



It is springtime in Roundshaw, and hope is blooming, out on the playing field where it is now warm enough to sit and admire the blossom trees around the edges, and imagine summer picnics and barbeques again. Being outdoors is a great way to connect with nature and God, and Charlie Davies believes that one historical theologian in particular would agree. Hildegard of Bingen taught passionately about the work of the Holy Spirit in nature, seeing it as an energy that is practically oozing out of the park at this time of the year, inspiring creativity, holiness, compassion and justice.

Hildegard of Bingen was extraordinary. You will not find many women's names among the lists of great historical theologians because so much of history, whether inside or outside of the church, concerns the exploits and the legacies of men. Only the most tremendous of women with remarkable contributions have been taken

seriously in what was traditionally a men's arena. Hildegard is one of these women, a medieval abbess and unintentional glass-ceiling breaker. Let's not imagine her as some matriarchal prima donna, though, as she was the very opposite, initially recoiling from her calling until it made her sick. It was only then, when her lack of obedience to her vocation made her physically ill, that she requested the church's endorsement for her writings, making her appeal as '*worthless, and even more worthless with the name of a woman*' (C. Butcher, 'Hildegard of Bingen'). Bizarre as such language must sound to our modern ears, it is thanks to her humility, and the fact that she wrote in (albeit clumsy) Latin, rather than her mother-tongue, German, that her works have survived through the ages and can help strengthen our Christian faith and practice today. Hildegard's creation spirituality and eco-theology, exported from her medieval world through word, poetry, music and art is relevant for us almost a thousand years later and offers a curiously refreshing way of looking at nature, and thinking about justice and creativity.

Hildegard would probably not have dared to have called herself a theologian, seemingly more comfortable identifying as a weak, uneducated human being, but her legacy and influence tell a different story and she was named a Doctor of the Church by Pope Benedict XVI in 2012. Still, she is often referred to as a mystic, who recorded her prophetic, apocalyptic visions of the future in obedience to God and for the benefit of believers. Although she may not have been able to foresee our urban, digitalized, secular society, her call for humanity to be redeemed from sin and reconciled with God and with the natural world feels relevant to us.

The Industrial Revolution, let alone the climate crisis was centuries away from the lush Rhineland valley where Hildegard lived. Her theology was inspired by her experience of the surrounding natural world, rather than philosophy, which was the

norm for academic theologians of her time. She believed in the power of the earth's greenness - 'viriditas' in Latin - as key to mankind's relationship with God. In Hildegard's thinking, the energy radiating from the natural world is the Holy Spirit's work, causing growth, expansion, celebration and the moisture that is associated with creativity, joy and life. The opposite of that - being dried up in the soul - was to her the ultimate sin, and at the root of hard heartedness, coldness, lack of creativity, indolence, carelessness and injustice. She herself was a powerhouse of creative energy, drenching her studies and art with a passion for holiness, God and his creation. Holiness is not the harsh state of perfection we might think of when we think of strict monastic vows like obedience and purity. Hildegard saw it as being more awake and alive to the world, more enthusiastic about justice, and actively working against injustice. She lived relatively simply for someone from a wealthy background, following Christ's example and saw it as an act of emptying out that helped make way for God. But she was clear that there wasn't anything good about self-denial unless it was coupled with action against injustice.

She tells the story of creation and the fall of man as she saw it in her visions, claiming that Adam's primal failure was to fully accept the gift of God, presented to him as a flower which he smelt, but did not taste or touch, instead turning away and falling into a darkness from which he could not save himself. In essence, Adam's downfall was his refusal to be sensual enough to fully participate in the goodness of creation, thinking he could be wise through his own intellect, without the need for deep connection. It sounds a lot like the way the climate crisis is talked about these days: as if it is a scientific or intellectual problem to be solved, not a problem with the attitude of the human heart. The solution can't be for the population of the world to keep growing, shopping and travelling like it does, just in a more eco-friendly way;

the planet just can't cope. Thinking about the environmental impact of the things we buy is good, but the heart of the crisis is about mankind living with a better understanding of the natural world and more closely with God, which is what Hildegard was so passionate about. In her vision of the fall, it is Christ who redeems Adam from the abyss. God can help us make things right.

We all know the health benefits of fresh air and a walk in the park, and the detrimental effects of too much screen time, but Hildegard's passion for nature teaches us that taking time to contemplate the natural world is more than a hobby with health perks, it's essential for getting to know God better. Hildegard's love for God was compelling and exuberant, bubbling up through her musical creativity, writing and preaching. Her energy flowed into writing books and encyclopedias on her observations of nature, animals, plants and natural medicine. In 2024 we can exist indoors without any need to get our hands dirty, or get anywhere close to our earthy food sources, but a dose of 'viriditas' can really help our creative and spiritual flourishing.

However, it's not just about plants: greenness, Hildegard says, can also be cultivated in the soul by good works and creativity. She believed parched souls were at the root of injustice and she was not afraid to speak truth to oppressors, openly rebuking Emperor Frederick Barbarossa for attacking monasteries (even while he was protecting her own convent), and those who sought the religious life with selfish motives. She exhorted church leaders to stay wet and juicy, and parents to ask their children's consent before committing them to religious life, likening it to putting dew on a field - it has to be the work of the Holy Spirit, she urged, otherwise they will run away. She has a point, as anyone who has tried to drag a reluctant teenager to church on a Sunday morning will know! Her parents were even more radical than

that in their religion: they actually gave her away to the church at the age of eight as an offering. At fourteen she was put in a cell connected to the monastery to live with a woman hermit six years her senior. She stayed there until her mentor died and she became the leader of what had become by then a small convent. This unthinkable fate for a teenager was amazingly one she embraced. Her time was spent in prayer and reading, and perhaps all that time indoors inspired her love of the greenness outdoors.

Hildegard lived by example and was a real font of creativity. She believed music could soften hard hearts, arouse sluggish souls and turn them heavenward. Sceptics should find her 'Ordo Virtium' on Spotify and try not to be moved. This 'Play of the Virtues' is a sensual choral work, written originally for nuns to sing together in the convent, as an expression of confession and forgiveness, about the seventeen virtues, designed to help and strengthen the soul, such as charity, obedience, discretion, and the queen of virtues – humility.

While humility and self-doubt could be said to be requisite attributes for a medieval nun, Hildegard's story might hopefully inspire anyone who has ever had a creative urge but been stopped by the voices in their head saying 'could I', 'should I' or 'who am I to'. If that's you, think of Hildegard, be bold and humbly have a go at doing what you feel called to. There is no virtue in being timid or lazy about it, or allowing ourselves to 'dry up' by doing nothing. Be inspired by the lushness and diversity of nature around you; God has given us an incredible world to live in and care for. He has instilled creative springs in all of us, and it is up to us to work with him to open them up for our collective flourishing.