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The Monastic Vocation (Matthew 10. 24-31)

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As you know, in the past week Mum and I have been participating in a conference in Rome, at which I've been giving some talks. We were at the Monastic Institute of San Anselmo, a Benedictine monastery and university. The theme of the conference was 'Meditation in the Monastic Tradition' – specifically the question of how meditation and monastic life might contribute to spiritual renewal in the church and the world.

Strangely, coincidentally, today is the feast day of Benedict himself. So this day seems like a doubly propitious time to share with you a little about our monastic adventure, and to reflect on what might be relevant in it for us all.

St Benedict was not the first monk. He lived in the late 5th and early 6th centuries, and by then there'd been a long tradition of monastic life in the Egyptian desert as well as various forms of communal Christian life established in Western Europe. But Benedict's genius was to synthesise and adapt these various traditions in a Rule – the Rule of Benedict – which was to become *the* pattern of monastic life in the West. At San Anselmo still today, a portion of the Rule is read aloud in the dining room every evening before dinner, and the monks still pray at set times during the day in the kind of way Benedict recommended.

This might seem simply anachronistic, but as Laurence Freeman said in one of his talks last week, the secret of Benedict's Rule is that it's not so much a collection of *rules* as a collection of *exceptions* to rules. And that gives it great flexibility as well as enduring relevance. Benedict's point was not to establish a fixed and unbending way of life, but to suggest a structure for living that enables the true work of the monastery. What is that work? It is to 'pray without ceasing' – that is, to be oriented

towards and responsive to God in every aspect of life, so to be a channel of God's love and mercy in the world.

Importantly, this work belongs not only to formally professed monks. Laurence suggested that this monastic archetype is part of each one of us, because in each of us is that desire, that single-minded longing for God (for being in touch with what is most real), which is the heart of the monastic vocation. So this suggests there could be something in Benedict's monastic way that might nourish and renew all our lives, and the life of the world. I've certainly felt enlivened and refreshed by our time at San Anselmo in ways that feel important, and have been reflecting on what there is to learn from this both for me personally and for all of us at Benedictus.

One striking feature about monastic life is the way its priorities are so clearly visible and lived out. The basic priorities are *ora et labora* – prayer and work. A Benedictine monk is supposed to earn his or her own living. Historically this was done by manual labour, but in a context like San Anselmo, the work can include university teaching, studying, and administration. One monk I met over lunch said he was the monastery's 'marketing director'!! So there is work – '*labora*'. And there is prayer – '*ora*'. In the Benedictine tradition, a large part of prayer takes the form of the daily offices or liturgical prayer – the community gathering in chapel at regular intervals throughout the day to sing the psalms, read the Scriptures and pray for the world. Of course, this can become formulaic and ritualistic – and part of the point of our conference was to consider how meditation might be part of the spiritual renewal of monastic prayer itself. Nevertheless, the priority of prayer, time spent with God, is clearly built into the monastic timetable.

This isn't easy – monks too are busy, so having to stop every two or three hours to pray can feel inconvenient, to say the least. But it's powerful – because it keeps reminding the monks of the true end and purpose of their lives. The monastic timetable, the rule, ensures the urgent does not continually overtake the important. And that caused me to wonder what that might mean for me, for us?

There are often things we say are important to us, but that we don't actually make time for, or give priority to. Time for prayer, time with family and friends, time for rest or study or exercise or good works. Observing Benedict's rule being practised by an actual community in daily life has challenged me to look again at how my priorities are actually built into my day, my week, or (more often) how I keep putting them off until there is 'time' – in some alternative future I keep promising myself and which in fact will never come.

A second and related feature of this monastic way of life is its simplicity, its non-complicatedness. Having named its priorities and put them on the program, a monastic community just gets on with it. They don't ask whether they feel like doing certain things, or whether they in fact have time to pray or rest or work or eat. They just do all these things when they say they will. Of course, there's capacity to deal with contingencies – exceptions to the Rule. Benedict talks about how the sick should be treated, or what to do when you're away from the monastery at the time of prayer, and so on. It's not a mechanical obedience, come what may.

And yet – what I began to get a taste for was the paradoxical freedom that comes when I'm no longer consulting my preferences or emotions of the moment in relation to every decision about what to do next. If I have discerned that prayer matters, then when it's time to pray, I pray. And for me I wonder, what would happen if I treated my sincere belief that doing some exercise is a good thing in that way – if I just put it in the schedule and then did it? And the same for rest, for friendship, for reading? If I stopped waiting to have enough time, or for the right time, or to 'feel' like it? I suspect life would get a lot simpler, and also a lot more aligned in practice with what I say actually matters to me.

So what I glimpsed in even this short taste of life under Benedict's rule is that it really can connect us with the deeper and more important dimensions of our selves and with the rhythm of God's life in ours. The emphasis in the rule is on listening and obedience. You listen for what really matters, for what you are really

called to. And then you enact that listening – which is what obedience really means. It's not mechanical subservience, but free self-giving; not doing what you're told, Laurence says, but 'becoming the Word you hear'.

In our gospel reading tonight, Jesus is sending his disciples into the world to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of heaven come near. He tells them to do as he has done – to cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons. He warns them that they will be vulnerable to the same misunderstanding and persecution he suffers. But, he says, they need 'have no fear', because in aligning their lives with his they will be in tune with the life of God, so that nothing can ultimately overcome them. Even though, their lives will not be congruent with the way of the world, they are congruent with what ultimately will be. For, he says, 'nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known ... [So] do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul'.

The monastic life is about seeking to align our lives, in every dimension, with the life and the call of God. For most of us, 'alignment' will not be lived out in a monastic community under a formal rule. Even so, just as for the monks at San Anselmo, it's what happens in our daily life and not just in our ideal life that counts – whether we pray or not, whether we practise friendship or not, exercise or not, gossip or not, overdramatise or not ... and so on. And just as for monastic communities, our community of Benedictus is about encouraging and enabling one another in the way of alignment, helping us to deepen our listening and our love. For as Jesus has shown, the kingdom of God has come near ... and we are invited to live in the light of its truth, energised by its power. Happy St Benedict's Day to you all!