

Homily for the
Solemnity of St. Bernard
Preached by Fr. Brendan Freeman
(August 20, 2009)

[Scripture Readings: Sir 39:6-11; Phil 3:17-4:1; Jn 17:20-26]

In our day and age we are used to politicians selling themselves. "If I am elected I will lower taxes, get more jobs, just look at my record I did this and this and this." We take it all with a grain of salt. We have been so lied to by politicians that we distrust them all. Because of this we tend to distrust anyone who brags about himself. It is not really polite to brag about you, but most of us do it anyway, sometimes in a very subtle manner. Jesus tells the story of two men who went up to the temple to pray. One, a Pharisee, who bragged about himself and all the good he did, the other, a publican, simply beat his breast and asked for mercy. Bernard tells us self knowledge is the first step to growth in the spiritual life. To have a true self estimation is a mark of humility.

This boils down to the fact that there are two main ways people can know us: what others say about us and what we say about ourselves. Jesus knew the Pharisee was probably padding his good works or at least if he did them all he did them for the wrong reasons. On the other hand the Publican was humble, sincere and truthful. He had a good heart and true insight into himself.

Now let us follow this train of thought with regards to St. Bernard. What do others say about him and what does he say about himself? If we look at what other say we can be overwhelmed. It is all found in his biography called the Vita Prima. There he seemed to be bigger than life, traveling all over Europe, drawing big crowds wherever he goes, counseling Popes, performing miracles, preaching crusades, founding sixty-eight monasteries in his lifetime. Even his own monks couldn't resist the temptation to exaggerate. One of my favorite stories is when the community saw the need to enlarge the monastery because of all the new vocations. The Prior came up with the idea to move to a new location down by the river, which they ended up doing. For most abbots' this would have been a major project, but in the context of all Bernard was doing it was small potatoes. To get him interested in the project was another matter. I quote: "The house council were not infrequently obliged to bring such necessary matters to Bernard's attention, for he was inclined to overlook them so true was it that his conversation was in heaven. Occasionally, then they had to force him to come down to earth for a while to discuss business" sounds like our council meetings! (St. Bernard of Clairvaux. Translated by Webb and Walker, p.87). Now if St. Bernard said the above about himself he wouldn't have the word saint before his name.

What does he say about himself? In all his sermons and chapter talks and letters, he says very

little about himself. If he exaggerates it is usually in the direction of the publican. He says a lot more about Jesus, Mary, and the Saints than he does about himself. This tells us a lot, however. He shares his experience of God with us; he opens his soul, his most intimate inner life in a way we can trust. In this way he helps us know ourselves, our inner life, our soul. We do not have to read everything he ever wrote. Little passages here and there can speak to us. A paragraph, a sentence, even a phrase can find an echo in our hearts.

As a young monk I ran across a quote from his famous Marian sermon where Mary is compared to the Star of the Sea. The refrain, *Respice Stella, Voca Maria* look to the star, call upon Mary, is used like a mantra. When my days were dark the refrain proved true for me. Mary was leading me like a star. Another quotation that I like is one that comes from Bernard's homilies on the Song of Songs:

The Word is a Spirit
The soul is a spirit
And they have a language
By which they are present to each other. Homily 45:7

Bernard knew this language and he can teach it to us. Bernard knew the transformation Paul speaks of in the second reading when he says God will give a new form to this lowly body of ours and remake it according to the pattern of his glorified body (Phil 3:21). We all know our lowly body and we are all being schooled into knowing our glorified body. Bernard is a wonderful teacher in this school.