

St Benedict  
(Proverbs 2:1-9 / Matthew 19:27-29)  
11.07.2015

We might not have formulated things quite as clearly as Peter did in today's gospel passage, but I am sure there have been times when we have all asked the Lord the question (or, at least, harboured this thought in our hearts): *What about us? We have left everything and followed you.*

Maybe we have been more personal and asked: *What about me, Lord?*

We can wonder, at times, to what avail we have committed ourselves to do all we have undertaken for the Lord.

There may be days when we ask: *Has it been an act of folly on my behalf to have left so much behind to follow Him?*

While I can understand Peter and even sympathise with him, recognising that there are times when the cost of Christian discipleship, and, perhaps even more the implications that go with our own particular calling in life, make themselves felt, it seems to me that where Peter went wrong (and we can all go wrong here) is to have followed up his initial question with the demand: *What are we to have then?*

This enquiry betrayed the fact that Peter was still a very self-interested man.

His question appears to have come from an attitude which saw everything from the perspective: *What is in this for me?*

Such self-interest is never the perspective of genuine love.

True love always has us look beyond self-interest alone.

It is in love's nature to give, and to want to give more and more. A true lover wants to give him or her self to and for their loved one, rather than think in terms of *having* the other for their self.

True love does not have us look at our loved one and ask: *What am I have from this person?*

While not denying that we will always receive something from our love for another, for there is always reciprocity in love (both giving and receiving), what is received is never taken as a right, but always welcomed as pure grace, a genuine gift.

If we have not grasped this, it is to be asked if we have really understood what love is all about.

Love is not something we can merit or achieve.

Love is something we give and receive.

It is an exchange of free gift. It is a gracious encounter in which grace meets with grace.

In Christ love has been made manifest.

In Jesus love has been revealed.

Christ-Jesus makes love visible.

In the incarnate Son of God, the generosity and undeserved favour, the indescribable gift of love, has taken on flesh.

In Christ love is not just a concept or an idea, a feeling or an aspiration: it is incarnated.

In Jesus love is embodied, in a real person in a very tangible way.

In Christ-Jesus love is shown to be the gift of self, without thought for recompense, without payback demanded.

Clearly, the Christian approach stands in contrast with some of the ways in which we frame our thoughts about love!

So often what we call love is not rooted so much in our care for the other person, other people, but in consideration for our self.

So often, when we look at another and relate to them, we think along these lines (admittedly, not

fully consciously): *I love you because of how you make me feel. I love you because you fill a need inside me. I love you because I know that I am wanted by you and that I am cherished and cared for by you.*

All this could be resumed thus: *I love you because of what you can do for me, because of what I can have from you, because of what I can obtain through you.*

And all that is shorthand for: *I love me through you or I use you to love me.*

Clearly such an approach is basically self-centred.

This is the approach to love that the ancient Greeks called *eros*.

It is love that comes with strings attached.

It is all about *what you can do for me*.

The strings attached rob those engaged in this way of relating to each other of the hallmark of all true love: freedom!

Peter was still a bit in this perspective when he addressed the question he is said to have put to the Master in today's gospel passage.

The love made incarnate in Christ-Jesus stands in contrast to this lesser love.

Jesus' love is complete, because it is not self-centred. His love is self-giving love for others.

Jesus' love is love without strings attached.

Its hallmark is freedom.

To love and be loved with this love is a liberating experience.

This sort of love (called *agape* love) robs neither lover nor loved one of their liberty.

We could say that Benedict's whole purpose in writing his Rule for Monks, and proposing the way of life he does therein, was to give a framework in which to live in *the love of God* (*agape* love).

In chapter 4 of the Rule we read how the monk's way of seeing things and of acting should be different to that of this world.

The monk is to live for others and to love others with a love rooted in that of Christ Himself.

Benedict insists: *The love of Christ must come before all else.*

One American Episcopalian woman (a minister of her Church), who has engaged with the Rule of St Benedict in a very concrete way in her own ordinary life in the world, has said, very simply, in a reflection on its wisdom: *The Rule is 'lived out love' in the context of daily life and work.*

That little phrase does pretty well sum up what St Benedict's Rule is all about.

That is, of course, what gospel living is all about.

Benedict pretends to offer us nothing other than this: *a way of life with the gospel as our guide.* (He makes this clear in the Prologue to his Rule for Monasteries and he further underlines this in the closing chapters of the Rule.)

There is no doubt that God's love is the key to understanding the way of life Benedict proposes in his Rule for Monks.

