

De Vitis Patrum, Book Vi

by Heribert Rosweyde

The sermon explores the significance of spiritual vision, the consequences of one's actions, and the transformative power of God's mercy through repentance.

Scripture: 2 Kings 4:10, Psalm 92:12, Amos 1:9, Romans 5:8, 1 Corinthians 10:31

Topics: "Spiritual Discernment", "Repentance Mercy"

Description

Heribert Rosweyde preaches on the importance of spiritual discernment and the consequences of our actions, as seen through the stories of various old men and their encounters with divine visions and signs. These stories highlight the need to be wise, to focus on wholesome subjects, and to be vigilant against the snares of the devil. The accounts also emphasize the power of repentance, the mercy of God, and the transformative nature of genuine confession and good deeds in the eyes of God.

Transcript

Libellus 1, Second Sight (Praevidentia) or Contemplation

(Old men who did signs near bottom of this page)

VI.i.1. Once when Zacharias visited his abbot Silvanus he found him in a trance with his hands stretched out towards heaven. Seeing him like this he went out, shutting the door behind him. At the sixth hour and the ninth hour he went back again, only to find him in the same state, until at last at about the tenth hour he went in to find him in a normal state of mind. "How have you been today, father?" he asked. "Somewhat out of action, my son," he replied. Zacharias then seized his feet and said, "I shan't let you go till you tell me what you have seen."

The old man replied, "I have been caught up into the heavens, where I saw the glory of God, and there I have stayed right up to this minute when I have been sent back here." VI.i.2. Holy Syncretica said, "Let us be wise as serpents and as harmless as doves in order to understand the snares of the devil. For we are told to be wise as serpents that we might not underestimate the devil and all his tricks. Moreover like is overcome by like, and therefore the harmlessness of the dove is needed."

VI.i.3. (Also in III.36) One of the fathers said, "Once when some of the seniors were gathered together and talking about serious matters, one of them who was a seer was aware of angels stretching out their hands to anoint them. But when the talk went on to aimless worldly matters the angels departed and foul-smelling

swine cavorted about polluting them. When the talk returned again to wholesome subjects the angels returned and anointed them. VI.i.4. An old man said, "It is written in Scripture 'From two transgressions of Tyre or from three I shall avert my gaze, but the fourth I will not overlook'. (Amos 1.9) To have an evil thought, to consent to it and even to speak it are the three, but the fourth is to carry the evil thought into action, and from this the anger of the Lord will not be turned away".

VI.i.5. It was said of a certain great old man in Scete that whenever the brothers were building a new cell he would go out with great joy, help with the foundations and stay until it was finished. But on one occasion when he went out to build a cell he looked very troubled. The brothers asked him, "What are you so sad about, abba?" And he replied, "This place will be laid waste. For I saw as it were a fire lit in Scete which the brothers extinguished with cut branches of palm, and again the fire was lit and again the brothers extinguished it with cut branches of palm, but it was lit a third time engulfing the whole of Scete and could not be put out.

No wonder I am sad and troubled." VI.i.6. A certain old man said, "It is written in Scripture 'the righteous shall flourish as the palm tree' (Psalms 92.12). This saying refers to the high justice and beauty of good deeds. In the palm tree there is a single core which governs its whole clean growth. It is the same with the righteous; his heart is single and pure, looking always towards God, shining bright, lit up by faith; everything he does comes from the heart. The goal which spurs him on is to be a bulwark against the devil."

VI.i.7. Another old man once said, "The Shunamite woman could welcome Elisha because of her detachment from any man (2 Kings 4.10). The Shunamite is said to represent the soul and Elisha the Holy Spirit. So it is that whenever the soul withdraws from the confusion and worry of the world, the Holy Spirit will come and make her sterility fruitful." VI.i.8. Another of the fathers said, "The eyes of the pig are so placed that of necessity they always look down, and can never look up into heaven.

So it is with the soul that delights in sweet pleasures - once it has fallen into luxurious eating habits it can no longer see God or savour the things of God." VI.i.9. A certain well known visionary said that he saw the same glory shining around the clothing of a monk receiving the habit as he had seen shining over Baptism. VI.i.10. A certain old man to whom had been given the gift of discernment said that he saw a brother meditating in his cell and a demon who had approached was standing outside.

As long as the brother was meditating the demon was not able to enter, but as soon as the brother stopped meditating, the demon got in. VI.i.11. It is said of a certain old man that he prayed to God to let him see the demons. And the answer came, "You have no need to see them." But he asked again, saying "You, Lord will protect me from them by your grace." And the Lord did indeed open his eyes and he saw them swarming around people buzzing like bees. But the angels of the Lord were likewise arrayed against them.

