and perfected in direct response to the gracious initiative of divine wisdom mediated through Christ.

'The door to wisdom is yearning and a vehement desire for it.'¹⁶ It is a matter of the heart quite as much as the head and, in the end, love trumps all. Bonaventure drew a direct parallel with love itself by asserting that abiding within the love of God means abiding in His wisdom also.¹⁷ The moral basis for human transformation by divine wisdom is therefore a true love of what is just and right; and this love is expressed in a disciplined Christian life: for 'a person does not become wise only by listening but also by observing'.¹⁸ Christianity is thus an active, demanding and lifelong apprenticeship in the school of divine love: mysticism and morality go hand in hand. Christian obedience has to be freely given, however, if it is to participate in divine love, which alone can cast out all fear.¹⁹ 'When you keep the law [of God] you are sanctified and made full of the Holy Spirit; then you become drawn away from any other love that is not God.'²⁰ Holiness thus reveals and expresses the profound affinity that there is between God as Creator and created human beings; for 'without sanctity a person is not wise'. This is because 'sanctity is the immediate disposition [of the soul] towards wisdom'.²¹ This is also why the single-minded quest for divine wisdom is the supreme *raison d'être* and mission of human beings, that which explains the unique meaning and purpose of each human person's identity and life.²²

Bonaventure was confident that divine wisdom expressed in Christ the Word of God could interpret the meaning of every aspect of created reality. He portrayed its fourfold character firstly as 'uniform' or 'universal' in terms of the principle behind the laws of creation and nature, 'by which the mind knows and judges that which could not be otherwise'. By this Bonaventure meant the existence of God as the first principle of everything, whose truth had to be believed and whose goodness had to be supremely desired and loved. 'In these truths, wisdom appears, for they are so certain and they cannot be otherwise.'²³ These truths are the basis for all secure human thought and judgement, the divine light by and in which we may see light.²⁴

Divine wisdom takes a 'manifold' or 'multiform' expression, however, in Scripture, which is filled with 'the unfathomable riches of Christ'.²⁵ In the passage from Paul's letter to the Ephesians to which Bonaventure referred, divine wisdom is described as 'manifold' or 'multiform'.²⁶ Throughout his life, Bonaventure devoted great energy to the exposition of the Bible, probing its hidden depths and meaning, ever mindful of the fact that its truth is only revealed to the humble, who may encounter the humility of Christ hidden within its text.²⁷ Faith, hope and love intimate what is to be believed, hoped for and done in response to divine wisdom by following the humble Christ. In the mysteries of Scripture, 'God's wisdom appears more beautifully',²⁸ and the sheer variety within the Bible flashes forth the manifold wisdom of God like so many polished mirrors full of light. For Bonaventure the Bible was always a multidimensional landscape or environment to be inhabited and explored.

Scripture in turn illuminates God's wisdom that is evident and expressed in the created world, which Bonaventure described as 'omniform', to those who can discern it. He was confident that every part of created reality expresses in some way the mind and wisdom of God its Creator. He knew too how blinded human beings so often are to this truth to their own detriment. The very construction of the world however demonstrates the creating genius of God, from whose eternal existence all created existences spring and to which they will in the end return. 'So it is clear that the whole world is like a single mirror full of lights presenting divine wisdom, or like a glowing coal emitting light.'²⁹ Bonaventure's deep belief inspired the clarity and order with which he wrote, and also his own sincere appreciation of the beauty and intricacy of the created world as a person with a keen aesthetic sense and a nascent scientific mind.

Nonetheless, these three modes of divine wisdom find their fulfilment beyond the confines of this world in an inexpressible manner which Bonaventure, following Dionysius, described as 'nulliform' - indescribable, literally 'without form'. Bonaventure cited Paul's words at the beginning of his first letter to the Corinthians, which spoke about 'a wisdom hidden in mystery', taught by the Holy Spirit to those becoming 'perfect'.³⁰ Here Bonaventure was on dangerous ground, for did not the followers of Joachim of Fiore claim precisely this more 'spiritual' knowledge of a deeper mystery than that already revealed in the Gospels?

