

St Benedict (A)

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

11.07.2020

In chapter 2 of his Rule for Monks, St Benedict reminds the abbot, and the whole community with him: *we are all one in Christ*. Here St Benedict is referring to a line found in chapter 3 of St Paul's Letter to the Galatians: *We are all the same; we are all Christians; we are all one in Christ. (Gal.3:28)*.

The proposal made by our Order's lectionary that we should read an extract from Christ's High Priestly Prayer this morning, for this year's celebration of St Benedict, is an invitation for all of us to reflect upon the call addressed to us to live our lives in the unity of Christ, since, as we have heard, we are all meant to be *one in Christ*.

For us monks this is a reminder that we are called, by our whole way of life to live as credible witnesses to the mystery of communion which should be a hallmark of the whole Church. Our common life, the brotherhood we share, should be nothing other than a ferment of that communion which Christ desires to see His disciples enjoy and which He continually asks the Father to grant to us... so that our testimony may lead the world to see that the Father sent Jesus into the world to announce the Good News of salvation and *to gather all together as one*.

When we read Christ's High Priestly Prayer in which Jesus implores that His disciples may be one we see the emphasis He places upon each one's communion with God so that all together they may come to live the mystery of communion: *May they be one as We are one. May they be one in Us!*

Fundamental to our unity as Christians is each one's relationship with the Lord. Upon the quality of our relationship with Christ depends the quality of all the other relationships of our lives.

If this is true for all Christians it is *a fortiori* the case for Benedictine monks who, gathered in community, are called to live the witness of the common life. The Rule of St Benedict is all about teaching men and women how to live in community as part of *the strong race of cenobites*: that is, as Benedict explains, those *gathered in monasteries to live in community under a Rule and an abbot*. Again and again, throughout the text of the Rule, St Benedict gives central importance to each individual monk's living in intimate relationship with Christ. A reading of the Rule shows us that those who follow its teaching should be able to say: *Jesus Christ, You are my life!* Benedictine monastic living is all about putting Christ at the centre of one's whole existence. We could think of the Benedictine way as being summed up in this little phrase which St Benedict employs more than once in the Rule: *Let them prefer nothing to Christ*. That maxim could be considered the keystone of the Rule. For Benedict everything reposes upon the foundation stone of Jesus Christ! The cornerstone of this church building reminds us monks and our visitors that Jesus Christ Himself is (certainly should be!) the cornerstone of all that is lived here in this place.

The Rule of St Benedict continually points beyond itself to the person of Christ. It is entirely Christ-focused, helping us to live according to the Gospels. This explains why many people from beyond the confines of monastic life in community have felt drawn to the Rule throughout the centuries. This is the case more and more in our own day and age when the Benedictine way is being discovered by Christians from all traditions to be *a sure Gospel path of life*. The Rule of St Benedict has much to say to the Church at large – and here I am referring to the wider Christian family, across the denominational boundaries which exist among us. The relevance of the Rule is something that many people have come to recognise. The amount of Benedictine related literature that has appeared on the scene in the late 20<sup>th</sup>

and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, emanating from Christian writers of various Christian traditions, bears testimony to this.

One thing that comes across in these various reflections which have considered the relevance of the Rule of St Benedict for all Christians and the Churches' life today is one fundamental Benedictine insight I have alluded to: namely, that before we can ever hope to live positively and faithfully with one another in mature relationships of communion, we must, first of all, each one of us, for him or her self, be looking to God and seeking to grow in our personal integrity in Christ. It is from each one's union with Christ that our *comm-union* – our *union with* – each other stems. This is something we see formulated clearly in Christ's prayer in John 17: *May they be one as We are one. May they be one. May they be one in Us.* Our personal and corporate growth processes in the Lord and with each other are simultaneously rooted in Christ.

Growth is never without its challenges. We talk of *growing pains* because they are a reality. *Life Together* – which is how the Protestant Churchman and theologian Bonhoeffer defines community – is inclined to stretch us. It obliges a great attention to those with whom we are called to share our existence. This attention obliges us to take into consideration all the small details which are what make up our existence. It is not enough to have some great theories about what unity means and how to attain it. We must seek to live it in the concrete reality of our daily lives. Benedict sees the importance of this in his Rule for Monks. Again and again, he deals with the *nitty gritty* of life shared; again and again he invites us to be attentive to our own and each other's incarnation. There are so many examples of this consideration to concrete details in the Rule that it would be unfair to signal out just one. This attention is all pervasive.

For Benedict, everything that holds us together is *rooted in and founded upon love* – to use that phrase St Paul employs in his Letter to the Ephesians. A very beautiful expression of what life shared is all about for Benedict is found in chapter 72 of the Rule – a chapter the monks and many of us will be familiar with, but which it is worth quoting again and again to refresh our memories.

*This is the good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love: 'They should try to be the first to show respect to the other' (Rom. 12:19), supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behaviour, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else. To their fellow monks they should show the pure love of brothers; to God, loving fear; to their abbot, unfeigned and humble love. Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may He bring us all together to everlasting life. (RB 72)*

A Cistercian abbot, Dom John Eudes Bamberger, has said: *In this chapter of the Rule we find the essence, the deepest dimension and the core of the whole Rule.* An English Anglican, Esther de Waal, reading the text as a laywoman remarks: *Here I am brought very close to the heart of the Christian mystery. In this chapter everything flows together in a tremendous affirmation of the place of Christ.* The point Esther de Waal makes is that what comes across in chapter 72 of the Rule is that it is upon our relationship with Christ that everything depends. If this is true at a personal level, it is also true at a community level. And so we are brought back to what has my insistence this morning. The strength of the life of a Benedictine community depends upon all its members being united to Christ and one in Christ. It depends upon all the members seeing Christ in each other, honouring Christ in each other, serving Christ in each other, loving Christ in each other... and each one doing all that out of the conviction that Christ lives in his or her own heart.

For the health and well-being of a community it is vital that each of its members discerns Christ to be in its midst. Each monk should be able to make his own that exclamation of Paul writing to the Colossians: *Christ in our midst!* We are called to discern Christ to be present everywhere and in everyone. This is where today's first reading from the Book of Proverbs comes in. A fundamental point made by the whole of the Book of Proverbs is that life together depends upon living in healthy relationships. All the maxims and precepts of this Wisdom Book instruct us about how to go about establishing and maintaining such relationships. They call upon us to be discerning and consistent in our whole way of being; to seek God and to see God in all things – and especially in every person encountered. The idea of seeing Christ in every person encountered is profoundly Benedictine. The section from Proverbs that we read this morning – Proverbs 2:1-9 – makes the point that all the wisdom we need for healthy living, good life shared together, comes from God. It speaks of wisdom being like *a hidden treasure found by those who search for it*. It leads us to see that *those who find this treasure come to know happiness*.

May we be led to recognise the hidden treasure which is the life of Christ in each other – in ourselves and in those with whom we share life. May our joy be found in sharing life with all those with whom the Lord has called us to love and serve Him.

We are graced to be a source of mutual enrichment by the gifts we share. We are blessed to have each other's support. The Lord has given each one of us to the community and the rest of the community to each one of us for the common good.

*Ut congregamur in unum! May He gather us together as one!*

May He lead us all together in the way of life!

Amen!