

SERMON #1

Meister Eckhart

Meister Eckhart (c.1260-c.1328) was born at Hochheim, Thuringia (now central Germany). He entered the Dominican monastery at nearby Erfurt, and then at the universities at Cologne and Paris, eventually receiving his Master's degree from Paris (thus his title 'Meister').

Eckhart held various administrative posts within the Dominican order, involving him in frequent travels. He was also a popular preacher, and gave his sermons in German, rather than the usual Latin, thus conferring a literary presence to German over 200 years before Luther's German translation of the Bible (1534).

Eckhart's writings locate him squarely in the tradition of medieval Christian mysticism, and the unorthodox tendency of some of his propositions eventually resulted in the Archbishop of Cologne branding these writings as heretical. A year following Eckhart's death, Pope John XXII declared eleven of Eckhart's teachings as suspect, and seventeen as heretical.

THIS IS MEISTER ECKHART FROM WHOM GOD HID NOTHING

Dum medium silentium tenerent omnia et nox in suo cursu medium iter haberet etc.¹

— *Wisdom of Solomon* (18: 14)

[1] Here in time we make holiday because the eternal birth which God the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity is now born in time, in human nature. St Augustine says this birth is always happening. But if it happens not in me what does it profit me? What matters is that it shall happen in me.

[2] We intend therefore to speak of this birth as taking place in us: as being consummated in the virtuous soul; for it is the perfect soul that God speaks his Word. What I shall say is true only of the perfect man, of him who has walked and is still walking the way of God; not of the natural undisciplined man who is entirely remote from and unconscious of this birth.

[3] There is the saying of the wise man: 'When all things lay in the midst of silence then leapt there down into me

from on high, from the royal throne, a secret word.' This sermon is about that word.

[4] Concerning it three things are to be noted. The first is: Where in the soul does God the Father speak his Word, where is she receptive of this act, where does this birth take place? It is bound to be in the purest, loftiest, subtlest part of the soul. Verily, if God the Father in his omnipotence had endowed the soul with a still nobler nature, had she received from him anything yet more exalted, then must the Father have delayed this birth for the presence of this greater excellence. The soul in which this birth shall come to pass must be absolutely pure and must live in gentle fashion, quite peaceful and wholly introverted: not running out through the five senses and into the multiplicity of created things, but altogether within herself and harmonized in her single purity. That is its place; it disdains anything less.

[5] The second part of this sermon has to do with man's conduct in relation to this act, this interior speaking, this birth: Whether it is more profitable to co-operate in it — perhaps by creating in the mind an imaginary image and disciplining oneself thereon by reflecting that God is wise, omnipotent, eternal, or whatever else one is able to excogitate about God — so that the birth may come to pass in us through our own exertion and merit; or whether it is more profitable and conducive to this birth from the Father to shun all thoughts, words, and deeds, as well as all mental images, and empty oneself, maintaining a wholly God-receptive attitude, such that one's own self is idle, letting God work. How shall one best serve the eternal birth?

[6] The third point is the profit, and how great it is, that accrues from this birth.

[7] Note in the first place that in what I am about to say I intend to avail myself of natural proof that ye yourselves can grasp, for though I put more faith in the scriptures than in myself, nevertheless it is easier and better for you to learn by means of arguments that can be verified.

¹ [Translation: 'For while all things were in peaceful silence and the night was in the midst of her course, etc.']

[8] First we will take the words: 'In the midst of the silence there was spoken in me a secret word.'

[9] — But, Sir, where is the silence and where the place in which the word is spoken?

[10] As I said just now, it is in the purest part of the soul, in the noblest, in her ground, aye in the very essence of the soul. There is the central silence, into which no creature may enter, nor any image, nor has the soul there either activity or understanding, therefore she is not aware of any image either of herself or any creature. Whatever the soul effects she effects with her powers.

[11] When she understands, she understands with her intellect. When she remembers, she does so with her memory. When she loves, she does so with her will. She works then with her powers and not with her essence. Now every exterior act is lined with some means. The power of seeing is brought into play only through the eyes; elsewhere she can neither do nor bestow such a thing as seeing. And so with all the other senses: their operations are always effected through some means or others.

[12] In Being, however, there is no action, and thus none in the essence of the soul; the faculties she works with emanate from the ground of the essence but in her actual ground there is a central stillness; here alone is rest and a habitation for this birth, this act, wherein God the Father speaks his Word, for it is intrinsically receptive of naught save the divine essence, without means. Here God enters the soul with his all, not merely with a part. God enters the ground of the soul. None can touch the ground of the soul but God alone. No creature is admitted into her ground, it must stop outside in her powers. There it sees the image whereby it has been drawn in and found shelter. For when the soul-powers contact a creature they set to make of the creature an image and likeness which they absorb. By it they know the creature. Creatures cannot go into the soul, nor can the soul know anything about a creature which she has not willingly taken the image of into herself. She approaches creatures through their present images; an image being a thing that the soul creates with her powers. Be it a stone, a rose, a man, or anything else that she wants to know about, she gets out the image of it which she has already taken in and is thus enabled to unite herself with it.

