

St Benedict

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

11.07.2021

Following the Benedictine *Ordo* today we celebrate the Solemnity of St Benedict here at the abbey even though today is Sunday, the *Day of the Lord*. We could explain today's celebration then by saying that according to the instructions of the *Ordo* liturgically when the Solemnity of our Holy Father Benedict falls on a Sunday it primes over the normal *Day of the Lord* celebration – and that would be the correct explanation, but I would much prefer that we think of today's memorial of St Benedict not as taking precedence over Sunday, but rather by seeing today's celebration in the context of what every Sunday is all about. To celebrate St Benedict today would have us think of this great saint now living in glory sharing fully in Christ's risen life... and, at the same time, this Sunday celebration could be taken as a reminder to us that all of us, like St Benedict, are called to share in Christ's *risen-ness*. (Using that word *risen-ness* I employ a word we won't find in our dictionary, but I believe this turn of phrase conveys an important spiritual message!). The following words from St Paul's writings draw to our attention that we are called to share in Jesus' risen life: *You are risen with Christ. Christ lives in you. Your real life is now to be found in Christ who is risen from the dead*. Those phrases which to Paul addressed to readers engaged on their earthly pilgrimage are all the more applicable to the saints who now live in glory – St Benedict among their number.

I find it significant that in Benedict's Rule for Monks the chapter in the liturgical code which is devoted to *The manner in which the memorial days of Saints be celebrated* has us use the same basic structure for those celebrations as that which is used for the Divine Office on Sundays. I see this as pointing to our founding father's understanding that the saints in heaven commemorated by the Church on earth should be considered as men and women who, having gone before us marked with the sign of faith, now share fully in the risen life of Christ. Christ's resurrection is the mystery we celebrate each Sunday and we do so remembering that our Christian vocation would have us share in his risen life.

All of us are called to share in Christ's risen life not only one day in the future, when we will pass from our earthly existence to an eternity of glory, but already during our earthly existence, in the here and now of daily life. One spiritual writer speaks of Christians sharing in what he called *Christ's present risen-ness*.

In light of what I have said so far, let us reflect for a few moments on Benedictine life as a call to share in the risen life of Jesus.

I am sure, like me, you have heard monastic life presented as a way whereby a monk shares in the death of Christ. Many words and signs from the monastic tradition could be evoked that point to monks seeking to live their lives as people who have died to life in this world. If, in a sense, it is true that monastic life is a life which shares in Christ's death and that the same could be said of every Christian life. (The rite of baptism signifies this. The candidate is plunged into the water to signify their having died with Christ. They rise from the water in which they were immersed to signify their having risen again with Christ.) But if we were to think of monastic life only in terms of the monk having died to this world's ways, we would be missing the goal of our existence. We must be careful not to fall short in our understanding of monastic life: its real goal is precisely *life*. Monks are called to well and truly *live*!

The last lines of the Prologue of the Rule situate us clearly in the perspective of Christ's Paschal mystery... which must always be taken as a whole. If monks share in Christ's

suffering and death of Christ in the monastery until the end of their days, they do so in order that they may participate in Christ's glorious resurrection.

Every time any Christian thinks of or speaks about sharing in the death of Christ, he or she must also think of and speak about sharing in the Lord's resurrection. St Paul reminds us that *we have died with Christ, so that we may live in Him.*

That we are called to life in Christ is made clear at the heart of the Prologue of the Rule. Therein we read the following words: *Seeking a workman in a multitude of people, the Lord calls out to him and lifts His voice again: Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days? If you hear this and your answer is 'I do', God directs these words to you: If you desire true and eternal life then...* At this point the text then goes on to advise us about how to live our lives in such a way that it can be said of us in all honesty that we are **living... well and truly living!** There can be no doubt that for St Benedict life is the monk's ultimate goal. Life is what we are promised. Those who come to the monastery, those who live in the monastery, are to be men and women who *long for life*. Fullness of life is meant to be our desire.

If the word *Peace* is most often associated with the Benedictine way, this peace is that which the Bible refers to as *Shalom*: that's to say, a peace that is *fullness of life*. It is a peace of well-being; a peace which is the fruit of plenitude of existence.

Those who are well and truly living a Benedictine life will never settle for just half an existence, a partial life. Their goal will be plenitude of being... wholeness. They will aspire to what Jesus calls in John's Gospel *fullness of life*.

It is sad that so many people (sometimes we ourselves) can settle for mere *survival* when what we are called to and offered is *life*. How readily on our bad days we can satisfy ourselves just to *scrape through*, as it were. To *scrape through* is not enough! Benedict talks of the call addressed to those who follow his Rule for Monks as having an aspiration to enjoy *true and eternal life*. Saying that, I am pretty sure he would have had in mind that wonderful little phrase we find on Jesus' lips in His Good Shepherd Discourse: *I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.* (John 10:10.)

