

Hildegard of Bingen, 17.09.20

May I speak in the name of the one who is love. Amen.

Today the church marks the life and work of Hildegard of Bingen, a theologian, philosopher, visionary, abbess, composer, artist, writer, healer, natural scientist and, of course, a saint! That's quite a list of accomplishments.

Hildegard is also considered to be the first Western thinker to articulate the philosophical theory that a woman is not a deficient form of a man, but a distinct type of human being.

Hildegard was born in 1098 in Bockelheim, Mainz, the tenth child of wealthy parents. Even as a young child Hildegard had visionary experiences and unusual intellectual and healing abilities, although she was told that she should hide such skills and visions as they might be considered marks of witchcraft.

Around the age of eight, Hildegard was given to the service of the church and placed with a well-known holy woman, Jutta of Sponheim. This was seen as a tithe offering as Hildegard was the tenth child, a practice Hildegard argued against later in life.

Here Hildegard was taught the Psalms, basic Latin and a good deal about plants, herbs and the healing arts. Scholars debate the extent of her education, which makes her genius all the more extraordinary.

At 15, she joined the Benedictine abbey as a nun. In 1136, after Jutta's death, Hildegard became the abbess of her community and in 1141 began to write a major work called *Knowledge or Scivias*. She also wrote two other philosophical theological works, two spiritual biographies, a treatise on natural science, a book on medicine,

several commentaries, hymns and plays, as well as hundreds of letters to political, academic and church leaders in Europe.

Hildegard was bewildered by her gift for understanding scripture so deeply, taught as she had been that women were inferior in mind and unsuitable for academic work or ministry. Later she came to insist that knowledge was a gift of grace from the divine, which could be given to men or women.

Hildegard was also a gifted composer: her dedication to music and liturgy was meant to delight the ear of the churchgoer in order that they would see that true delight is in faith.

In opposition to her times, Hildegard admonished the church for its teaching about the evils of the body and the dangers of the flesh, arguing that the church needed to pay more attention to the body, its pleasures, needs and health.

She is also credited as being the first Western thinker to create a full account of gender essentialism, contradicting the gender binary theory that claims there are only two genders and instead describing four different types of men and four different types of women, noting the physical and psychological characteristics and the type of care and lifestyle suitable for each.

Hildegard's powers as a healer were also well known in her time: people, especially women, lined the riverbanks hoping to be healed by her words and remedies as she travelled by boat up and down The Rhine. Her book, 'Causes and Cures', as well as her remedies, continue to be studied and used today.

Hildegard died on this date in Bingen in 1170. At her death, it was said that the sky was filled by two streams of light that crossed over the building in which her body lay.

What an extraordinary woman and what an extraordinary life story. As I pondered this, I was fascinated by the shape her life had taken. As a girl, her gifts as a visionary, healer and philosophical thinker were already apparent, yet she had to hide this gifting so as not to be pronounced, and potentially killed, as a witch, an abhorrent practice of the church at that time in the presence of gifted women, in particular.

Hildegard was also investigated by the church for impropriety on several occasions, finally near the end of her life placing her entire community under censure.

Yet from a dysfunctional beginning and continued distractions and stumbling blocks Hildegard did indeed give her life to God, and continued to give her life to God, and *from that* extraordinary things happened. The very church which might have ended her life and admonished her at various points throughout it now celebrates her as a saint.

In this I find hope. I say that because still today gender discrimination remains at the heart of the church, although women might not be burned at the stake for witchcraft anymore. Yes, we have female bishops, but only with the grotesque compromise of the 'Five Guiding Principles', which legalises discrimination and allows people to reject the authority of women in a way that would be *unthinkable* were the places of women and men reversed.

We say that we are all created in the image of God and that God has no gender and yet we only call God 'he'. Like Hildegard, we are so used to and conditioned by this way of being promulgated by the

church and written into its scriptures that many of us don't even notice how great the disparity is or how tragic the situation.

And yet. Into this place comes the Holy Spirit, as tongues of flame and a rushing wind, breaking through the walls of suspicion, fear, shame and misguided teaching so that a woman who might have been killed as a witch could become one of the great lights of the church.

And yet. Into this place comes the Holy Spirit, breaking through the same walls of suspicion, fear, shame and the worn and weary suppositions of the church, releasing women *today* to live profoundly impactful lives.

I speak of gender here because of Hildegard's own story but, sadly, as we know, there are many other faces to the disabling prism of discrimination.

And yet. Into this place comes the Holy Spirit, able to do incredible things, to increase, magnify and release our gifts in manifold, extraordinary and sometimes unexpected ways, whatever our starting point and no matter what might be loaded against us.

So, on this day when we give thanks for the life, witness and work of Hildegard of Bingen, may it be so that *all* people who feel themselves put down, silenced, shamed or degraded for whatever reason, who give their lives to God, might find the Spirit's power to be greater than that of any church.

And may it be so that they might know the truth that God, source of *love*, our mother *and* our father, she *and* he, can through that very same love, bring abundance and fruitfulness beyond imagining.

For, in the words of the Song of Solomon:

“Love is strong as death,
passion fierce as the grave.
Its flashes are flashes of fire,
A raging flame.
Many waters cannot quench love,
Neither can the floods drown it.”

May we be ready and waiting.

Amen. May it be so.
Hildegard, pray for us.