

Learning about the Rule of Saint Benedict – as we are this Lent – offers us an opportunity to reflect on the important things of Christian life. It is also a reminder to the Church of today that being missional – doing God’s work – has many forms and facets, and last year’s Lent reading and Holy Week Addresses on those who took themselves off into the desert to serve God made it clear that from the very earliest days the patterns of monastic life, both the common life and the solitary life, have been and are very powerful in both establishing the discipleship of individuals and communities, and in the service of mission through attraction, hospitality, and most of all through constant prayer.

Tonight’s reflection – as advertised – is on prayer as understood and practised in the Benedictine tradition. I will not be offering a direct meditation of the words of the Rule, because you may wish to do that either on your own, or in the group meeting on Wednesday; nor is this address to be taken as a doctoral thesis, covering everything exhaustively. It is simply the prayerful thinking of one man on his own learning and observation in and around various expressions and traditions of Benedictine life, and it is offered in the hope of sparking off your thought and prayer as part of our common coming closer to God this Lent.

If people know anything about the Benedictine tradition, they will certainly know of the motto *ora et labora*, which means – Pray and labour. They may also have come across a slight corruption of the phrase which was very popular in the 1960s and 1970s – *ora est labora* – a slight alteration of the Latin (also appalling Latin grammar!) which changes the meaning completely to ‘prayer *is* labour’, and has led to a good number of people following the philosophy that when they work, if they offer that work to God, then that is prayer enough. That point may indeed be argued, but it isn’t what the Benedictine tradition holds or practises.

A couple of centuries before Saint Benedict, the aim of the desert monks was to make the whole of life an uninterrupted prayer. You can suffuse your work with the spirit of prayer, but that doesn’t make it prayer – nor does it make it any the less valuable: it’s simply your work!

By the time Benedict was writing his rule, the wisdom of ensuring that the monastic day had a structure, with a framework of formal prayer, was commonly accepted. This – with variations – became a pattern familiar to any visitor to a monastery today: the day is punctuated by common formal prayer,

often with chant or other music as an accompaniment to assist in meditation (or indeed in staying awake!). From Vigils in the middle of the night, to Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and finally Compline prior to sleep and the great Silence – these Offices, as they came to be known, came to be shared by non-monastic clergy, and became binding on them as well.

In the High Middle Ages, primers and other prayer books tended to offer a selection of Little Offices: shorter and simpler versions which could be used by literate lay people, or even learned by heart for saying at key moments of the day. While not an Office, the *Angelus Domini* which is still said in this Parish Church, is also part of that attempt to bring a prayerful structure to the rhythm of the day, following the example of monastic life. When preparing his Book of Common Prayer, intended to be accessible and usable to all who could read or learn texts by heart, Cranmer followed in the tradition of the Little Offices by combining the most important elements of monastic prayer into the two Offices of Mattins and Evensong.

In the tradition of Saint Benedict, this rhythm of prayer, work and indeed rest and recreation is known as the *opus Dei*. It is because of this term that I used the word 'labour' rather than 'work' earlier. The Latin verb *laborare* carries with it a sense of putting one's back into something; the noun *opus* carries with it a sense of completeness – and the completeness of the Christian's life is indeed a work carried out for God. The *opus Dei* has the double sense of work carried out by God, and also work carried out for God. In Benedictine practice, then, the framework of formal prayer ensures that all other aspects of life are shot through with God's presence. It was an old Jesuit who said: 'You shouldn't smoke while you're praying; but you can pray while you're smoking' and I think a good Benedictine would concur.

Growing out of this liturgical structure are several other aspects that form part of the life of most monks. A late development – especially once it became normal for some monks to be ordained as priests – is the daily Mass. From the extensive use of the psalms and the lengthy reading of scripture in the Offices grow the practices of meditation and *lectio divina*, both of which have become more fashionable and more widely-used in recent decades. I would suppose that both meditation and *lectio divina* arise from the awareness of boredom and lack of attention when exposed to lengthy texts, and together with the use of

plainchant they offer the human brain a way of coping with the onslaught of so many words at all times of day and night.

Meditation in this tradition involves reading the words of a passage aloud, repeating its words in order to see if the mind's eye, or the eye of the spirit, can perceive further or deeper meaning in the words. *Lectio divina* starts with formal meditation, and follows that with a phase of chewing over the words. A modern Benedictine writer puts it this way: 'We approach Scripture wanting to know what we can do with it; the Fathers were more concerned with what the Scripture could do with them.' Saint Benedict himself personifies the Scriptures: he takes the words as coming directly from another person, and engages in a conversation with that person in his prayerful imagination. He is doing with words what Saint Ignatius does with pictures in his Spiritual Exercises.

Working prayerfully with Scripture in this way does carry some dangers, as there are numerous ways in which we can be distracted. Apart from the obvious one of falling asleep, it is possible for the studious mind to begin analysing the texts as if it were an academic exercise, or in other ways allowing the text to be an object of study and intellectual learning, rather than allowing the text to address the attitudes and behaviour of the individual praying in a way that is often either disturbing or frankly unwelcome. The fact that we do not subscribe to a literal sense of scripture in the way past generations may have done – this is no reason to prohibit the texts from interrogating us as the Word of God and bringing about change.

Beyond the formal structures of prayer lie areas of personal prayer which the Rule does not legislate for, nor should it. The whole surrender of the self, which is part of being a Christian, and which is required in a monastic community, is the heart of personal prayer – the passing of time with God with no agenda other than to be with God and to have one's human emptiness filled with the divine presence. This is a response to an awareness of the presence of God, and also a craving to know that presence more fully.

Benedict expects his monks to have their loins girded with faith, to know that God sees them everywhere, to believe that God is always present. They must be in attitude and practice God-fearing: 'Prayer must penetrate and enliven every aspect of our life, including things that are time-bound and pass away.

Prayer does not despise even the most apparently lowly aspects of our existence in time. It lends them a spiritual nature, and turns them toward God.’ I don’t want to conclude this address without coming back to the assertion I made at the beginning: that to live according to the principles of a monastic rule is in itself missional. There is a peculiar arrogance commonly to be found in the Church of today, which, while talking of helping the Church to develop as a ‘mixed economy’, refuses to understand the mission of a life of work and prayer, which – let’s face it, and we might not all be monks and nuns – is actually the life-pattern of most Christians in the real world.

A meditation on mission produced by the English Benedictine Congregation in the late 1970s states this: ‘The [monastic] mission is to share in the mission of the Spirit himself, to renew the face of the earth.’ and: ‘Those who are professed are committed to a life in which they continually meet the challenge that underlies separation from the world, but they have to go back into the world in some way and offer it a new outlook. If they are truly prayerful, their life and work will communicate to those in urgent need of it the spirit of peace they have drawn from their prayer.’

I would like to think that the monastic life, especially as inspired by the Rule of Saint Benedict, is a distillation of all that is needful in the life of a baptised Christian. This is why I have supported the use of the Rule as a structure for reflection this Lent, and it is my fervent prayer that we all may learn to renew not only the external structure, but the whole heart of our lives of prayer and service, through understanding more about this hallowed way of holiness.

*Gracious and Holy Father, give us the wisdom to discover you, the intelligence to understand you, the diligence to seek after you, the patience to wait for you, eyes to behold you, a heart to meditate upon you, and a life to proclaim you, through the power of the Spirit of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*

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