

Finding a Framework for Prayer – what can the Benedictine Tradition teach us for today?

I struggled to find a suitable text from this rather tough set of readings, for what I want to talk about, but St Paul in his letter to the Philippians provides it:

Our citizenship is in heaven.

I am going to offer you some thoughts today on the Benedictine tradition and how it could help us improve that citizenship, thinking particularly about some sort of framework for prayer.

I wonder how many of you have visited one of the great Benedictine abbeys in France, mostly now ruined - Cluny in Burgundy or Le Bec Hellouin in Normandy or Montmajour in Provence? Or maybe one of the imposing sites of our Abbeys in England, Riveaulx or Fountains. Conjure it up in your mind's eye if you have, and travel with me, if you will, if you do not know them, in your imagination. Let's go to CLUNY, set deep in rural France.

CLUNY was one of the biggest of the Benedictine abbeys. The ruined buildings still give an idea of its former size and magnificence. It is this year celebrating 1,100 years since its foundation. Imagine it when it was flourishing in the Middle Ages: stone buildings of fine design, that included a church, dormitories, refectory, cloister, gardens and land for crops and vegetables.

And now let's move inside these buildings to see the community of monks who would have lived here, leading a life of prayer, manual work, divine study and reading, all fitted around the central routine of the Opus Dei (the work of God) which meant the seven daily offices, or services. These started with Vigils in the very early hours of the morning, and ended with Compline at around 7 in the evening. Between the services, they would have worked on illuminating manuscripts, labouring on the land, tilling and tending crops, working at the music they produced, in the kitchens and at the books they studied. They would have been conscious of the local poor and sick and they would have given hospitality to pilgrims and wayfarers and those seeking spiritual refreshment.

But may I invite you now to move back a bit further in time, to the man who has given his name to this monastic tradition and way of life - Benedict of Nursia - St Benedict.

He was born in 480 in Italy at a time when there was considerable change, socially and politically and ecclesiastically. Society needed some steadying and inspirational guidance. Benedict emerged to provide this. He founded a monastery at Monte Cassino in the Apennines. This, and others which grew up from it, were small communities of men, mostly not priests or scholars, but holy men with a desire to seek God.

Benedict composed a Rule of Living for his community – as did other Abbots for their communities. But such was the humanity and wisdom of Benedict that his Rule became the most influential on the Latin church and western monasticism.

Well that's quite enough of a History lesson. Let's now take a look at this Rule of St Benedict's and see how it could have lessons for us in the 21st Century.

The Rule falls into 73 Chapters taking us through the shape of the community, the tools required for leading a godly life, the shape and content of the daily offices – the psalms forming a strong core to all of them - , the practicalities of prayer, of a communal life, of time-keeping, the place of work, managing hospitality, the right rhythm and balance of a spiritual and physical life, centred on prayer and love.

It is gentle but firm, it is positive rather than negative, it focuses on both a spiritual and a practical regime, and it is profoundly spiritual. It is based throughout and fully on the Scriptures. It is a School for the Lord's Service. It is intended to lead us and sign us to how to walk in the presence of Christ and seek God with our whole being. It is about being alive and awake to that presence.

One of the reasons I believe it still resonates for us today is that it deals with tensions, with finding a balance for the different elements of the human life. Although our lives are very different in many aspects from those of the medieval monks, there are still many elements in common: we struggle to balance work, family, time for prayer, leisure, home, guests, gardening, church services, environment, cooking. So did they.

What does Benedict say then?

First STILLNESS AND STABILITY

This is about finding first and foremost your relationship with God, tuning in to your heart and your conversation with God. Allowing yourself to be where you are, stilling yourself here in his presence. You do not need to go running off, wishing you were somewhere else or were somehow else. Stick with it. So by extension this means perseverance and even endurance. But always the feeling of presence – in those words of T.S. Eliot :

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight. Quick now, here, now, always.

Next Benedict deals with CHANGE

We cannot just stop and stay comfortably stuck in our comfort zone; we are pilgrims and need always to be moving on, to be adapting our behaviour, to circumstances, to others' needs, to the community in which we exist. Change and growth, growth through change. Alarming maybe, but life enhancing too. For the monks the time before dawn was very

special. They found the coming of the morning light at daybreak a reassuring sign of the presence of God, bringing us out of darkness. Moving into the light of another day and all the possibilities it would bring.

