

THE POOR IN SPIRIT

A SERMON BY MEISTER ECKHART

[A number of sermons and devotional tracts by the great Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart (1260 to about 1327) have come down to us. They were usually taken down while he was preaching—in convents, or at the Dominican church at Cologne or Erfurt—and later reconstructed from verbatim notes. What has come down to us is therefore often rather disjointed, and very fine passages are found side by side with comments which may appear banal. But even so, we cannot read anything that bears Eckhart's name without appreciating his tremendous significance for the development of speculative mysticism in the late Middle Ages. 'The Poor in Spirit' is translated from the Middle High German from the text edited by F. Pfeiffer, *Deutsche Mystiker des vierzehnten Jahrhunderts*, Vol. 2, p. 493f. Leipzig 1857; and 'A Certain Man Made a Great Supper' (cf. July, 1952, *LIFE OF THE SPIRIT*) was translated from 'Meister Eckhart. Die deutschen und lateinischen Werke', edited by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, the German Works, Vol. 1, p. 342f. Stuttgart 1936, in progress.—ELIZABETH STOPP.]

Beati pauperes spiritu. . . Matthew, 5, 3.

LET us for evermore be as poor as we were from the beginning when we had no being. Dwelling within God as our true being, we become truly ourselves. We need not fear to make use of all things, but only in and through their creator. We should worship God without the help of comparisons, and love him without material images and enjoy him without a sense of ownership. We should conceive all things in purity, as the eternal wisdom has engendered and ordered them in itself.

The poor in spirit go out of themselves and out of all creatures; they are nothing, they have nothing, they do nothing, and are nothing except with God and by his grace. They have no particular knowledge of God. St Augustine says: all things are God. St Dionysius says: all things are not God. St Augustine says: God is all in all. But Dionysius: God is not anything that we can say or think, and yet God is the acknowledged sanctity of all the saints and is himself the essence of their holiness. Dionysius sees God more clearly in this nothingness and says: God is nothing. In him is all nothingness. All that is, hangs upon this

nothingness, and this same nothingness is an entity which is so incomprehensible that all the spirits in heaven and on earth can neither understand nor fathom it. So he remains unknown of all creatures.

When the soul reaches the purity of not being attached to anything it is also free of guilt. That comes of the freedom in which it now moves. When it becomes aware of itself and of the body it has a sense of guilt as it did before, and it feels shackled; but entering again into its inner sanctuary, it calls to mind what it had once found, and rising then above itself, it comes where it may enjoy all bliss and plenty. St Bernard says: the soul knows well that it cannot find its beloved until it has cast out all else. St Augustine says: the man who loves, knowing well that he is not loved in return, loves surely and well, and this is the greatest love. St Paul says: we know that all things work together for good to them that love God. And Christ said: blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

One might say that spiritual poverty is of various kinds. In fact there are four kinds. To begin with, the soul being illuminated by the spirit of truth and weighing all things in the balance, holds as nothing all that is not God. As St Paul says: I count all things as loss. In this state the soul wearies of all creatures.

In the second state of poverty the soul sees the example of Christ in its greatness and its own self in its meanness, counting all its efforts as nothing even though it had the sum of all human achievement to its credit. Now it mourns in the words of the Book of Love and says: my love himself has shown me the way and I cannot follow where he goes. The soul follows of its own accord, and yet its quarry, Christ, is in turn hard upon the soul's track. Such sweet savour draws the soul out of itself, forgetting all its pain. And here St Augustine says that the soul is more at home where it loves than where it lives. And St Peter says that our dwelling place is in heaven.

In the third state of poverty the spirit has died to its own nature, and then all pride of life is slain and the only thing that still lives in the soul is the spirit of God. Of this St Paul says: and dying, behold I live; now not I, but Christ

liveth in me. In this spiritual state the soul has learnt poverty, for all that it has to give and to hold is taken away. It is poor of its own free will, and Christ can do with the soul what he pleases.

In the fourth state of poverty the soul realises that God is wholly incomprehensible, beyond the reach of all a man may either think or do. The more deeply the soul is lost in God the more brightly the mysterious radiance of the Godhead stands out in contrast to the soul's poverty. In like measure as the inward man progresses toward knowledge of the Godhead, so the outer man will follow the example of Jesus Christ in willing poverty. That means that God's grace has despoiled it of all selfhood so that now it uses creatures as it needs them, but passively and without attachment. And when the soul is deprived of creatures, it can do without them in the same detached mind as if they were there. And all the soul can now do is to rejoice in God's incomprehensible truth, to rejoice that all created things are as nothing compared with him, and that the fire of his love has drawn the soul's nothingness upwards into itself so that it cleaves there like a tiny sparking flame. St Paul was in this state of poverty when he said: I understood secret words in God which it is not granted to man to utter. He was so closely caught up into the Godhead that neither life nor death could ever part him from his love. This is what happens to a generous soul which is lost in God, lost not only to all creatures, but lost also to itself, finding nothing there but only the essential undimmed radiance of the Godhead. Behold, the soul is so merged in the being of him who is called her heavenly joy that it is incapable of real wrongdoing. All the saints have declared that nothing can move them from their anchorage in God. Now real wrongdoing is all that is not ordered according to divine love, that is, all that diverges from the life of Christ. For he is the pattern and the essence of all things. And what is true virtue? Anything that heavenly love alone effects in the soul, for it can but create in its own image.

Now I have told you about the poor in spirit. And into this true poverty may we be drawn by the overflowing goodness of God. AMEN.