Bonaventure maintained that Christ is the key to all forms of divine wisdom and love, and he followed Dionysius in declaring

that such an experience of divine wisdom transcended all else; but it could only be experienced, not described or thought about. 'At the summit is the union of love, and this transcends all.'³¹ To this process, a human being can only offer the ascetic assent of love, relinquishing all else in the process, by dying in order to live.³² 'Such love transcends all understanding and knowledge';³³ and, while the mind sleeps, the heart remains in some mysterious way awake.³⁴ The power of love silences all other aspects of human thought and existence, and this is the meaning of spiritual ecstasy to which all Christians are called. 'No one can arrive at this wisdom except through grace', however, being taught directly by the Holy Spirit and by Christ the Word of God.³⁵ Furthermore, 'it is necessary that a person die through this love so that such a one may be lifted up to God'. In this way the whole energy of the soul is focused within itself upon God as the summit of its love.³⁶

Bonaventure also endorsed the teaching of Dionysius that this arduous way to God is essentially 'apophatic' in the sense that by entering the darkness of God, in which the mind is stilled, the soul becomes supremely enlightened through contemplative prayer.³⁷ The soul's love for God enters the very heart of Christ, becoming kindled by the fire of the Holy Spirit.³⁸ This *via negativa* leads to divine love itself, which transcends all human understanding, but which may be sensed by the human heart, for 'love always comes after negation'.³⁹ This is because divine love, revealed in the death of Christ, is by its nature profoundly sacrificial in character. Thus, the way of the Cross is the way to participate in divine wisdom and love, as Francis and Clare had demonstrated.

Just as a sculptor gradually removes what obscures the beautiful form hidden within a piece of stone, so knowledge of divine love in this self-denying manner reveals the nobility of the human soul made in the divine image and likeness. Such a costly spiritual *transitus* lies at the heart of Bonaventure's contemplative theology because it is the only response possible to the manifestation of divine wisdom in all its forms in Christ the incarnate and crucified Word of God. To this spiritual mystery and existential truth confronting human beings such scriptural events as the passage of the Red Sea, the crossing into the Promised Land, the death of Christ and his burial all point.⁴⁰ The path of return to God by following Christ is truly a path of living through dying and so learning how to love.

Christ the Bridegroom

Bonaventure inherited a rich tradition of theological expression drawn from monastic meditation and reflection upon the spiritual meaning of the Song of Songs, which is evident throughout his writings. His usage of it in the *Collations on the Hexaëmeron* is highly significant, revealing and, at times, original too. Bonaventure assumed the mantle of Bede and Bernard of Clairvaux in using nuptial language to describe the nature of divine wisdom, the nature of the Church and of the soul, and also the language of loving encounter with Christ.⁴¹ The feminine personification of Wisdom in the Old Testament and Apocrypha is very striking and it proved pregnant with meaning for Christian commentators from Origen onwards. Citing Wisdom chapter seven, Bonaventure taught in his second collation about divine wisdom that 'she is the highest good, who must be loved supremely and who must be sought above all else'.⁴² In his sixth collation, he extolled her beauty as 'the radiance of eternal light, the spotless mirror of God's majesty, and the image of His goodness', words also drawn from Wisdom chapter seven. Bonaventure concluded that 'where there is a mirror, an image and a radiance, there is necessarily representation and beauty'.⁴³ In these words the whole mystery of the Trinity was implicit, as was its revealing in the beauty of the created world, including the human soul. At the same point in this collation, words taken from Wisdom chapter eight form a bridge into the language of the Song of Songs: 'I have loved and have searched after her from my youth. I have sought to take her for my bride, and to become the lover of her beauty.'⁴⁴

