

Prayer of the Month • September 2016

Loving you, O God, brings its own reward here on earth, as well as the eternal reward of heaven. And failure to love you, even when we can offer a thousand excuses, brings its own punishment. By becoming mirrors of your love, by wearing the mask of your likeness, and by allowing you to make us perfect, we can know the joy of heaven, even while we abide here on earth. Our consciences are sullied by our many sins; cleanse them, that we may reflect your infinite brightness.

William of Saint-Thierry c.1085-c.1148¹

William of Saint-Thierry – he is named after the monastery of which he became abbot – was a theologian and a mystic. He had met and been inspired by Bernard of Clairvaux, and went on to write a monastic ‘letter’ to the Carthusians, which has become known as the *Golden Epistle*. He writes and prays with great commitment and depth. We can see this right from the very first sentence of this prayer – he has his thoughts set on heaven, not just earth. The prayer is like an internal monologue: is William talking to God or to himself as he reflects on ideas of success and failure, reward and punishment? The central image of the prayer is the mirror – the idea of reflecting God’s likeness, which raises the problem of being tarnished, tainted, and brings him finally to a request to be cleansed. This purification will bring the joys of heaven to earth. But it is not selfish, for such cleansing is desired not so that we may shine for ourselves, but that we may reflect God’s light.

William was born at Liège (in present-day Belgium) into a noble family around 1085. He seems to have been educated either at the cathedral school in Reims, or in Laon. He entered the Benedictine Order at the monastery of St Nicaise, also in Reims. In 1118 William visited Clairvaux, where he became both a friend and a disciple of Bernard, who, at twenty-eight, was the first abbot of Clairvaux. They became close friends and William earnestly desired to join Bernard. However, the following year William was chosen as abbot of the Cluniac house of Saint-Thierry, where, in co-operation with the monks, he set about raising the standard of religious life there. He also began to write for the brothers, beginning with two short treatises, *On the Nature and Dignity of Love*, and *On Contemplating God* (1121-1124). He visited Cîteaux again, and asked Bernard if he could be admitted, but Bernard refused, and instructed him to remain at Saint-Thierry. Eventually, William couldn’t resist the call of a more contemplative life any longer, and in 1135, at the age of fifty, exchanged his black habit for the white of the Cistercian order at the recently-founded monastery at Signy in the Ardennes. Here, he found that he didn’t have the health and strength to carry out the manual labour the brothers did, but he could write. He completed his *Meditationes Orationes* (*Meditations* or *Meditative Prayers*), but his most famous work is *Epistola ad Fratres de Monte Dei de Vita Solitaria*, named by a later editor the ‘Golden Epistle’, which became popular partly because it was erroneously attributed to St Bernard. William also wrote the *First Life of Bernard* (*Vita prima Bernardi*) in 1147. He remained at Signy until his death in 1147 or 1148 (dated by his abbey as 8 September), a few years before Bernard’s own death in 1153.

Colin Lunt

¹*The Golden Epistle of William Saint-Thierry*, translated by Walter Shewring. – London : Sheed & Ward, 1930.