

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

13 July 2014

St Benedict, the spiritual father of Anglicanism

Sermon preached by Fr John Stewart

On Friday the church remembered the Life of St Benedict, often called the founder of western monasticism. This morning I'm inviting you into a reflection on Benedict, the one considered to be the spiritual father of Anglicanism. Benedict was born in 480 in northern Italy, into a world not unlike our own. The Roman Empire was in its death throes, familiar social and economic institutions were collapsing, markets failing, the rich were getting richer and the poor poorer. We know little about Benedict's personal life. He studied in Rome until the decadent living around him led him at the age of 20 to withdraw, seeking God in the silence of a cave. He lived as a hermit, and gradually people were drawn to him and communities developed. He was never priest but lived his life as a layman. After 25 years he moved to Monte Cassino, not far from Rome, where he lived until his death c 70.

His enduring work is the Rule he wrote. It was intended to be guidelines for community life for those who sought to follow Benedict on their journey to God. Benedictine communities have flourished throughout the world for more than 15 centuries. Benedict wrote the Rule at the time of the Arian and Pelagian heresies and people were looking for certainty in their faith. Benedict urged everyone to keep their minds open and the doors of their monasteries open as well.

I'll come back and look at some central and helpful Benedictine teaching in a moment. But now let's take a look at the English Church. There are still some people who say the Anglican Church began in the 16th century as a direct consequence of King Henry VIII's marital problems. WRONG.

The first chapters of Anglican history are filled with towering monastic figures of Celtic Christianity, like Ninian, Patrick, Aidan and Cuthbert, Columba, and the most Benedictine of them all, the Venerable Bede. Then St Augustine arrived in 596 – less than 50 years after Benedict's death. He was sent by Pope Gregory I who was himself already deeply influenced by the Rule of Benedict. Augustine was himself a monk and became the first Archbishop of Canterbury. In an unbroken line from him, the present Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby is the 105th Archbishop. The Benedictines were very influential in all aspects of church life up to the sixteenth century. Canterbury Cathedral and Westminster Abbey were both Benedictine foundations, established and run by communities of Benedictine monks from the beginnings. They also established many cathedrals throughout the land, including Ely, Winchester, Coventry, Worcester, St Albans, Norwich, Lincoln, Peterborough, Durham and others.

For ten centuries Anglicanism, insisting on its continuity with Norman, Anglo-Saxon and Celtic Christianity, decisively shaped by its monastic experience, developed its spirituality, liturgy, theology and polity. At the time of the Reformation the monastic houses were dissolved – in many ways a great tragedy for the mission and life of the church. And yet what emerges is

absolutely foundational to us – the Book of Common Prayer, itself expressing the essentials of Benedictine spirituality. Remember at the centre of Anglican reform there is not a towering reformer like Luther or Calvin, but a book of liturgical prayer. A book that makes available to all members of the church and order for the community Eucharist, an order for morning and evening prayer each day, and orders for personal and communal prayer at different life stages. All this in the language accessible to the common people - hence Common Prayer. These ways of praying, personally and communally, through the cycles of the year and the seasons of life, come directly from the Rule of Benedict. There is a very real sense in which Anglicanism, robbed of its monastic communities, became itself monastic in its spiritual and liturgical life. The basic bond of the Anglican Communion is, and always has been, community prayer: this is also true of the Benedictine family. As we pray for and with each other in the unity of Christ, we rediscover what we are and experience what we shall be.

There is a huge revival of interest in the Rule of Benedict now – especially looking at how it can inform our relationship with God today. If you want to do some more thinking a good place to start of this book by Joan Chittister – *The Rule of Benedict, a spirituality for the 21st century*.

Let me point to just one part of the Rule – it is where Benedict describes the attitude, orientation we should have about ordinary life each day. He has three words: *stabilitas, conversatio morum* and *obedientia*.

Stability is being present to the here and now, rooted to the spot, resisting the urge to look to the next thing and the one after that. Being truly present to the moment, to the actual job in hand, to the people who are my companions now.

Conversatio morum translates as journeying on, being ready for change, being open to the new, the unexpected, the surprising. Being free to choose the life God is calling us to.

These two are in a creative tension and need to be held in each hand together. Being present to the here and now, whilst also recognizing that this isn't the final word or destination. There is always more to be open to.

Obedientia comes from *ob-audire* = listening very attentively. This is about listening deeply with the heart. It's about deciding whose voice to listen to, whose to reject or avoid. This is the way to personal freedom.

Being truly in the present moment, being open to where the Spirit is leading, and listening to the deep inner wisdom – this is the heart of Benedictine life. As it is the heart of Anglican life. Joan Chittister has this in the introduction to this book:

The foundations of the Benedictine way of life that the Rule preserves are the very foundations that the modern world most lacks but at the same time most needs.

To a world fragmented by transience and distance, the Rule stresses the need and nature of real community.

To a world dry to the core with secularism the Rule brings the rhythm and ointment of prayer.

To a world that has severed human life from the creation that sustains it, the Rule brings a new respect for the seasons of life and the stewardship of the world.

To a world torn apart by random and state violence, the Rule brings a life based on the equality and reverence that a world in search of peace requires.

To a world where arrogance separates the developed from the 'underdeveloped' by assuming that one has the right to the basics of life while the other must exist on less, the Rule requires the development of the kind of humility that makes none of us subject to the whims of the rest of us.

To a world where people work for money, the Rule requires that we work to continue the will of God for all of creation.

To a world where leisure has been reduced to aimlessness, the Rule provides a sense of contemplation, the fruits of which enable us to see the world as God sees it.

This is one way which has inspired and nourished Christian disciples for more than 15 centuries, especially those of us who identify with the English tradition. It has much to offer us in this age – it is there for our taking. Will you?