Hildegard of Bingen, Woman of Spirit

I am pleased to begin this sermon by announcing a first. More than a fortnight ago I received a kind email from someone saying how sorry she was that she would not be able to be in Chapel to hear me preach today. The point was not to flatter the preacher, of course, but to express interest in the subject. What makes this doubly remarkable is that until relatively recently Hildegard was if not unknown then certainly uncelebrated.

She lived in the twelfth century – the era when Durham cathedral was built and Bernard of Clairvaux was reforming monasticism in France. It was a time of cultural renaissance – the word ‘modern’ was coined, there were significant agricultural advances, and the west began learning seriously from the east. They were interesting times indeed, and Hildegard was a very interesting person.

She was born into an aristocratic family in 1098. As the tenth child she was sent to live in a monastery; indeed she was walled up as the handmaid of a hermit nun when she was eight. She became a Benedictine nun by her own volition when she was 17 and became the superior of her community in 1136.

Her education and early life experience were therefore very unusual. It seems that she didn’t receive much formal instruction, but learnt mostly by observation of others and by participation in monastic life. As a result her theological and spiritual insights were of a much higher quality than her ability to write in perfectly grammatical Latin.

What mostly characterized Hildegard’s writing was its subject matter and the poetry of its expression. Pope Benedict made her a Doctor of the Church in 2012. In the Apostolic Letter of proclamation he wrote that her the language was ‘characterized by an original and effective style, making ample use of poetic expressions [being] rich in symbols, dazzling intuitions, incisive comparisons and evocative metaphors’.

I think we can safely say that the professorial German Pope was an enthusiast for ‘the Sybil of the Rhine’.

One of the impressive things about Hildegard is that she led a life that was both active and contemplative. She was busy with administration and leadership, and yet was open to God in prayer in an extraordinarily vivid way. Her writing reminds me of Old Testament prophecy – which we perhaps think of as a rather masculine genre. There is certainly no doubting her confidence either in her visions, or in the authority of what she has to say. In her letters to bishops, popes, kings and the like, she takes them to task on God’s behalf, writing that ‘Living Light says …’, or ‘He who sees and is subject to no change says …’. These circumlocutions are intended to leave no doubt in the mind of the recipient that what she has to say, which is often bluntly critical, is to be taken very seriously indeed.

As you might have gathered, Hildegard was not on the whole very favourably impressed by the leaders of the state, or the church. She castigated her age as
‘effeminate’ and told men off for being ‘womanish’. There was no doubt in her mind of the importance of real women, however. Interdependence and balance in human affairs and in nature were, for her, key principles. She was also extremely concerned about wisdom and justice, and how people could live faithfully. And it was for such reasons that she founded and administered religious communities for women, and ensured that their liturgical life was well-resourced, engaging and beautiful. But it was her passion for justice that often fueled her extensive and acerbic correspondence.

One aspect of her life that was controversial at the time is that her first monastery was a community for aristocratic women only. She was socially very conservative, and didn’t think that the classes or orders should mix any more than various species of animals. She also encouraged and allowed the sisters to wear elaborate and beautiful headdresses in chapel; arguing that as virgins they were uniquely able to reflect innocence and glory.

Hildegard was also a musician, writing many antiphons and the like to adorn and enrich the liturgy of her chapel. In 1982 a CD of her then largely unknown ‘sequences and hymns’ was recorded by Gothic Voices with Emma Kirkby. Called ‘A Feather on the Breath of God’ (one of Hildegard’s poetic phrases of self-description), it was a Gramophone Award winner. It went on to sell in huge numbers, confounding the recording engineer who said at one of the sessions, ‘beautiful music, but it will never sell’.

Some see in Hildegard the beginnings of the Reformation. A comparison with Martin Luther, who lived four hundred years later, would be an interesting exercise, although Hildegard’s conservatism meant that she was destined to be a reformer from within – a monastic for life.

Nonetheless her spiritual audacity, expressed in deed as well as word, was real. Having become a serious writer in her forties she embarked on no fewer than three extensive preaching missions in her sixties. This is extraordinary for a woman of her era, and yet this is what she felt called to do – and she did it with great energy and to great effect. People certainly felt the power of her influence.

One of the big words in Hildegard's vocabulary was ‘greenness’ (viriditas). The word naturally refers to the beautiful green of the countryside, and at a slight stretch to the forces and realities that make it so. For Hildegard greenness is also a defining quality of paradise. She writes that, ‘It provides the dry earth with fortifying moisture and gives its vital force to the earth, just as the soul provides the body with its vital forces, for paradise is not darkened by any shadow of sinners’. In another place she writes of things being ‘green with the greenness of the Holy Spirit’. This is not just whimsy or poetry. There is powerful theological point about what it means to give life – and therefore what it means to live.

I am increasingly convinced that Christian theology is fundamentally and ultimately concerned with exploring and explaining the belief that God is love, and working out its implications for the way in which we relate to God, to each other and to ourselves. Reading about Hildegard and exploring her own words, I
have come to the view that she is on the same page. As Pope Benedict put it in the exhortation I mentioned earlier, ‘Creation is an act of love by which the world can emerge from nothingness’.

Basically, the thing about God is that God does acts of love. We might even say, by tweaking Heinrich Heine’s cynical quote about divine forgiveness1 - that *loving* is God’s métier. This is all of piece with Hildegard’s vision, which is hugely wide-ranging and encompasses God’s loving action across the whole of time and space.

Researching for this sermon I have become a bit of a fan of Hildegard’s. There is something very attractive about a person with so much passionate energy and such a deep involvement with so many things that matter. She was inspired and is still inspiring and we today have much to learn from her as a great woman of spirit. Let me conclude with a poetic prayer of hers. It is an Antiphon of the Holy Spirit that richly connects many aspects of life with the Spirit of God.

The Holy Spirit is life that gives life,  
Moving all things.  
It is the root in every creature  
And purifies all things,  
Wiping away sins,  
Anointing wounds.  
It is radiant life, worthy of praise,  
Awakening and enlivening  
All things.

Sermon preached in King’s College Chapel, Cambridge by the Dean, the Revd Dr Stephen Cherry 23 October 2016

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1 ‘Pardonner, c’est son métier – to forgive, that’s his [God’s] business’