[13] But an image received in this way must of necessity enter from without through the senses. Consequently there is nothing so unknown to the soul as herself. The soul, says a philosopher, can neither create nor absorb an image of

herself. So she has nothing to know herself by. Images all enter through the senses, hence she can have no image of herself. She knows other things but not herself. Of nothing does she know so little as of herself, owing to this arrangement.

[14] Now thou must know that inwardly the soul is free from means and images, that is why God can freely unite with her without form or similitude. Thou canst not but attribute to God without measure whatever power thou dost attribute to a master. The wiser and more powerful the master the more immediately is his work effected and the simpler it is. Man requires many instruments for his external works; much preparation is needed before he can bring them forth as he has imagined them. The sun and moon, whose work is to give light, in their mastership perform this very swiftly: the instant their radiance is poured forth, all the ends of the world are full of light. More exalted are the angels, who need less means for their works and have fewer images. The highest Seraph has but a single image. He seizes as a unity all that his inferiors regard as a multitude. But God needs no image and has no image: without image, likeness, or means does God work in the soul, aye, in her ground into which no image did ever get but only himself with his own essence. This no creature can do.

[15] — How does God the Father give birth to his Son in the soul? As a creature might, in image and likeness?

[16] No, by my faith! but just as he gives him birth in eternity and not otherwise.

[17] — Well, but how does he give him birth there?

[18] Let us see. God the Father has perfect insight into himself, profound and thorough knowledge of himself by means of himself, not by means of any image. And thus God the Father gives birth to his Son, in the very oneness of the divine nature. See, thus it is and no other way that God the Father gives birth to his Son in the ground and essence of the soul and thus he unites himself with her. Were any image present there would not be real union and in real union lies your entire beatitude.

[19] Now you might say: 'But there is nothing innate in the soul save images.' No, not so! If that were true the soul would never be happy, for God cannot make any creature in which you can enjoy perfect happiness, otherwise God would not be the highest happiness and final goal, whereas it is his will and nature to be the alpha and omega of all. No creature can be happiness. And here indeed can just as little be perfection, for perfection (perfect virtue that is to say)

results from perfection of life. Therefore you truly must enter into and dwell in your essence, in your ground, and there God will mix you with his simple essence, without the medium of any image. No image represents and signifies itself; it stands for that of which it is the image. Now seeing that you have no image save of what is outside yourself, it is impossible for you to be beatified by any image whatsoever.

[20] The second point is this: What should a man do in order to deserve and procure this birth to come to pass and be consummated in him? Is it better for him to do his part towards it, to imagine and think about God, or should he keep still in peace and quiet so that God can speak and act in him while he merely waits on God's operation? At the same time I repeat that this speaking, this act, is only for the good and perfect, those who have so absorbed and assimilated the essence of virtue that it emanates from them naturally, without their seeking; and above all there must live in them the worthy life and lofty teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. Such are permitted to know that the very best and utmost of attainment in this life is to remain still and let God act and speak in you.

[21] When the powers have all been withdrawn from their bodily form and functions, then this Word is spoken. Thus he said: 'in the midst of the silence the secret word was spoken to me.' The more completely you can withdraw your faculties and forget those things and their images which you have taken in, the more, that is to say, you forget the creature, the nearer you are to his, and the more sensitive you will be to it. If only you could suddenly be altogether unaware of things, then you would pass into the oblivion of your own existence, as St Paul did when he said: 'Whether in the body I know not, or out of the body I know not, God knows!' Here the spirit had so entirely absorbed the faculties that it had forgotten the body: memory no longer functioned, nor understanding, nor the senses, nor even those powers whose duty it is to give and grace the body. Vital warmth and energy were stopped, so that the body did not fail during the three days he neither ate nor drank. Even so fared Moses when he fasted forty days on the mount and was none the worse for it: on the last day he was as strong as on the first. Thus a man must abscond from his senses, invert his faculties and lapse into oblivion of things and of himself. As one philosopher spoke to his soul: 'Withdraw from the restlessness of external activities!' And again: 'Fly away and hide yourself from the turmoil of outward occupations and inward thoughts for they create nothing but discord!'

[22] If God is to speak his Word in the soul she must be at rest and at peace; then he speaks in the soul his Word and himself — not image but himself. Dionysius says: 'God has no image nor likeness of himself seeing that he is intrinsically all good, truth and being.' God performs all his works, in himself and outside of himself, simultaneously. Do not fondly imagine that God, when he created the heavens and the earth and all creatures, made one thing one day and another the next. Moses describes it thus, but he knew better. He did so merely on account of those who are incapable of understanding or conceiving otherwise. All God did was this: He willed and they were. God works without instrument and without image. And the freer you are from images, the more receptive you will be to his interior operation; and the more introverted and oblivious you are, the closer you will be to it.