VI.i.12. An old man said, "There were two brothers who were neighbours, one went on pilgrimage but the other stayed at home. The pilgrim brother was not very strict in his way of life, but the other was very strict indeed. Now it so happened that the pilgrim died, and a neighbour who was a visionary saw a host of angels carrying away his soul. When he got to the gate of heaven and sought to enter, enquiry was made about him and a voice came from above saying, "He was obviously not very strict, but because of his pilgrimage let him come in."

After a time the stay-at-home brother died and all his family came to meet him. The visionary neighbour was astonished that the angels did not come for him, and falling on his face before God he said, "Why was that rather lax pilgrim taken into glory while the strict one merited nothing of the sort?" And a voice came from heaven saying, "After this strict one died he opened his eyes and saw his weeping parents, and he was consoled. But the pilgrim, although he was somewhat lax, saw none of his family.

And he wept, and was consoled by God." VI.i.13. Another of the fathers told of a solitary in the desert near Nilopolis, who was cared for by a certain citizen, one of the faithful. And there was in that city a certain rich man of quite ungodly life, who when he died was carried to the grave by the whole city, led by a bishop with torches. And when the citizen who cared for the solitary went out as usual to take him bread he found that he had been eaten by wild beasts. And he fell on his face before the Lord and said, "I shall not move from here till you have show me what this means.

For that ungodly man was buried with great pomp and ceremony, but this man who served you night and day was given nothing like that at all." And an angel of the Lord came to him and said, "That ungodly man did few good works in this life and for reward has found little rest in the next. But this solitary, a man adorned with every virtue and guilty of hardly any fault, has for his reward that he is found to be pure in the sight of God." And he was consoled by these words and went on his way glorifying God who is true in all his judgments.

VI.i.14. Some of the holy fathers of Scete while making predictions about future generations began by asking, "What exactly have we done?" Someone called Cyrion, a man of great repute, replied, "We have not kept the commandments of God." The others asked, "What about those who shall come after us? How shall they do?" And he replied, "They shall only achieve half of what we have done." They asked, "What about those who will come after them? How shall they do?" He replied, "That last generation shall do nothing of what we have done.

But I foresee great temptations for them, and those who are able to persevere in that time will be much greater than either us or our fathers." VI.i.15. An old man told the story of a virgin well advanced in age who had walked in the fear of God. He had asked her what had prompted her to follow this way of life, and she sighed and said, "When I was a little girl, my friend, I had a father who was gentle and kind but who suffered from very poor health. He was always so busy with his own affairs that he was hardly ever seen by the people among whom he lived.

He busied himself on his own land - that was his whole life. For so long as he was in good health he brought home the fruits of his own labour, but more often than not he was confined to bed in a state of great weakness. He had so little to say for himself that if you didn't know him you would have thought he was dumb. But my mother, by way of contrast, was meddlesome above measure, with a worse reputation than anyone else in the neighbourhood. Her tongue constantly clacked away on every possible subject so that you might have thought that her body was all one large tongue, always picking quarrels with someone, often drunk, keeping company with all kinds of disreputable men.

My father had entrusted the care of the household to her but she managed it worse than the most dissolute whore, she indulged herself so disgracefully that there were few people in the neighbourhood who were untouched by her excesses. But she never had a day's illness, never felt a moment's unease, but from birth up to her very last day enjoyed full possession of all her faculties. "While she was still living it happened that my father died, weakened by a long spell of sickness.

For three days and nights he lay on his bed, for we were unable to bury him because of unceasing storms with rain and thunder and lightning. People in the neighbourhood shook their heads and muttered that he must have been covering up all sorts of wickednesses because if the earth was unwilling to receive him he must have been an enemy of God. But it was getting to the point where his body was decaying so badly that we would not have been able to live in the house for much longer, so although the rain and storm were still raging we made shift to bury him somehow.

From then on my mother became more and more uninhibited, indulging herself in every possible pleasure. She turned our house into a brothel, and her life into one riotous party. I was still a girl when she died, seemingly without showing any remorse, but although our wealth was greatly diminished she was given a splendid funeral, even the weather smiled upon the proceedings. "After her death, as I emerged from girlhood and began to feel the urges of puberty, I began as usual one evening to think and worry about whose example it was that I should follow.

Should it be my father, with his kind and gentle, sober life? I thought of how nothing good had ever happened to him in his lifetime, he had always been borne down by trouble and illness, and at the end of his life even the earth did not want to accept him. If this kind of life was so good in the eyes of God why was it that my father who had chosen to live like this had been so dogged by ill fortune? It would be better, I thought, to live like my mother and indulge every pleasurable whim and fancy of my body.