The monk is *to prefer nothing to the love of Christ.*

*The brethren are to love one another with the pure love of Christ.*

Their love is to find expression in mutual obedience (that is in listening to each other respectfully), willingly accepting each other for who and what he or she is.

The brethren's love is to be demonstrated in attention to each other's needs.

It is to be shown to the old, the young, the abbot, the guests, the sick, the poor, the needy, the weak, those we might consider to be our enemies, those struggling to remain faithful to their calling, those going through crises, those who have cut themselves off from the community.

*The love of God poured into our hearts* is the end to which Benedict's way of humility leads.

The monk who has arrived at the end to which Benedict invites us in his chapter *On Humility* is one who lives *in perfect love which casts out all fear*.

The last degree of humility speaks of *the monk having arrived at Christ's perfect love* (Christ's total, self-giving, love) which is the antipodes of self-absorbed, self-centred love.

One Benedictine woman, in a commentary on the Rule, reflecting on chapter 7, says that the fundamental choice with which Benedict confronts us in this chapter is between humility and narcissism.

Without contradicting her, I might just rephrase that.

I would say that the fundamental choice with which Benedict confronts us is between self-absorbed love and self-giving love: it is the choice between love which seeks to captivate for oneself, drawing everything to oneself. and love which is, what I call, *oblative*, a love whose hallmark is generous '*self-giveness*'.

(I know I have invented words there, but you will get my meaning.)

At the end of chapter 7 of the Rule of St Benedict we read: *Having therefore ascended all the degrees of humility, the brother (or sister) will presently arrive at that love of God, which being perfect, casts out fear.*

(*Presently arrives*. That means that we are not there yet!)

Freed and fearless, such a person will be able to look to Christ and at Him in the community (and, indeed, in every person encountered).

Freed and fearless, such a person will know that Christ can be found everywhere and in everyone.

Freed and fearless, such a person will be able to look at others saying to him or her self: *I do not interact with Christ and other people just to get something out of this for myself, but because the love of Christ impels me.*

*I interact with Christ and others because Christ and these persons call forth something from within me.*

*I interact with Christ and others because I want to give myself to them. I can and I want to give the self I am, the self I have received from God.*

To quote from the guidelines drawn up for one Benedictine University Faculty (without actually saying it, but no doubt seeing itself as *a school of love*, to use a phrase dear to our monastic tradition): *Love in our Benedictine perspective* (which I would say is none other than the gospel perspective) *is love of Christ and neighbour lived out of an astonished respect for what we know and see as God's amazing love for us first. This love is against all human selfishness. Such love is in fact selflessness. It is selfless love which animates us and is our grounding principle.*

In the words of Bernard of Clairvaux, from a letter he wrote to monks of the Abbey of St John in the Alps: *Our vocation is above all to keep to that more excellent way which is the way of love.*

Elsewhere this same monk, who was schooled in a tradition which lived according to Benedict's Rule for Monasteries, has this to say: *For our love of others to be wholly right, God must be at its root.*

In our life all begins with and ends with love, because *God is love* and in Him we have our origin and our final destiny.

The way Benedict proposes is a way of self-offering. It is a way of self-giving love. It is a way of oblation.

This is expressed most eloquently in those words Benedict has the man or woman who makes monastic Profession or the Oblation of their life sing in the liturgy on the day they make the offering of their life.

They sing the *Suscipe*, a verse taken from the psalms to express their loving self-gift. This psalm verse has them implore: *Receive me, O Lord, according to your promise and I shall live.*

That prayer, which asks the Lord to receive the gift made of one's life, immediately introduces the reminder of the Lord's promise to those who follow the way He proposes: **life!**

We really live our lives when we live them not for ourselves alone, but *out of love of Christ* and, in Him, out of love for others.

The gift of the Spirit that has been poured into our hearts is, according to St Paul, nothing other than the gift of divine *agape*: God's way of loving.

God's way of loving brings us to live the humble gift of ourselves, far from all self-interest. God's way of loving has us live a generous self-gift.

Our consecrated life is one of self-giving love.

In his writings, St John-Paul II reminded Consecrated men and women, over and over again, that self-giving love was the sense and sign-value of their lives.

Let me end with a few lines from *Redemptionis Donum*, wherein he says to Consecrated men and women: *It is precisely the witness of love that the world today and all humanity need. You must constantly strive to make it fully transparent and fully fruitful in the world.*

Let us take those words of exhortation to heart on this day when we celebrate the man who has given us the Rule of Life by which we seek to live here at this monastery. Benedict's Rule of Life is nothing other than the gospel's Rule of Love!

Amen!