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Five Marks (Acts 2. 37-39, 43-47)

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Over the past five weeks, we've been exploring the five marks of Benedictus, five ways of being that characterize our life together. I said at the beginning of this series, that throughout Christian history, different communities have focused on particular core marks or values which shape their practice, help them discern their priorities and their direction. I mentioned how in Benedictine monastic communities the Rule of Life is based on three core vows of stability, obedience and conversion of life, how the marks of poverty, humility and joy characterize Franciscan communities, and I spoke of the more recently founded Northumbria community which has discerned 'availability' and 'vulnerability' as being at the heart of its vocation.

Our core commitments at Benedictus, as by now you know very well, are hospitality, silence, discernment, reconciliation and adventure – and we've been exploring each of these values, these ways of being, in some depth. A natural question, however – a question which was asked on our community day – is 'why these particular marks?' Did we just pluck them off the shelf because they seemed like a good idea at a time? What drew us to them? And how are they connected to each other? In this final reflection on the Marks of Benedictus, I want to engage a little with these questions.

Theologically speaking, any Christian community, any church, is not just an organizational unit. It's a body called to participate in what God is doing, and so to manifest or make visible who God is. This means that certain ways of being must characterize all Christian communities. Rowan Williams has said, 'Generosity, mercy and welcome are imperatives for Christians because they are a participation in the divine activity' – they're what God is doing in the world. And they are also imperative because

they communicate the *nature* of God. The church gives glory to God, he says, by reflecting back to God what God is.¹

We see something like this going on in our reading from the Acts of the Apostles. As people are drawn into fellowship with Christ and begin to source their lives in Him (as they ‘receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’), their life together begins to reflect the abundance, non-anxiousness and generosity of God: they share possessions in common, give and receive hospitality, rejoice in the gift of new belonging and of hope. They manifest God – and day by day attract others into this same healing relationship with the divine life.

So there’s some basic experience of who God is which must characterize the life of any community which bears the name of Christ. At the same time, this divine life is also experienced and communicated in a range of particular contexts. This means that God’s gift of healing, wholeness and liberation will show up differently depending on what needs redeeming and freeing. For example, for some people, the journey of salvation includes ceasing to be a doormat and learning to speak out; for others, it involves discovering you can hold your tongue without going out of existence. It means a new freedom *not* always to have to proffer an opinion. Within the broad categories of redemption, freedom, and new life – salvation can take different forms in different lives.

The same can be true at the level of whole societies. Theologian Jürgen Moltmann has said that the Christian life is always related to its time and context and that, as a witness to salvation, ‘the Christian testimony must be related to the sicknesses of the given society *in a healing way*’. So, he suggests: ‘the Reformation’s testimony to freedom of faith acted therapeutically on the public sicknesses of mediaeval ecclesiastical society... [and] the Methodist testimony to personal sanctification acted therapeutically on the sicknesses of the rising industrial society in England’.²

¹ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.255.

² Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A universal affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (London: SCM Press, 1992), p.171.

I find this helpful for understanding the global emergence and hunger for contemplation. When the illness of society includes alienation from creation and our own depths, when it leads to frenzied busyness, anxiety, over-consumption and incessant noise, it's no wonder that the Spirit of God awakens a yearning for stillness, silence and simplicity. I believe that the reawakening of contemplative consciousness is part of the deep movement of the Spirit in our time, and that Benedictus is part of this movement. The particular marks of Benedictus, then, flow out of this, our vocation to be a contemplative church – communicating the possibility of deep healing in our time.

The mark of hospitality connects to the unitive and integrating dimension of the contemplative way. Where so much religion is dualistic and ideological, powered by fear and mechanisms of exclusion, hospitality is about openness and unthreatenedness. Hospitality in a contemplative key doesn't start from preconceived notions of how things should be, or who's allowed. Everything belongs, says Richard Rohr. We don't need to be afraid of what is.

This isn't the same as saying 'anything goes'. The life of faith *is* about transformation, change – the healing of wounds, the redemption of sin. But nothing can be transformed unless we start with what is, unless we start where we are. And healing and fuller life comes ultimately, not by rejecting or excluding, but learning to befriend and embrace what we find difficult in ourselves and one another. Hospitality is a practice of welcoming openness which transforms strangers, wounds and even failure into friends.

Silence is our radical hospitality to God. As we practice the 'silence of the mind', we consent to let go our opinions, judgements and obsessions, habits of complaint, fantasy and self-talk which draws us away from reality and so from God. Through the disciplined practice of silence, we're self-dispossessed in a profound way, simply available for God. As direct corollary, we find ourselves more spacious in relationship

with others and our own depths. Silence makes deep relatedness possible, communion – so silence and hospitality go together.

Discernment, the capacity to live responsively, obediently, from listening, flows likewise out of our silence. We can't hear God unless we begin to detach from all the ways we grasp at reality on our terms, noisily filling up the space with our agenda and demands. Discernment involves the willingness to suspend judgement and wait in unknowing – it's a kind of humility. In a culture so opinionated, so often characterized by arrogant certainty and impatience with vulnerability and waiting, this contemplative practice of discernment is profoundly necessary if the wisdom our world needs is to find expression.

As we deepen our capacity to listen in this way, we become increasingly participants in Christ's ministry of reconciliation. We're practicing attending to the world as God does, seeing things whole, and so become bearers of healing and the possibility of new life. We entrust ourselves more completely to God's promised future, and so are able to commit more whole-heartedly and hopefully to the adventure of the life of faith.

In 1949, Thomas Merton wrote a poem on the contemplative vocation, called 'The Quickening of John the Baptist'. He was thinking primarily of enclosed monastic life, I think, and the imagery of the poem is a bit martial for my taste. Even so, I find something compelling about these lines, where he describes the work of contemplative life:

Beyond the scope of sight or sound we dwell upon the air
Seeking the world's gain in an unthinkable experience.
We are exiles in the far end of solitude, living as listeners
With hearts attending to the skies we cannot understand:
Waiting upon the first far drums of Christ the Conqueror,
Planted like sentinels upon the world's frontier.

What resonates for me, what speaks of our experience at Benedictus, is this notion of 'living as listeners' and of 'seeking the world's gain', 'planted like sentinels upon the world's frontier' – our attention focused on God who comes towards us and calls us on.

The vocation of every Christian community is to participate in what God is doing and so make visible who God is. As a contemplative community in a distracted, violent and anxious world, our practice of open-hearted hospitality and self-dispossessing silence, our commitment to patient discernment, our entrusting ourselves to God's promise of reconciliation and our heeding the call to adventure, constitute and orient who and how we are. I give thanks for our life together. I pray that we may receive grace to be faithful to our calling, and so play our part in the healing and blessing of our world.