Bonaventure's use of bridal or nuptial language in the *Collations on the Hexaëmeron* is influenced by this vision of divine wisdom and drawn directly from the Song of Songs, and it is fascinating and significant. For, if Christ is the Bridegroom,⁴⁵ his Bride can be either the Church itself or the individual human soul or, indeed, the soul as the microcosm of the Church.⁴⁶ Thus, in the second collation, the threefold praise of the bride in the Song of Songs relates to the Church 'in its beginning, middle and end'.⁴⁷ In the manifold richness of scriptural language, 'God's wisdom appears most beautifully'. Thus, for example:

if I wish to praise the bride because she is beautiful and truthful and I simply say this, my heart is not affected

very much. But when I say, 'your cheeks are beautiful as the turtle dove and your neck like jewels', I commend her wonderfully, for then I commend her not only as chaste and honest, but also on account of her love for the bridegroom, which is chaste and loveable.⁴⁸

In common with patristic and monastic tradition, Bonaventure regarded the Song of Songs as only appropriate for 'souls already cleansed'.⁴⁹ In the sixth collation, words from this canticle were applied to the Blessed Virgin Mary herself, who is 'beautiful like the moon, bright like the sun', being 'a vessel designed to receive light, like the sun itself'.⁵⁰ In a different context, Bonaventure noted that in creation itself the apparent ugliness of some seeds conceals the beauty that they will produce. This is true in the spiritual life, as the bride herself says, 'I am black, but beautiful', for it was true to some extent also of the incarnate life of Christ himself.⁵¹

In an important passage, Bonaventure described the soul as a hidden inner paradise:

The soul is a paradise in which Scripture has been planted, and it has a wonderful sweetness and elegance. So in the Song of Songs, 'My sister, my spouse, you are an enclosed garden, a fountain sealed, your emissions – a paradise.'^[52] The soul is a garden in which there are sacramental mysteries and spiritual understandings, where there gushes forth a fountain of spiritual emissions. But it is enclosed and its fountain is sealed, because it is not open to the unclean, but only to those whom the Lord knows are His own.^[53] Eternal wisdom loves this garden and dwells around it.⁵⁴

This inner paradise is watered by the blood of Christ, and its fountain of living water is the Holy Spirit springing up within it; and all is mediated through Scripture.⁵⁵

An interesting implication arises inasmuch as the barring of the gates to paradise in Genesis 3.24 could signify the protection of this inner paradise of the soul by God against the day of its redemption and opening by Christ the Bridegroom. This may be intimated in the last collation when Bonaventure says that, 'it is necessary that the sign of truth be imprinted upon the soul, by which it becomes "an enclosed garden and a fountain sealed"'.⁵⁶

He goes on to expound the meaning of this 'sealing of the soul' in words drawn from the Song of Songs, all of which extol the nature of love as an 'indissoluble bond', overflowing charity for others, and 'fire for the soul', so that love becomes as strong as death, experiencing the consolation hinted at in the feasting described in the canticle.⁵⁷ 'Thus the contemplative soul is signed by God.' When Bonaventure wrote these words, he probably had the stigmata of Francis in mind, symbolised by the angel in Revelation, to which he referred here and who appeared bearing 'the sign of the living God'.⁵⁸

The language of the Song of Songs is pre-eminently the language of love; and Bonaventure describes the union of the soul with God in these terms towards the end of his *Collations on the Hexaëmeron*:

Then comes divine induction . . . when the soul is raptured into God or into the Beloved. Hence in the Song of Songs, 'his left hand is under my head and his right arm embraces me. I belong to my Beloved and my Beloved to me; he feeds among the lilies'.^[59] For the soul already senses this union and has become one spirit with God; for 'whoever is joined to God is one spirit'.^[60] This is the supreme height of the soul, which makes the soul to be in heaven.⁶¹

These words represent the pinnacle of his thought and the climax to the whole reordering of the human soul by divine wisdom.

The path to this summit may be charted throughout these collations, and it reveals how this inner conviction guided Bonaventure's consideration of the external realities of the Church set in the midst of history. Bonaventure appreciated the profound way in which the language of the Song of Songs can enable expression of the deepest mystery of Christianity, in the Church and also in the individual soul, which was described by Paul as, 'Christ within you, the hope of glory'.⁶² It was clearly language close to Bonaventure's heart and also to his own spiritual experience.

