

Lent Address 13/03/22

Of all the things I tell people about the two months I spent living alongside an enclosed Benedictine order of nuns, the one fact they respond to most surely is this: there are no mirrors. No mirrors anywhere other than in the Sacristy, so that the priest can check her (or his) chasuble isn't wonky before celebrating Mass.

People are astonished. No mirrors – but how do they see themselves?

They don't. And it doesn't matter. These are women who take the Rule of St Benedict very seriously. The patterns of life laid down encourage a person to take each day, each individual decision and choice, as a step closer to God's ideal. Within that, one of the most important virtues to cultivate is humility.

We know this because the rule has a stonking great (by Benedict's standards) chapter on it.

There is much to take in and I would encourage you to read and dwell on it yourself. If I tried to include everything we'd be here for the long haul. Let's begin with the mirrors. Why no mirrors? All sorts of reasons, I imagine, and I never did ask. However, I suspect it is to stop oneself spending too much time and attention on personal appearance. But also, along a slightly different track - I wonder if removing the temptation to gaze at oneself in the looking glass is a symbolic step away from seeing yourself as the centre of the world.

There is a thing, I am told, amongst young people on social media – main character syndrome. A person who floats through life imagining themselves as the main character in a film or novel, casting those around them in supporting roles. This is a very human problem and I suspect it pre-dates Snap Chat by many centuries, if not millennia. We can often, if we are not careful and deliberate about it, be drawn into patterns of thinking along these lines. And no, I am not just talking selfies, and I'm not raining hot coals on social media, as mixed a blessing as it is. That would be hypocritical given my own possession of a Twitter account. It would also be useless. Social media isn't the ultimate evil – it's just the latest invention that allows us to put ourselves at the centre of our thought process. Honestly, it doesn't actually matter whether it's your face or your opinions you're putting out there – it is still the same distraction. A twenty-tweet thread containing your expert analysis of the latest political horror show is just as much about you as a picture of your smiling face. If not, more so.

And this is what Benedict was writing about.

Remember, he is not a fictional character – we can all be guilty of seeing people in the past through that lens. This was a very real man, living a very real life and trying to shape the lives of those men he was responsible for toward God. He knew people. He lived up close and personal with the reality of seeking God together in community. Which is what we're doing here tonight in a less intense way.

So, what does he have to teach us about why humility is important, and what we have to gain from pursuing it?

Humility is rooted in obedience, but it doesn't mean pretending you don't have a mind of your own. Obedience is dependent on the freedom of thought God has given to us because to be proper obedience it needs to be freely chosen rather than imposed by another – including God. Obedience to God can be reflected in the way we may seek to find wisdom in others. Sometimes, we must put ourselves at the feet of those who know better.

When I was learning to play the violin, I saw not the point of scales. Why, why, why would you bother? Seriously? Repetitive, dull, and not proper music. Why can't I learn from just playing pieces? Well, that was the approach I took, as a strong-willed young lass. And it meant that I never moved beyond a level that I think it's fair to label 'rubbish'. I sounded awful. I wasn't until I became an adult and returned to lessons that I took up scales, because a wise and brilliant teacher told me what I could learn: the precise placement of the fingers for the finest intonation (to prevent one sounding like next door's cat having an argument with next door's dog) articulation in the bow hand, and many other things. Suddenly the pieces I had been playing badly for years sounded different. Better. Because I trusted in the words of one who knew more, and obediently did as I was told. As any of you who know me will confirm, this is RARE.

We can do the same in our spiritual lives if we are willing. We can put ourselves at the feet of others and learn from their greater wisdom. We can do the equivalent of 'holiness scales'. We can seek out a Spiritual Director, go to confession, ask our parish priest... or whomever. That is humility – and seeking to follow direction is one way of being humble. However, it is worth remembering that obedience is more than just doing as you're told – it is attentiveness. Fear, or awe, of God comes from being attentive to God's presence and all that this means.

Humility that stems from that attentiveness and obedience will be a deep-rooted awareness that our lives are not entirely our own. That we should not look to the satisfaction of our desires, or our own advancement, to fulfil us, because they will not. As Judith Suter put it in her new commentary on Benedict's Rule, seeking these will only lead to disappointment. To walk the humble path we must look to God's power over our own, and seek to build up those with whom we walk.

As we've noted, the Rule was for a community. For a reason. Imagine for a second the kind of community where people are relentlessly competitive, they are seeking to win, even when they're not sure what the game is, they will put themselves above everyone else, fighting off the others, getting each other into trouble, creating arguments from the smallest of tiny irritations... like a kind of ecclesiastical Wacky Races. Sounds absolutely terrible. Community life is hard enough – even in parish churches - without that kind of carrying on. It doesn't reflect God. It definitely reflects unchecked human ego though. And this is why it's vital to reject that outright and seek a humble path. Far better to do that than seek to throw our weight around or manipulate our way to 'the top' and to whatever special status we think that will give us.

Far better that we seek to control only our own reactions to things, not other people, and recognise our dependence on one another and on Christ.

Let's talk worms.

Obviously.

People are sometimes a bit scared of humility because they imagine it means that they have to stand in the North Sea repeating 'I am a worm' until they turn blue, or something. Don't let me stop you, you can if you want, but I don't think that's required. What is required, for those seeking humility, is an understanding that you are a creature of God. No more, but no less either. And the more you make your peace with this, the more Christ will shine in your every action. Worms are not just essential, they are also beautiful in their own way, perfectly suited for what they do. We are his creatures too, and we could do a lot worse than choose a worm for a role model – quietly going about essential business, attentive to their purpose.

Yes, worms are humble, and we are meant to think of them as such – but that's a good thing to aim for, not a way to beat yourself up.

True humility does not seek to feel special and stand out, as Sutera puts it, or to be a Church of England superhero, as I put it. You do not have to be lauded, held up as a wonderful example of whatever it is you do, you do not have to be invited to speak on Radio 4. All that is fine, but it's not the aim of a life. Washing the floor to the glory of God is a beautiful and holy thing. Humility seeks to be faithful in all the things, not just those which bring an obvious reward.

There is a book by Michael Casey, one of the great monastic writers of our time. It is called *The Unexciting Life*. It tells us of exactly that. The pursuit of holiness through the small and mundane things. That is a humble life. That is a holy life, and anyone can do it.

I'll leave you with a small reflection of my own on this from a recent visit to a monastery:

I was planting in the absolute sheeting rain, of course, with the former Abbot. He is a wise and good man, and has taught me many things, mostly without knowing that he has. We came to the end of the session. Soaked and muddy, with wellies full of water, we plodded back toward the buildings, and this is what we did: We washed the spades. In a trough outside the tool shed there is water, and you take a brush, and wash your spade down. I was praying seven services a day with this wonderful community, but this one small act of care spoke to me more deeply than almost anything else. Wash the spades, so the next person doesn't have to. Replace them, clean in the place where anyone can find and use them. Things used for the good of a community, cared for quietly and without fuss, to be used again the next day and the next and the next. The unexciting life. Doing the next small thing right. The humble and holy pursuit of God together. That's what we are here for.

Amen

Benedict's rule is B – big chapter. Also 5 – based in obedience.