

Fifth Sunday after Trinity

BENEDICT OF NURSIA

July 11 is the Feast of St Benedict, and today's service reflects this theme. As a young man, Benedict decided to turn away from the culture and mores of Rome and to seek God in solitude. He withdrew to Subiaco where he lived in a cave, cared for by a local hermit. In time his spiritual gifts became known, and people sought him out. He was invited to become Abbot of a local community of monks; his rule proved too demanding, and so he left, eventually moving south to Monte Cassino. Here he wrote a Rule to govern the life of his followers, and the Order of St Benedict came into being. In time it became the premier monastic order, and during the Dark Ages it was largely responsible for preserving Christian faith and culture. Benedict's influence on the Church was huge, and it lives on in the Church today.

INVOCATION

+ In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

The Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.

We lift up our hearts in thanks and praise:

Glory to you, O God!

PRAISE

From glory to glory advancing, we praise thee, O Lord;
thy name with the Father and Spirit be ever adored.

From strength unto strength we go forward on Sion's
highway,

to appear before God in the city of infinite day.

Thanksgiving and glory and worship and blessing
and love,

one heart and one song have the saints upon earth
and above.

Evermore, O Lord, to thy servants thy presence be nigh;
ever fit us by service on earth for thy service on high.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Almighty God,
to whom all hearts are open,
all desires known,
and from whom no secrets are hidden:
cleanse the thoughts of our hearts
by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit,
that we may perfectly love you,
and worthily magnify your holy name;
through Christ our Lord. Amen.

As we come before God asking him to cleanse our hearts that we may worship and follow him in Spirit and in truth. In a time of silence reflect on your life in the last week, asking God to amend what is wrong, and to affirm what is good.

Then say:

You were sent to heal the contrite:
Father, have mercy.

You came to call sinners:
Christ, have mercy.

You plead for us at the right hand of the Father:
Lord, have mercy.

Almighty God have mercy upon me,
forgive me my sins,
and keep me in eternal life. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE DAY

We thank you Father,
for the life of your servant Benedict
to whom you gave spiritual wisdom and insight:
mercifully grant, that having him as our guide
we may learn to put nothing before the love of Christ,
your Son, our Lord,
in whose name we make our prayer. Amen.

READINGS

Read: Proverbs 2.1–8

The opening words of the Rule of St Benedict read: 'Listen my son to the instructions of your master, turn your ear of your heart to the advice of a loving father...' Listening with the 'ears of our heart' is to listen with the whole of our person, echoing the opening words of this reading.

Verses from Psalm 119

LORD, teach me the way of your statutes,
and I will keep them to the end.

Grant me insight that I may keep your law,
and observe it wholeheartedly.

Guide me in the path of your commands,
for in them is my delight.

Bend my heart to your decrees,
and not to wrongful gain.

Turn my eyes from gazing on vanities;
in your way, give me life.

Fulfill your promise to your servant,
that you may be revered.

Turn away the taunts I dread,
for your decrees are good.

See, I long for your precepts;
give me life by your justice.

ALLELUIA

Alleluia, alleluia!
You shall love the Lord with all your heart
and with all your soul
and with all your mind
and with all your strength.
Alleluia!

Read: MATTHEW 19.27-29

REFLECTION

CHANGE, CONTINUITY AND THE BENEDICTINE WAY

‘Rootlessness not meaninglessness is the problem of our age’ – a remark I heard on the radio some years ago. I can’t remember who said it or in what context, but it spoke to me and it has remained with me. I think it makes sense. Giving people roots is essentially what St Benedict was about. Roots give identity and stability, roots anchor us; but roots also make possible new growth. Being rooted enables us change whilst preserving continuity.

Benedict’s ‘little Rule for beginners’ still speaks to us after fifteen centuries. In a confused world, Benedict draws us back to roots which still contain abundant life. In particular I think he can help us with three aspects of the search for meaning today: the loss of community; the nature of work; and the dominance of economics.

The feeling of loss of community is widespread, and although much of this feeling is romantic, the loss is real enough. We are

social beings and we exist in relationship; we need community to be and to become. Benedict has much to teach, both about the nature of community and about the leadership that nurtures it.

The Benedictine vow of stability roots the monk in a community. Community is not something that arises of its own accord around those who happen to live or work in the same place, but, as Benedict knew well, creating a community requires hard work. It requires not only obedience to God and to the Abbot, but also to one another. It was Benedict who first spoke of mutual obedience, and in this he was way ahead of his time. Those who join in community make an open-ended promise to make a journey together come what may; but making the journey and forming the community are symbiotic. It is travelling together that enables journey to be made, and it is perseverance in the journey that forms the community and helps it to change.

Community, says Hans Kung, resolves the paradox of the modern world: 'It acknowledges our interdependence; it recognises our individual worth.' Recovering community is an important political as well as religious priority, as the Covid-19 pandemic daily reminds us. Recovering community is the way to regain the sense of social responsibility that has been largely eroded by our rights-based culture.

