

The Author

Aelred was born in 1109 at Hexham. He served in the court of King David of Scotland from 1124 to 1133. Leaving his court service he entered the monastery of Rievaulx. There he received his formation and was made the master of novices. Aelred was later sent as abbot to the new foundation in Revesby in 1142. Then in 1146 he was elected as abbot of Rievaulx, a position he held until his death on the 12 January 1166.

(LE BAIL, A., "Aelred", in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 1, Paris 1937, 225-234).

The Text and Critical Edition

ÆLRED OF RIEVAULX, *The Pastoral Prayer*

Living House

"Let your good and sweet Spirit descend into my heart and prepare in it a dwelling place for himself, cleansing it *from all defilement of flesh and spirit* and pouring into it an increase of *faith, hope, and love* and a disposition of compunction, loving tenderness, and kindness. Let him quench the fire of my cravings with his blessed dew and by his power snuff out my lustful urges and carnal desires. As I labor, keep vigil, and fast, let him bestow upon me the fervor and discernment to love and praise you, to pray to you and meditate on you, the dedication and capability to have all my thoughts and deeds be in harmony with you, and perseverance in all these things until the very end of my life".

(ÆLRED OF RIEVAULX, *Pastoral Prayer*, (ed.) M. L. Dutton - M. DelCogliano, CF 73, Kalamazoo, Michigan 2008, p. 47).

ÆLRED OF RIEVAULX, *Oratio Pastoralis*

"Descendat Spiritus tuus bonus et dulcis in cor meum et preparet in eo habitaculum sibi, mundans illud *ab omni inquinamento carnis et spiritus*, et infundens ei fidei, spei, et caritatis augmentum, compunctionis, pietatis, et humanitatis affectum; estus concupiscentiarum rore sue benedictionis extinguat; libidinosas commotiones et carnales affectiones sua uirtute mortificet. Prestet michi in laboribus, in uigiliis, in abstinentia feruorem et discretionem ad te amandum, laudandum, orandum, meditandum, et omnem secundum te actum et cogitatum, deuotionem et efficaciam, et in hiis omnibus usque ad finem uite mee perseuerantiam".

(ÆLRED OF RIEVAULX, *Pastoral Prayer*, (ed.) M. L. Dutton - M. DelCogliano, CF 73, Kalamazoo, Michigan 2008, p. 46).

An Analysis

In this passage St Aelred describes for us what the monastic heart longs for-to be transformed into a dwelling place for God. He does this through the use of very recognizable language and within the realm of daily monastic life and prayer. Though St Aelred writes this selection for himself it is applicable to many.

The key terms in this text, both from the English and original Latin, does not arise from repetition but from the idea which they convey. The chief verbs are: descend (*descendat*), prepare (*preparat*), quench (*extinguat*), and bestow (word properly not present in Latin text). Additional key words from the text consist of: compunction, craving, lustful urges, carnal desires, labor, vigil, fast, love, praise, pray, meditate, harmony and perseverance. And of all these words none is repeated.

With these words from above we can make three semantic groups; verbs, desires and monastic vocabulary. The verbs form a collection of their own as they give the prayer its power and movement. Aelred in asking sending this pray up to God asks for some specific things. Another group of terms we can create is one of human failing consisting of cravings (*concupiscentiarum*, concupiscence or closer to lusts, desires), lustful urges (*libidinosas conmotiones* (misspelled in original)), and carnal desires (*caruales affectiones*). These are the vices one wishing to be closer to the Lord seeks to rid themselves of. A third group of words belongs to the category of monastic vocabulary; the following terms are very common in Benedictine tradition as means of living the monastic life: labor, keep vigil, fast, pray, meditate, perseverance, love, and praise. The first six terms specifically are our daily work in order to render the last two to God.

Concerning the sources of this text, that with italics indicates outside sources but only includes direct quotes. There are a few more references to the Bible which are indirect. But as St Aelred was a Cistercian he certainly was familiar with and made use of the Bible even in the background of his thought, both New and Old Testament, as well as his own experience. The unique combination of these three sources comes together in this text as Cistercians are inclined to do. Within this text is a plea for assistance but not without reciprocity. In no fashion is it a cry of desperation but one of hope; with God's grace all things are possible.

Comment

I believe this text is a common monastic interchange with the Lord-asking for favors, acknowledging faults and presenting offerings. I use the term monastic instead of general because many in the world are falling out of this habit. In the world today there is less and less of an acknowledgement of individual personal fault as it is not fostered but almost shunned by society. And though many believers ask for favors from the Lord the last two elements are often missing for the same reason mentioned above. Though not an instruction on how to present needs to the Lord, the text however does present a model of approach.

As St Benedict points out in his rule, if we wanted to ask a rich person for a favor we would humble ourselves and go out of our way to do the little we could to repay them (cf. RB 20, 1-2). Knowing that God is even greater than any man and is able to see into the human heart, we

should all the more lay everything before Him. He loves the little ones and as such comes to the aid of the humble who call on Him. There is no need to neither “hide” our faults from nor be afraid to offer the little we have to repay Him. If we cannot do right in secret with our Father in heaven then there is little hope that we will do right with our neighbors on earth. All should remember this when they pray but also another point to add, held out at the very end of the text, is the need to keep at the work until the end of our days. Usually what we ask for will take time to make manifest so we must keep at our asking, recognizing of faults and offerings.

In a more monastic context this passage contains truly what every heart desires-union with God. We all wish to be washed clean in the blood of the Lamb that we may rejoice fully with Him. And yet the specific means given in this same passage make it proper to the monk. Monks and nuns the world over can put into practice what they read here. Our daily observances serve a purpose both for ourselves and for the Lord. It would not be a far stretch of the imagination that this prayer could belong just as well to any monk or nun in the present day; for we know that it is by God’s help that we are able to complete the tasks we have set out to do. May we be able to say with St Paul, “by the grace of God I am what I am” (1Col 15:10).