Nothing evil ever happened to her. She spent her life safely and happily in an alcoholic haze right up to the end. What then? It would be best to live like my mother. Better to put your trust in things which you can see with your own eyes and try everything. "By the time I had decided to throw myself into this miserable sort of life it was night time, and I fell into a deep sleep. Arising out of my thoughts there came before me an enormous figure of horrible appearance who quite terrified me by the way he looked at me.

He began to interrogate me with an angry expression and a harsh voice. "Tell me' he said 'what you have been thinking.' "But I was so petrified by his appearance and manner that I didn't even dare to look up at him. In a louder voice still he again demanded that I should tell him my decisions. Paralysed with fear, my mind a complete blank, I said there was nothing important. He told me I lied, and reminded me of all the things that I had been thinking of. I had to admit he was correct, and began to ask for pardon, explaining why it was that I had been thinking like this.

"He said to me, 'Come and see them both, your father and your mother, and then choose what sort of life you want to live.' "And he took my hand and led me off to a vast plain, containing many gardens, all kinds of fruit and a variety of trees, all of unspeakable beauty. He took me into the midst of it, and my father came to meet me, embracing and kissing me, recognising me as his daughter. I gave him a hug and asked if I could stay with him. "'No,' he said, 'you can't stay here.

But if you wish to follow in my footsteps you will come here. It won't be all that long.' "While I was still asking to be allowed to stay my guide pulled me away again as he said, 'Come and I will show you your mother as well, tormented by fire, so that you can learn which of them to model your life after.' "He put me into the middle of a dark and gloomy place, full of noise and turbulence, and showed me a furnace burning fiercely with flaming pitch, and some horrible looking creatures standing on top of the furnace.

And as I looked down I saw my mother immersed in the furnace up to her neck, gnashing her teeth, burning in the fire and tormented by a multitude of worms. When she saw me she recognised me as her daughter and cried out with loud shrieks, 'Alas, my daughter, you see how I am suffering through my own

fault. Everything to do with sobriety I judged to be madness; pornography and adultery I found to be very pleasant, drunkenness and lustfulness were no hardship, and see how I now suffer the pains of hell in exchange for all those trifling pleasures.

Look at my torments now in exchange for all those delicate delights, see what reward I reap for being contemptuous of God. Every irrevocable evil has finally caught up with me. And now I need help, my daughter. Remember how I have provided for you, now is the time to pay back whatever good I have done you. Have pity on me as I burn in this consuming fire, have pity, I'm totally exhausted by this excruciating punishment, have pity, my daughter, and reach out your hand to drag me out of this place.'

"But I couldn't do this because of those standing in front of her, and she cried and shouted again, 'Help me, my daughter, don't despise the tears of your own mother. Remember how I suffered for you in the day of your birth, don't abandon me now as I perish in the flames of hell.' "Moved to tears by her crying, I was overcome by compassion and began to weep and cry out in sympathy with her, so that those with me in the house were awoken and brought lamps, asking me why I was moaning so piteously.

I told them what I had seen. And so it was that I decided on one thing, to follow in the footsteps of my father. By the unbelievable mercy of God I had been convinced of what punishments are laid up in store for those who live an evil life." So this woman happily learned from her vision what reward would be given to good works, and set her face against the terrible punishments which would follow the evil acts of a vicious life. We were blessed by the profit we gained from her good counsel.

VI.i.16. In order to strengthen our faithfulness and encourage us to be diligent in our path towards salvation the same old man told us this story about a certain bishop. This bishop used to live among us, and according to what he himself told us some people reported to him that there were two women in the congregation whose lives were not above reproach. Moved by the people who told him these things, and suspecting that there might be others like that, he earnestly begged God to show him clearly their true state.

After this solemn and terrifying request he was able to see in the faces of those who came to the holy mysteries the state of their souls and the sins which had control over each one of them. The faces of those men who were sinful appeared to be black, some of them appearing as if burned out by fire, their eyes red and bloodshot, others were fair of face, clothed in white. When they received the body of the Lord some seemed to become enveloped in destroying fire, for others it was as if a light was lit in them which entered their mouth and illuminated their whole body.

Among them were some who lived a solitary life and some who were married, but all were laid open in this way. When he turned to the women and began to communicate them he learned what the state of their souls was like also. For some of their faces too were black, some red and bloodshot, some white. Among them came those two women who had been denounced to the bishop, and because of whom he had been given this visionary state of prayer. As they approached the sacred mysteries, he saw them as if clothed in white garments, their faces pure and innocent.