Helping people to become rooted in community is, perhaps, the most important function of leadership. Benedict knew that the way the Abbot exercised his office was crucial to the health of the community, and his approach is characterised by a concern for the different temperaments of his brothers, who are always to be treated as individuals, never as a group. Thus the Abbot is advised that 'he should seek to be loved rather than feared, always preferring mercy to judgement, [and] he should so regulate everything that the strong may desire to carry more, and the weak are not afraid.'

Another area where people are looking for meaning is in their work. Work tends to be seen a means to an end, and not something

that is fulfilling in itself. Part of the problem is the way we separate things that should be held together. We are used to the cry that religion must be kept out of politics, but we have been more successful in keeping it out of work. Faith is seen as part of our private life, almost a leisure activity. The Bible teaches otherwise, insisting that work is central to our being, indeed to our well-being. To have no work is to be rootless, as those who are unemployed know only too well. It is for work that the gifts of the Spirit are given, and it is through work that those gifts will grow.

But even those in work can feel that life is out of balance – they may be making a living, but they are not making a life. Benedict knew that a fulfilled life was a balanced life, and the monastic day was a combination of work, study, recreation and prayer. The same spirit that animated prayer should animate work. Thus the Cellarer (or Steward) of the monastery was instructed to ‘regard the chattels of the monastery and its whole property as if they were the sacred vessels of the altar.’ Christians resist the dualism of body and soul, but equally we should resist the dualism of faith and work, the sacred and the secular.

Perhaps the basic cause of our rootlessness is the dominance of economic ideas in the understanding of life. As the Cambridge economist Jane Collier has pointed out, our modern culture is an ‘economic’ culture: ‘The language of economics is the language through which the world is understood, the language by which human and social problems are defined and by which solutions to those problems are expressed. Our lives are dominated by the rituals of “getting and spending”’. Economic ideas express the spirit of the age.

Benedict taught that a monk is engaged in spiritual warfare, and if Walter Wink is right that the demonic incarnates itself in the structures of power, then the war about which we need to be deadly serious is the one of engaging the dominant culture of economics. Being rooted is not just about absorbing the tradition

but also about learning how to use the tradition to challenge the gods of the age.

Economics is not so much a science as a rival religion. Its foundations are not hard empirical data but assumptions about what makes for human happiness and about the ends to which society should be directed, namely that happiness comes through increasing consumption, and that the goal of society should be increasing material prosperity. The individual is central; ethics are uncompromisingly utilitarian; and it is assumed that human behaviour is motivated solely by the rational pursuit of self-interest. This economic view is far removed from the Christian view which insists that the common good is central and equates love of neighbour with love of self. It insists that the condition of the poorest rather than the general level of material prosperity is the bottom line in determining the state of the nation.

The Benedictine principle of frugality offers a fundamental alternative to today's consumer lifestyle. Benedict is not an ascetic, but he is clear that enough is enough. He prescribes moderation in the allowance of food, drink and clothing, and by requiring the Abbot to inspect the beds regularly, ensured that there was no danger of the monks being ensnared by personal possessions! And the care with which the tools and the property of the monastery are to be maintained is a sharp judgement on our disposable society. Benedict saw his monks as stewards; we view people as consumers; we demean their humanity and treat them as mere economic agents.

But this battle is not just about preserving our humanity; it is now abundantly clear that our survival depends on dethroning the economic gods. For years we have known that our exploitation of the Earth's renewable resources exceeds the natural capacity of the planet to replenish itself. There are signs that this message is being heard, and there is a small but growing group of economists who are striving to work out an economic theory concerned less with life style and more with life-giving style. We need to seek, as

George W Bush said in his Inaugural Address, 'a common good beyond your comfort.' If we are serious, Benedict shows the way.

Our Christian roots are essentially Benedictine. Continuity is about returning to our roots so that we may change and move closer to God. As Bishop Simon Phipps once said to me, 'Peter, God is not interested in where you stand but in where you are moving.'

Pause and reflect.

RESPONSE

For all Thy saints, O Lord,
Who strove in Thee to live,
Who followed Thee, obeyed, adored,
Our grateful hymn receive.

Thine earthly members fit
To join Thy saints above,
In one communion ever knit,
One fellowship of love.

Jesus, Thy Name we bless
And humbly pray that we
May follow them in holiness
Who lived and died for Thee.

PRAYERS

A time of free prayer and intercession. You might like to use this five-fold pattern:

For the Church

For the World

For family, friends, neighbours and the local community

For the sick and all in need, near and far

For those who have died

At the end:

Merciful Father, accept my prayers,
for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.

CONCLUSION

Our Father...

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
The love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit,
be with us all, now and for ever. Amen.