

Understanding St. Bernard Today

A Glance at the Parables & Sentences of St. Bernard

Addressing an audience of 12th century monks in his First Parable, the Cistercian Abbot St. Bernard of Clairvaux illustrates the point of being formed in contemplative life and professing vows through creative narrative. He does this by anthropomorphizing human attributes so that we can better relate to our motivations. Bernard begins by describing human beings as God creates and interacts with us. Using the collective term “man,” we are described as a “delicate boy” and “son,” endowed with “free will” that makes us “masters of paradise.”¹ Yet even though God has provided us with the Law and Prophets as “guardians, tutors,” and “masters,” we are “dissatisfied, unhappy,” and “silly,” and hide ourselves in “conceit, curiosity, indiscipline,” and “worldly cares.”²

This is all due to the Fall described in Genesis 2:16-17, where we gained knowledge of good and evil. For Bernard however, the Fall was not about gaining, but *unlearning*. These consequences were such that we “unlearned all that (we) had previously learned,” had to do the “work of slaves” by becoming enslaved to attachments, and “the ancient villain” was empowered to convey us “to the distant Region of Unlikeness.”³ We needed to remember who we are, both for our own sakes and for the wellbeing of others. This restoration and strengthening of the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27) illustrates a process by which we are set free. So how does it happen?

¹ Michael Casey, trans., *Cistercian Fathers Series*. No. 55. *Bernard of Clairvaux: The Parables & the Sentences* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 2000), 18.

² Casey, *Bernard of Clairvaux*, 18.

³ *Ibid*, 19.

First, God remembers man and “grieves and mourn(s) for his son’s absence and loss.” He then instructs “his friends...and slaves...to make a search for him.” The slave Fear finds him in a “deep dungeon,” and the slave Hope follows, bringing the horse named Desire, on which the son escapes. Prudence and Temperance (both female officials of the palace) exhort the son to keep a steady pace and not hurry off the path, and Prudence “restrains the ardor of the horse named Desire with the bridle of Discretion, and (gives) the reins into the control of Temperance.”⁴

When Fear speaks up, Prudence dispels him – “Get behind, Satan, you are a source of stumbling.” The military champion Fortitude arrives at the “fields of Boldness, wielding the sword that is Joy,” and the counselor Prudence states, “As my servant Solomon says, ‘If at the beginning you hasten toward your inheritance, then at the end there will be no blessing,’” and so she leads them on “the road of Justice...to the camp of Wisdom.” “Fear added urgency. Hope attracted. Fortitude strengthened. Temperance controlled. Prudence kept watch and gave instructions. Justice led and directed.”⁵

Wisdom then anticipated and greeted the son, and her camp was “surrounded by a trench of deep Humility.” Its walls were Obedience, and the door was Profession (of monastic vows). A herald was “stationed above the gate and he cried out: ‘If anyone loves Wisdom let him turn to me and he shall find Wisdom. And when he has found her, happy is he who keeps his hold on her’” (cf. Pr 9:16, 3:18). Wisdom then carries the son in her arms, bringing him triumphantly into “the stronghold in the middle of the city.”⁶ From this figurative stronghold, his literal monastery, the monk enjoys a newfound freedom through profession of monastic vows.

⁴ Ibid, 19-23.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

St. Bernard is a Doctor of the Church who very creatively described the process of monastic formation. Yet for professional people living in contemporary society, how are we to understand him today? Is his teaching relatable to how people currently live in the world? Though his language and concepts may seem anachronistic and difficult to apply, in symbolically depicting monastic formation resulting in taking vows, he is describing what we can know as a *rite of passage*. Whether preparing for confirmation, graduation, marriage, or entering professional life, we all experience such things one way or another.

We encounter rites of passage in all states of life, and they generally consist of three phases; “the preliminal, or phase of separation; the liminal, or in-between phase; (and) the postliminal, or time of reincorporation.”⁷ Such rites help people to navigate from one place to another in their lives, and we use them to satisfy and balance the longing to be a separate, distinct person with the desire to become “part of a larger whole” in a new, more self-actualized way.⁸

The *preliminal* phase breaks up familiar ways of being; interrupting “the way our lives are organized.”⁹ For Bernard, this meant entering the monastery; for us it could mean any sort of intentional commitment, including a decision to simply try something new. When we follow through on such a decision, we enter into the *liminal*, in-between time, where learning curves may cause us to experience a breakdown of sorts, as we navigate unfamiliar parameters. Finally when we learn our *post-liminal* lessons and

⁷ Andre Papineau, *Breaking Up, Down and Through* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 7.

⁸ Papineau, *Breaking Up*, 11.

⁹ Ibid, 3.

become reincorporated, we enjoy the fruits of breaking through into new “insight or vision,” and our lives are changed as a result.¹⁰

Whether referring to becoming a professed monk or taking on any sort of intentional commitment, the results of worthwhile rites of passage, such as facing our emotions and ordering our lives so that we become better-integrated persons as we progress through life, are as relevant as ever. Even on a professional resume, employers want to see experienced persons who have made a point of successfully meeting challenges head on, and most marriage-minded people would prefer meeting experienced, mature spouses than someone who never took a risk.

Meeting challenges and taking risks are all normal components of growing in maturity. As of this writing, the upcoming days of my life are marked by many challenges, culminating in a rite of passage. This rite is in the form of a sabbatical, as I prepare to take on an increasingly administrative role in my province as a priest. The sabbatical begins as I leave my current parish assignment, embarking on an extended road trip. During this time I will finish writing a draft of a book of liturgical homilies, and the sabbatical will culminate in a trip to Ireland. In preparation, I enter the preliminal phase of leaving parish ministry, the liminal experience of the sabbatical itself, and the post-liminal reincorporation into priesthood as it changes from a specifically pastoral role into an administrative one. This will be a stretch as I learn new ways of being, but like a monk in St. Bernard’s time, I will find a newfound freedom and union with God all the more as a result.

We can always find meaningful ways to stretch ourselves, and chosen rites of passage can lead to a disciplined, joyous life in which union with God is consciously

¹⁰ Ibid, 5.

experienced. With God, this is its own reward. Let us remain flexible as we progress through life, remembering and never unlearning the benefits that flow from ordering ourselves into activities ordained by God.

Bibliography

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