So here we are given a strong vertical, of my relationship with God, of a rootedness, down and up; and a strong, crossing horizontal, of forward movement and of a relationship with the community in which we live.

Held in tension. The shape of the cross, if you will.

To maintain this tension, Benedict talks about BALANCE and ORDER.

He understands that men and women need order and rhythm if they are to flourish and be happy and effective in their lives. He lays out the precepts for a life of rhythm – in the services in the community throughout the day, the times set for manual work, for study, for sleep, for meals – and for a life of moderation, contentment and enjoyment of the familiar, the ordinary, the monotonous. With this rhythm, the religious and the worldly, the spiritual and the bodily become integrated – in a way which I think to some degree, we have lost – to our emotional, physical and spiritual detriment. And all the activities are carried out in the conscious and constant presence of Christ.

Benedict does not shy away from the DIFFICULTIES. Of respecting others in the community, of sharing burdens, of dealing with the frustration of proximity to people with different approaches or gifts. But the Community provides an opportunity for love to flourish –very different from the solitary state of the Desert Fathers. He speaks of hospitality and how important it is to have a separate place set aside for guests and to ensure that the timetable of the community and the monks' stillness with God is preserved and not interrupted – if it were, the hospitality would be compromised. We need to avoid Martha's frazzled frame of mind.

Benedictines have always, and still do, do hospitality superbly, glorying in the fruits of God's earth and the enjoyment of them.

He speaks of the right use of authority, of appropriate delegation, and of the sound principles in any community of solidarity but plurality.

And finally PRAYER, which wraps around and through all of this. The opus dei, the services, are the framework for the community. But loving prayer and a constant dialogue with God permeate the day and all its activities.

Benedict's balance does not mean compromise and mediocrity. It is about holding and using the tension between:

Stability and change

Tradition and future

Personal and community

Obedience and initiative

Contemplation and action

The desert and the marketplace.

So what can we take from St Benedict and his Rule for our lives today?

- We could strive for a more ordered balance and rhythm in our daily lives
- We could ensure a healthy balance of set times for our prayer and dialogue with God – our spiritual dimension – and our engagement with others
- We could make more of the daily routines of life, offering small prayers before or as we perform them
- We could think about how we meet Christ in others and offer them hospitality while preserving our inner stillness
- We could think about our stewardship of the earth and about the produce from it
- We could try and integrate a physical practical exercise of the body with a mental and spiritual regime
- We could try to be more aware of God's constant presence. Proverbs tells us (Ch15:3 & 19:1) We believe that the divine presence is everywhere and that in every place the eyes of the Lord are watching.

I will finish with a few personal observations on how I am trying to bring some of Benedict's ideas into my life.

Like many of you, I am sure, I try to maintain a morning and night-time routine of time for prayer, starting and ending the day in the presence of God; early morning before the day starts making worldly demands, and bed time to wrap the day up with thanks. And I try to keep a weekly rota of people to pray for each day.

My take on the rhythm and pattern of the opus dei is to try to expand these prayer times several times a week by using a simple Daily Office, a morning and/or evening service. This has the set framework of words for praise, for intercessions, and readings from the Bible, and the psalms. I try to say a Psalm each day, working through the Book of Psalms, alternately using the 1662 version and then a modern version. Roger

spoke last week of their richness: they reflect every mood and give us a channel for our dialogue with God.

There is something about sticking with the service or office regularly and constantly. Sometimes it feels fertile sometimes arid. That doesn't matter. It provides the spiritual space for God to seek us and us to find Him.

I find a great re-assurance in the rhythm of the Daily Office words. This in part comes from a traditional Anglican upbringing and childhood, trailing along to C of E services every Sunday. We had to learn the collects off by heart each week at school: a real pain at the time, but all of that experience has provided a treasure trove of words and phrases now. Maybe we have too much choice in our liturgy today for memory to manage.

There is reassurance in the words of the services which have been said and sung day in day out, year in year out, over the centuries. I find you can let them run and think within them, or you can attend to exactly what they say to you on this particular occasion.

I also find a reassurance in knowing that the daily office is being said, in cathedrals and abbeys and communities, each day. It does not matter whether you are there – you know that the ceaseless song is continuing. Rather in the same way as the rhythm of the coastal tides, endlessly coming in and going out, pounding against the cliffs or pouring over the sands, over the months, the years and the centuries.

The heartbeat of God's eternal presence.

AMEN

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