

Sermons on the Feasts of Saint Mary

By

Ælred of Rievaulx

Translated by Athanasius Sulavik, OP

The translations of Ælred's Marian sermons that follow this introduction are based on the 1989 Latin edition prepared by Gaetano Raciti (*Sermones 1-46: Collectio Claravallensis Prima et Secunda*, CCCM 2A). Of the forty-five sermons contained in that volume, the following eleven Marian sermons appear here in translation: *In Purificatione sanctæ Mariæ*, SS 5, 32, 33, 34; *In Assumptione sanctæ Mariæ*, SS 19, 20, 21, 45; *In Nativitate sanctæ Mariæ*, SS 22, 23, 24. This English translation has retained the sermon title, section numbers, and paragraphing of the Raciti edition for the sake of convenience in locating references. When a sermon is also found in *Patrologia Latina*, its location and column numbers are noted in the first footnote. All editorial emendations from the Raciti edition have also been retained and are marked off by angular brackets, "< >."

I have tried to render a readable translation without betraying Ælred's original thought. However, it was necessary occasionally to divide some of his long, complex sentences into two or more shorter ones, to change some passive constructions into active ones, and occasionally to omit unnecessarily repetitive nouns, adjectives, conjunctions, and pronouns.

Biblical quotations are translated as they appear in Ælred's sermons; where his wording differs from the Vulgate, the Vulgate text is placed in a footnote. The English translation has been compared with the Douai-Rheims translation to reflect Ælred's usage of the Vulgate. All Biblical references are enclosed in parentheses within the text. The Psalms are cited according to the Septuagint numeration; other Biblical references are cited according to the Revised Standard Version.

The sources of Biblical, patristic, and liturgical quotations are listed in the footnotes; allusions and indirect references are indicated by "cf." Parallel passages in other writings of Ælred are also indicated by reference in footnotes.

Because most of Ælred's forty-five sermons have not appeared in English, they, along with his *Homilies on the Burdens of Isaiah* (*De Oneribus*), remain

the last great frontier of Ælredian studies."¹ The sermons themselves are total in tone and content; even Ælred's references to Mary are meant to serve a purpose. Whenever Ælred speaks about Mary, his intent is to convey to his hearers that her life can and should be imitated, since it perfectly illustrates the ideal monastic life.

A promising prospect of these newly edited sermons is that they may also reveal a great deal about Ælred as a preacher, an abbot, a diplomat, and a person. There is little doubt that Ælred lived what he preached. What his biographer Walter Daniel said concerning Ælred's letters appears equally applicable to his sermons: "He left a living image of himself, for what he there commended in himself he himself practiced in life, and lived much better than he could say."²

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¹Brian McGuire, *Brother and Lover: Ælred of Rievaulx* (New York: Crossroad, 1994) 103. [A translation of the complete sermons in two volumes is forthcoming from Cistercian Publications.—Ed.]

²Walter Daniel, *The Life of Ælred of Rievaulx*, trans. F. M. Powicke, CF 57 (Cambridge: Cistercian, 1994) 121.

Sermon 5¹

The Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 2 February

1. Brothers, I see that you have gathered so that you may be fed with the food *that endures* (cf. Jn 6:27), the saving food of God's word. As the Lord says: *Heaven and earth will pass away, but the word of the Lord endures forever* (Mt 24:35; Is 40:8; cf. Ps 118:89). *This is the bread that came down from heaven and gives life to the world* (Jn 6:33). You ask for this bread just like the children of the Lord Jesus. About them he says: *Suffer the little children to come to me, for of such as these is the kingdom of heaven* (Mk 10:14; Mt 19:14). By coming here you wish to be fed, especially with the bread that fills the mind more than the stomach, lest you fall behind *on the road* (cf. Mt 15:32). May the Lord grant that he be the one who breaks it for you, so that it may not be said about you: *The little children have asked for bread, and there was none to break it for them* (Lam 4:4). 2. Just as it is yours to ask for bread, so it is ours to break it. The bread that God gave you in your pilgrimage must be broken by us, so that you may reach that bread, which he keeps untouched for you with the angels in your heavenly home. The bread of your pilgrimage is the mystery of Christ's Incarnation and the truth of his teaching, as well as the example of the humility of Christ and of his faithful. The bread of your heavenly home, by which the angels are fed, is the face of God, the participation of divinity, and the possession of a joy *that eye has not seen or ear heard or the human heart conceived* (1 Cor 2:9).

3. In order that you may more eagerly desire this *bread of angels* (cf. Ps 77:25) and may more ardently hasten to it, the Gospel today serves to you bread that will give strength to your spirit on the road of your exile (cf. 1 K 19:8). It unites you to the purification of the Mother of God, our Lady, Saint Mary, and to the sacrifice of the Savior himself. This bread must be broken so that it may be eaten, since such things must be explained to be understood. 4. She purified herself who bore the one who had no sin at all. That one offered a sacrifice for himself, he who was the sacrifice for the whole world. Why the whole world? First, it was not yet time for the law of Moses to end. Furthermore, he was willing to show that the *law* of Moses was *good*, since he was fulfilling it himself (cf. 1 Tm 1:8). Finally, he wished to teach us that we should seek a spiritual meaning in those corporal observances that the Jews used to follow.