Bearing in mind what we have said so far, let us now turn to today's Gospel passage. When I read the few short verses from Matthew's Gospel proposed for our meditation this morning I found myself thinking of what those of us who made Monastic Profession at Bec promised on that day, as well as what we heard promised to us in return. To the Abbot's question: *Que promettez-vous? What do you promise?*, we answered: *L'obéissance, selon la Règle de notre père, St Benoit. Obedience according to the Rule of our holy father Benedict.* In response to that promise we heard the following declaration spoken by the Abbot (a declaration which must be understood as having come not just from the abbot, but from the Lord of Life Himself): *Et moi, je vous promets la vie éternelle. And I promise you eternal life.*

The Rite of Profession and the texts used have been changed slightly in recent years. Now they are more closely aligned to today's Gospel passage.

Those who made Monastic Profession here at Holy Cross Abbey in recent years will have been asked about their resolve to live the vows of monastic life and all that flows from them. To each question put to them about their resolve they will have replied *I am resolved to live the vowed life to which I am called as a monk.* At the end of that part of the Profession Liturgy called *The Examination of the Candidate*, they will have heard the abbot acknowledge and respond to their promised commitment, saying: *In receiving your commitment to do all that is asked of you, we remember Christ's own promise to those who renounce themselves for His sake and that of the Gospel: 'Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for my name's sake will receive a*

*hundred-fold and inherit eternal life.* The point to be retained is that the core of the Lord's response to the commitment monks make to live out their Baptismal vocation in a monastery stands His promise of life. Christian living, monastic life, really is all about *Christ living in us* and our living *in Christ*.

The eternal life we are promised on our Profession day is life that stems from configuration to Christ in the way of obedience... obedience lived as an expression of humble love. Jesus lived for God and of God. This is what He shared with His disciples when He declared: *The Father lives in Me*. As Christian disciples, we are called to imitate Jesus by living for God and of God. When we do this, then, like that great Christian witness of all time, the Apostle Paul, we are able to declare: *I live no longer I alone, but Christ lives in me*. To be able to speak those words in truth, there can be no half measure in our hearts; no holding back; no only giving ourselves up to a point. Our offering must be whole – a holocaust of the heart, an all-encompassing oblation of our lives.

The fifteenth century Dominican mystic Meister Eckhart encourages such wholehearted commitment to Christ, drawing attention to the fact that too many people settle for what is simply a half-measured engagement in the way of life to which they are called. Meister Eckhart warns his readers (that is us today) that too many followers of Jesus (and that can include us) settle to live for God and of God *only up to a point*. He writes: *There are plenty of Christians to follow the Lord halfway, but not the other half. They will give up possessions, friends and honours, but it touches them too closely to disown themselves*. Fundamental to all the questions posed in the Profession Liturgy is this: *Are you ready to leave all things behind, yourself included, out of preferential love for Christ?*

What monks are called to is a life lived entirely for God: a life of complete commitment, a life of total self-giving; a life of full oblation. This is what St Benedict has in mind when he speaks in the Rule of *preferring Christ*. He wants those who follow his Rule for Monks to be able to say that they *prefer nothing whatsoever to the love of Christ...* nothing whatsoever to God's love revealed in Christ. To be a monk is simply to be a Christian. To be a Christian is to be like Christ; it is to be Christ; it is to be an *alter Christus*, another Christ.

When we live in this way – when we live as Christ Himself did – then the limitless power of the Holy Spirit is unleashed in us. That word of Jesus spoken in St John's Gospel really begins to take on meaning, it is given flesh and becomes incarnate in our lives: *You will do even greater things than I do*.

What are these *greater things*? They are the kinds of things St Gregory the Great tells us St Benedict exemplified in his life by his submission to the Lord His God in all humility. In his Second Book of the Dialogues, St Gregory tells us how Benedict was led to display sort of power Jesus demonstrated during His earthly ministry. He shows us Benedict working miracles, reading hearts and minds, helping people experience healing and reconciliation in their lives. Gregory recounts for us many stories which show Benedict serving the gift of divine life in the hearts of all those he encountered. The call I hear from all of this is a call addressed to us to serve the gift of divine life in ourselves and in every person we meet with during our earthly existence. Like St Benedict we are called to serve the Lord's own life in all our brothers and sisters in humanity.

When we come into the experience of life in abundance to which we are called by Christ, then our whole existence resembles that of Jesus. We start living lives of genuine love; lives of humble service; lives of total oblation, lives of unreserved self-giving. And with that we begin to radiate the profound peace Jesus shared with all those with whom He came into contact as He walked the face of this earth, ministering to His contemporaries. Jesus' peace was one that made people live. It was a peace that led others to share in His own life. Jesus

did not just give His disciples some sort of feeling of peace. He made it clear to them that the peace He gave them was His very own. Jesus gave Himself. *It is My own peace that I give you.* Christ's peace, His *Shalom* was – and still is: a share in His very own *fullness of life*.

In our monastic family we speak not only of peace, but of life and peace: ***Vita et Pax***. May that ideal inspire us monks anew on this blessed day! May we be endowed with a fresh outpouring of God's Spirit of life on this feast of St Benedict, so that the kind of vigour we had when we first answered God's call in our lives may be renewed, refreshed, restored within us. May we be strengthened to radiate by our whole way of being the Benedictine ideals of *Vita et Pax*, both ***Life and Peace***.