After receiving the mystery of Christ they shone with a brilliant light. The bishop later in solitary prayer begged to be shown the meaning of the revelations which he had been given. An angel of the Lord appeared to him whom he began to question in detail. The holy bishop first enquired whether the accusation against these women was true or false. The angel said that everything that had been said about them was true. He then asked the angel how it was that in the presence of the body of Christ their

faces were so wonderful, their garments so white, with such a brilliant light shining from them.

The angel replied, "In so far as they have repented of their sins, turning away from them with tears and sighs, and have given alms to the poor, they have become worthy by their confessions of being numbered among the righteous, for they have also promised never to walk in those sinful ways again as a condition of being found worthy to receive pardon for their past sins. This is why their lives have been changed by God. Cleansed from their sins they have since then lived soberly, devoutly and properly".

The bishop however was surprised not so much by the change in their lives (for that, after all, happens to many) but by the generosity of God who had not merely delivered them from punishment but had endowed them with grace in such overflowing measure. The angel said to him, "You are astonished because you are human, but the Lord, your God and mine, is in his nature good and merciful to those who depart from their evil ways and turn to him in confession. Not only does he save them from hell, but he turns away his wrath from them and counts them worthy of honour, for God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son for them.

While we were yet sinners he chose to die for us. Should he not therefore absolve from sin and welcome into his household those who repent of what they have done? He offers good things to be enjoyed by those whom he has prepared like this. You must realise that no human sin is greater than the mercy of God, as long as penitence results in good acts to wash away those evil acts of the past. Such is the mercy of God that he knows our infirmity and the strength of our passions and the cunning and power of the devil, so that when we fall into sin he humours us as children, patiently looking to us for amendment.

On those who turn and cast themselves on his mercy he has compassion as on those who are ill. He looses them from their torments and gives them the good things prepared for the just." The bishop then said to the angel, "May I ask you to enlighten me as to how the particular sin of each person was shown in the differing appearance of their faces, so that I may be conversant with these and ignorant no longer?" The Angel replied, "Those with shining happy faces are those who live in sobriety, chastity and justice and who are humble, compassionate and merciful.

Those with the black faces are given to fornication, unbridled lusts and all other crimes and sins of omission. Those who are red and bloodstained live in bitterness and injustice, scandalmongers, blasphemers, deceivers and murderers." Again the angel said to him, "If you wish for them to be saved you must help them. It is for this reason that your questions have been answered, so that by what you have seen you may learn about the sins of your disciples. Through your prayers and warnings their repentance will make them more acceptable to him who died and rose again for them, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Use whatever power and zeal you have, and love for the Lord Christ, to watch over them that they may be converted to God from their sins, plainly teaching them not to despair of their salvation whatever the sins they may have been dominated by. For those who repent and turn to God there will be salvation and the future reward of a sumptuous banquet. But the greatest reward will be yours, for imitating the Lord who came down from heaven and dwelt on earth for the salvation of humankind."

VI.i.17. One of the fathers declared that there are three worthwhile aims for monks to pursue with fear and trembling and spiritual joy, sharing in the holy Sacraments, breaking bread with the brethren, and washing the brethren's feet. He told the following story as an illustration: There was a certain old man who was a seer, and it happened that he was sharing a meal with some of the brothers. And as they were eating this

old man saw in the spirit that some of those at the table were eating honey, others bread, and others filth.

And he marvelled and prayed to God, saying, "Lord, reveal this mystery to me, that whereas the same food is put before all of them on the table, yet as they eat it seems to be changed, and one eats honey, another bread, and yet another filth." And a voice from above came to him, saying, "Those eating honey are those who eat at the table with fear and trembling and thanksgiving, and pray without ceasing. And their prayer rises up before God as the incense. And so they eat honey.

Those who eat bread are those who simply perceive the gifts of God and give thanks for them. But those eating filth are those who pick and choose, saying 'This is all right but I don't like that'. They ought not to think like that but rather glorify God and offer him praise, so that there may be fulfilled in us that which is written, 'Whether you eat, or whether you drink, or whatever you may be doing, do all things to the glory of God.'

Libellus 2: Old men who did signs

VI.ii.1. Abba Dulas, the disciple of Abba Besarion, told this story, We were walking one day by the seashore when I said to Abba Besarion that I was very thirsty. The old man prayed and then said, "Drink from the sea".

So I drank and the water was perfectly sweet. I put some of the water into a bottle lest I should feel thirsty later on, but when he saw it he said, "Why are you filling that bottle with water?"

I said, "Well, I'm sorry, but I might be thirsty again later on."

And the old man said, "God will still be here then, just as he is now."

VI.ii.2. On another occasion, when he needed to, he walked across the river Chrysoroan. I was amazed, and said, "Forgive me for asking, but what did your feet feel like when you walked across the water?"

And the old man said, "It felt like water around my toenails, but the rest was solid under my feet."

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