5. Why is there the precept that an infant should be circumcised on the eighth day and that after forty days his mother should enter the temple with her son and a sacrifice (cf. Lv 12:1-8)? Why is there also the precept that they should cut off that part of their own flesh at which people normally blush? Anyone would consider such an observance shameful, not holy, unless the Lord

¹CCCM 2A:46-52; PL 195: 234-38, S 4.

himself had first ordered it and afterwards kept it. In truth, that observance was only, because through it people were purged from original sin, for it signified: faith that we have in the Lord Jesus, which purifies us from all sins. 6. There were many saints like holy Job, who did not come forth from the *loins of Abraham* (cf. Heb 7:5), and yet the precept of circumcision was specially given to the sons of Abraham. The fact that those who were of the race of Abraham had to cut away one part of that member through which men generate and are corrupted by fleshly corruption and sensual pleasure signifies that the Lord Jesus could be born from this lineage without any corruption or pleasure of the flesh. Therefore just as those sons of Abraham used to cut away that part of their flesh where lust chiefly reigns, so we, the spiritual sons of Abraham, ought to cut away every carnal pleasure. And this should happen *on the eighth day* (cf. Lv 12:3). 7. Why? Because just as they were purged, *on the eighth day*, through this sacrament (cf. Lv 12:3), from the sin in which they were born through corruption, so also our Lord, who was born from the race of Abraham through his Resurrection, which occurred *on the eighth day* (cf. Lv 12:3), that is, the day after the seventh, which is called the sabbath, having put aside all mortality and the weakness of corruption, restored the immortal and incorruptible nature of the flesh that he received from us and for us. Likewise, we are purged from all sins through faith in our Lord's Resurrection.

8. After the circumcision follows the purification. Before the circumcision the woman was *impure* (cf. Lv 12:2), and the infant was impure; after the circumcision they were neither wholly pure nor wholly impure. For if they were wholly pure, they would not need purification, nor would they be prohibited from entering the temple. However, if a greater impurity had not been present in them before circumcision, there would not have been the precept that pronounces a woman who bears an infant *impure until the eighth day*, when the infant is to be circumcised (cf. Lv 12:2-3). Recall what we just said about circumcision, and that we break that bread so that it may have flavor.²

9. It seems to me that this *woman* signifies human nature. She was cast out of paradise, because through vice and sin she became *impure*. There were some who without faith in Christ thought that by their own strength they could be justified and approach God. Many, mostly philosophers, believed this opinion, but they were deceived. They brought forth sons, namely, by doing only works such as abstinence, scorn of world, and continence of the flesh. They brought forth sons, because they had many disciples; but since they had no knowledge of circumcision or of the eighth day, both those they brought forth and those begotten remained in their impurity. 10. Among these who could not attain any purity is the mother, that is human nature, and the son, that is their works. Therefore the Lord taught us through Moses how this woman and her son ought to be purified. First, she was *impure* until the circumcision of the

²Ælred is here referring to the opening sections of this sermon (5.1, 2, 3), where he assigns various spiritual meanings or "flavors" to "bread"—a favorite theme for monastic sermons.—Trans.

eighth day (cf. Lv 12:1-2). Circumcision on the eighth day is faith in Christ, which chiefly belongs to his Resurrection. Since he died in the sight of all, there is no merit in believing that he died; but there is merit in believing that he rose again, for that was done secretly. Through such faith we are justified, and through such justification we are purified.

11. Therefore the Apostle says: *Christ was handed over because of our sins and rose again for our justification* (Rm 4:25). Before having such faith, a person is impure and does what is impure, just as the Apostle clearly says: *All that is not from faith is sin* (Rm 14:23). If it is *sin*, it is also impure. Therefore the woman, whatever she brings forth or does, *will be impure* until the eighth day, because human nature is always in sin (cf. Lv 12:2-4) both in itself and in whatever it does, until it comes to faith in Christ. 12. *On the eighth day the woman* receives purification, and human nature receives the remission of sins by faith in Christ's Resurrection. Then the son is circumcised since the work is purified from sin. For example, before faith in Christ he had chastity, but this chastity was *impure* because he was in the sin of infidelity. The son, then, was circumcised *on the eighth day*, because through faith in Christ this chastity was cleansed from the sin of infidelity. But why is it that after this purification the woman is cleansed as if still *impure*?

13. There are many kinds of impurity. Some impurities come from nature, others from the will, still others from weakness. From nature comes that impurity we receive at birth. And so holy Job says: *There is no one clean from filth, not even an infant whose life is one day upon the earth* (Jb 14:4, according to the Septuagint). Therefore David says: *For behold I was conceived in iniquities, and in sins did my mother conceive me* (Ps 50:7). Holy Job was considering this impurity when he said: *Who can make him pure who was conceived from an impure seed* (Job 14:4)? 14. On account of this impurity, all when they are born are children of *Gehenna* and children of *wrath* (cf. Mt 23:15; Eph 2:3), and because of it there was circumcision in the old law. Therefore since circumcision signified faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, it purified people from that impurity, which alone was enough for their damnation.

15. Are there any who do not by their own will add to that another impurity? Concerning this impurity Scripture says: *There is no just one upon earth who does good and does not sin* (Qo 7:21). If the *just one* increases this impurity, how must adulterers, fornicators, murderers, and thieves increase it! Nevertheless, baptism purifies all these impurities, and after baptism, penance, and this purification is accomplished on the eighth day by faith in the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. 16. There is yet another kind of impurity that arises from weakness, of which the Apostle says: *I see another law in my members, fighting against the law of my mind and leading me captive into the law of sin, which is in my members* (Rm 7:23; cf. Vulg). Who is it, brothers, who can boast of not having that impurity within (cf. Pr 20:9)? From it come evil desires and pleasures, inordinate stirring in our members (cf. Rm 7:23), vanities, and wandering thoughts in the human heart.