[23] It was in this sense that Dionysius exhorted his disciple Timothy: 'My dear son Timothy, you should soar above yourself with untroubled mind, above all your powers, characteristics, and states, up into the still, secret darkness, so that you may come to know the unknown God above all gods. Forsake everything. God despises ideas.'

[24] But perhaps you now say: 'What is it that God does, without images, in the ground and essence?' That I am incapable of knowing, for my soul-powers can receive only images; they have to recognise and lay hold of each thing in its appropriate image: they cannot recognise a bird in the image of a man. Now since images all enter from without, this is concealed from my soul, which is most salutary for her. Not-knowing makes her wonder and leads her to eager pursuit, for she knows clearly *that* it is but knows not *how* nor *what* it is. No sooner does a man know the reason of a thing than immediately he tires of it and goes casting about for something new. Always clamoring to know, he is ever inconstant. The soul is constant only to this unknowing knowing which keeps her pursuing.

[25] The wise man said concerning this: 'In the middle of the night when all things were in quiet silence there was spoken to me a hidden word.' It came by stealth. like a thief. What does he mean by a word that was hidden? The nature of a word is to reveal what is hidden. It appeared before me, shining out with intent to reveal and give me knowledge of God. Hence it is called a word. But what it was remained hidden from me. That was its stealthy coming 'in a whispering stillness to reveal itself.' It is just because it is hidden that one is and must be always after it. It appears and disappears: we are meant to yearn and sigh for it.

[26] St Paul says we ought to pursue this until we espy it and not stop until we grasp it. Once he was caught up into the third heaven of the knowledge of God and saw everything. When he came back he had forgotten nothing, but it was so deep down in his ground that his intellect could not reach it: it was veiled from him. He was therefore obliged to pursue it and search for it in himself, not outside himself. It is not outside, it is inside: wholly within. And being convinced of this he said, 'I am sure that neither death nor any affliction can separate me from what I find within me.'

[27] There is a fine saying of one heathen philosopher to another about this, he says: 'I am aware of something in me which sparkles in my intelligence; I clearly perceive that it is something but *what* I cannot grasp. Yet I think if I could only seize it I should know all truth.' To which the other philosopher replied: 'Follow it boldly! for if you can seize it you will possess the sum-total of all good and have eternal life!' St Augustine expresses himself in the same sense: 'I am conscious of something within me that plays before my soul and is as a light dancing in front of it; were this brought to steadiness and perfection in me it would surely be eternal life!' It hides yet it shows. It comes, but after the manner of a thief, with intent to take and to steal all things from the soul. By emerging and showing itself somewhat it purposes to decoy the soul and draw it towards itself to rob it and take it from itself. As said the prophet: 'Lord take from them their spirit and give them instead thy spirit.' This too the loving soul meant when she said: 'My soul dissolved and melted away when Love spoke his word: when he entered I could not but fail.' And Christ signified it by his words: 'Whosoever shall forsake everything for my sake shall be repaid an hundredfold, and whoever will possess me must deny himself and all things and whosoever will serve me must follow me nor go any more after his own.'

[28] Now perhaps you are saying: 'But, Sir, you are wanting to change the natural course of the soul! It is her nature to take in through the senses, in images. Would you upset this arrangement?'

[29] No! But how do you know what nobility God has bestowed on human nature, what perfections yet uncataloged and undiscovered? Those who have written of the soul's nobility have gone no further than their natural intelligence could carry them; they never entered her ground, so that much remained obscure and unknown to them. 'I will sit in silence and hearken to what God speaks within me,' said the prophet. Into this retirement steals the Word in the darkness of the night. St John says: 'The light

shines in the darkness: it came unto its own and as many as received it became in authority sons of God: to them was given power to become God's sons.'

[30] See now the fruit and use of this mysterious Word and of this darkness. In this gloom which is his own the heavenly Father's Son is not born alone: you too are born there, a child of the same heavenly Father and no other, and to you also he gives power. Observe how great the use. No truth learned by any master by his own intellect and understanding, or ever to be learned at this side the day of judgment, has ever been interpreted at all according to this knowledge, in this ground. Call it ignorance, an unknowing, yet there is in it more than all knowing and understanding without it, for this outward ignorance lures and attracts you from all understood things and from yourself. This is what Christ meant when he said: 'Whosoever does not deny himself and leave father and more, and is not estranged from all these, he is not worthy of me.' As though to say: he who abandons not creaturely externals can neither be conceived nor born in this divine birth. But divesting yourself of yourself of everything external thereto does indeed give you it. And in very truth I believe, nay I am sure, that the man who is established herein can in no wise be at any time separated from God. I hold he can in no wise lapse into mortal sin. He would rather suffer the most shameful death, as the saints have done before him, than commit the least of mortal sins. I hold that he cannot willingly commit, nor yet consent to, even a venial sin, whether in himself or in another. So strongly is he drawn and attracted to this way, so much is he habituated to it, that he could never turn to any other; to this way are directed all his senses, all his powers.

[31] May the God who has been born again as man assist us in this birth, continually helping us, weak man, to be born again in him as God. Amen.