Discussing how divine wisdom steals upon the soul, Bonaventure said this in his second collation: 'When the mind is joined to God in that union, in some ways it sleeps, and in some ways it remains awake, saying, "I sleep but my heart is awake."^[63]

Only the affective power [of love] is awake and it imposes silence upon all the other powers [of the soul].⁶⁴ Furthermore, this love is solely of the Bridegroom and it induces sleep, quieting all the other powers (of the soul), by imposing silence as it lifts up the soul to God. This 'love is as strong as death'⁶⁵ because it separates from everything, so that a person dies to self through love even while being lifted up to God.⁶⁶ Only love, not the intellect, can penetrate this mystery of Christ and so enter his heart of love.⁶⁷ In the sixth collation, Bonaventure associated this kind of love with fortitude or courage itself, as shown by Christ on the Cross. Its hallmark is fire, and again he may have had Francis in mind when he cited words from the Song of Songs: 'love is as strong as death . . . its lamps are of fire and flame'.⁶⁸ This love is seraphic in character, flaming from the burning heart of God's love. It is set as a seal upon the soul, and in the case of Francis it took visible expression in his stigmata.

Bonaventure summed up the ethos of the Song of Songs in the phrase '*sapientia amorosa*' - 'loving wisdom', although these words do not actually occur in the Vulgate text. He said that, 'no one is able to say the words of the Song of Songs without wisdom and love. . . . Therefore it is necessary to pass over from all things into truth itself, so that there may be no delight except in God.'⁶⁹ Contemplative souls are to be identified with the daughters of Jerusalem, 'because they are beautiful and fertile, being filled with light. . . . Thus it is by purity, not by reason, that someone must enter contemplation.'⁷⁰ Later in the same collation Bonaventure asserted that the Song of Songs speaks 'by way of love and by way of song, because a person cannot reach such flashes of divine light except through such love'.⁷¹ Nonetheless, there is a paradox here because thus silenced and overwhelmed by divine light and love, a person may appear speechless and useless, even vile to others while being united to God. In the opening words of the Song of Songs, the bride says, 'Do not look down on me. I am dark of hue because I was scorched by the sun.'⁷² Of Christ the Suffering Servant it was said that, 'we despised him and held him of no account, an object from which people turn away their eyes'.⁷³ Paul called himself, 'a fool for Christ's sake',⁷⁴ which was how many regarded Francis in his lifetime also.

Bonaventure had a high estimate of the human soul, seeing it as a beautiful reflection of the heavenly Jerusalem itself: 'The soul is a great thing: within the soul the entire world can be

described.⁷⁵ Within its life and development there is an ascent of love, a descent of grace and finally a return to God. It is the Holy Spirit who enables the soul to receive illuminations from God directly, urging it thereby to rise upwards towards God Himself. This process comprises:

reception, revelation and union, beyond which the mind does not advance; and it is in this that the whole of the Song of Songs consists: in chaste, more chaste, and most chaste speculations and unions [with God]. Then the soul can say in the words of this canticle, 'let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth'.⁷⁶

For the goal is to be signed by the Holy Spirit with holiness so that, 'you may be able to comprehend what is in God, through God, and with God'.⁷⁷ This is His unshakeable love for those made in His image and likeness, an eternal love that is poured out in the creation of the world, and supremely in the giving of His Son, Jesus Christ, even to death on the Cross. This is the pledge of the eternal transformation of human nature and of all creation that is revealed in the resurrection of Christ.⁷⁸ Only being filled with this divine love can drive out evil and remedy human sin. It is notable that Bonaventure's last reference at the end of the final collation now remaining in the *Collations on the Hexaëmeron* was to the Song of Songs, using the chariot of Solomon as a symbol of contemplative wisdom that is founded upon virtue and overshadowed by divine love itself.⁷⁹