



## AMPLEFORTH ABBEY

### *Talk on Oblates (Easter 2023)*

Without a doubt there seems to be a growing number of people who are drawn to monastic spirituality and I guess this is why you are here! This retreat of course will focus on St Benedict's perspective of monastic spirituality but he would be the first to admit that his is not the only way of living the monastic life, there are others. He himself was much influenced by St Antony of Egypt, St John Cassian and St Basil the Great. Not all are called to be monks and nuns and hence the growing interest among many lay people in the insights that St Benedict can bring to their everyday lives is what attracts I think, and maybe you are here for all sorts of reasons. Many people are drawn to the counter sign that monastic life seems to give in a world today which is driven by competition, consumerism, individualism and hedonism. The fascination for example with the BBC programme 'The Monastery' in 2005 is a good indication that many people are at least curious about monastic life. Monastic life though I think has always attracted people from outside, from those who were not monks. Surely this is behind St Benedict's comment that monasteries are never free from guests i.e. that people were often visiting monasteries right from the beginning of the Benedictine life. And this only grew over the centuries as guesthouses indicate. With this came a growth in monastic style prayer books being issued to help those who wanted some kind of prayer rhythm in their own lives. People have often recognised the value of a more balanced life which is at the heart of St Benedict's monastery, a time for prayer, for reflection but also for work, study and community living. And I think this is even more so today when life seems hectic, when people seemed to be more stressed than ever, when life seems anything but balanced. Monasteries are also becoming aware that they have something to share with others, that what they have is not to be guarded and protected from those outside the monastery, rather the wisdom of St Benedict is for all who seek to follow Christ.

At the heart of Benedict's spirituality is the monk's search for God and this is why he is so appealing because we are all involved in this journey – each of us is called to seek God in our daily lives wherever that may be. Every generation desperately seeks God, struggles with the search for God, for answers and Benedict's spirituality is a way of exploring the questions of life, of faith and of God. St Benedict, writing in the 6<sup>th</sup> century believed that the key to the spiritual life was to simply live our lives to the full, to find God in the everydayness of living. He believed that we needed to live an attentive life, aware of the presence of God even in the smallest of things, in the simplest of things. Monasteries are not very exciting places and for good reason!

We do not join seeking excitement or searching for a spiritual high – God meets us where we are, in our everyday lives. The fact that the Benedictine way of life is still around today suggests that he was on to something. The Rule of St Benedict is over 1,500 years old and was written at a time when the known ‘civilised’ world was imploding. In AD 410 Rome had fallen to the so-called ‘barbarians,’ seventy years before Benedict was born. This was a shocking event for many – Rome was the Eternal City, home of the Emperors who had ruled the known world, a place of learning and administration. Now it was in ruin and tatters. The Church at the time was also going through its own internal struggles, heresies were abounding and pulling the Church apart. There seemed to be a lack of direction on all fronts, no one to turn to. The days of the great leaders like Basil the Great and Augustine of Hippo seemed long past. It was at this time that St Benedict arose and as Esther de Waal put it: ‘there appeared a man who built an ark to survive the rising storm, an ark not made with hands, into which two by two human and eternal values might enter, to be kept until the waters assuaged...’ (Seeking God, page 15).

The Rule of St Benedict continues to draw people today. Some aspects of the Rule have grown and developed over the ages, and different monastic families have grown up but all were inspired by this one man who showed that there was a way out of the chaos, that it was possible to take a different route. Benedict allowed his Rule to be flexible, knowing that it would need to be reinterpreted in every age as long as it held on to the essentials. He was right and here we are today. Today we live in a time of great change, global transitions, a time of anxiety and unrest, of technological and medical breakthroughs – and so we turn once again to the wisdom of Benedict to be our guide for us today. Benedict I am sure would want us to engage with this world around us, not to withdraw from it but to be leaven, to be transforming the world from the inside. Benedict gives us the tools for this – the workshop is our world, our communities, our families, our workplace, our parish.

‘Seeking his 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?* (Ps33:13)  
RB Prol 14&15

Listening and seeking are at the heart of the monastic journey as the opening word of the Rule suggests: Listen! To whom must we listen? To God, but he speaks to us in very varied ways. However, for St Benedict God primarily speaks through his Word, the Scriptures. To embark on the search for God we will need the Word of God at our side, we will need to become intensely familiar with the Word of God, it must continue to be our companion through life. When we read and pray the Word of God we encounter a person, we meet God. The Bible is not just a textbook for life, the Word of God is something alive and active, and through it we will meet God. Like the people of Israel we will encounter the living God in the circumstances

of our lives as we allow the Word of God to penetrate our daily lives, to allow that Word to shed its light on our lives. Hence the importance of *Lectio Divina* for monks – the daily prayerful reading of the Word of God. As we grow in familiarity with the Word of God it becomes a part of us, it becomes the very spiritual air which we breathe as we face the events of each day. As we grow in familiarity with the Word of God we are transformed more and more into God's likeness. We become the Word so to speak to the people we encounter – we become the living Gospel which people will read if we allow God's Word to penetrate our inmost being.

God is always calling us to listen again and again, to listen afresh each day hence the importance of Psalm 94 at the start of the day – O that today you would listen to his voice. God's call is a gentle invitation to grow in love of him and others as we journey in this life, it is not a demand or a threat. And if we respond positively then we know that God will walk with us throughout the journey just as he did with the Israelites in the wilderness. The journey then at times will take us into the wilderness, hence why the desert was so important to the early monks, it was a place where we could encounter the still small voice of the Lord, away from the noise of the towns and cities. We too then must enter the desert space if we are to respond to St Benedict's call to listen, to listen with the ear of the heart he says. There is a difference then between hearing and listening. We can hear things but not be paying any attention to what is being said, listening with the ear of the heart asks us to listen deeply, we must listen to God's Word with our hearts so that we can put what we really hear into practice. Yes, there is an important link between listening and acting as Jesus himself reminds us. It is those who hear the Word of God and put it into practice who are truly children of God. This is the journey of a lifetime and so we must not lose heart, we must begin each day anew and refreshed. We must not harden our hearts especially if the road seems long and arduous at times, because some days or maybe even weeks, it will seem a real struggle. We are not making this journey alone though, the strong kind of monks for St Benedict were the Cenobites, those who live in community. We need the support of others on this journey we are on, this search for God. We will need encouraging as well as challenging as we make this journey.

The Lord invites us to enter within the quiet of our own hearts, where we try to listen to the voice of the Lord within, to become aware that God is within, not out there somewhere. Alongside this though we walk the road with others. For people like me I have come here to this monastery and seek God within this particular community. For each of us we need to find that community which will support us along the road. Ideally this would be within the local Christian community, our parishes or other organisations. Sadly this is not always the case, but within parishes there may be smaller groups, like a prayer group or a *lectio* group, which can give us this support. It may be there is an ecumenical group which can give support or a

group for Christian meditation. It may be a group which is involved with the social issues within your area which is a way of living out the Gospel for you. Some are attached to particular monasteries and communities, some become Oblates, others feel a spiritual connection with a place or community. Many come here because they feel it offers them support and encouragement even if they don't know the monks personally, but they sense here a place of prayer, an encounter with God. The truth is that few of others could make this journey alone. There are times where we feel discouraged and downhearted, and we need others to support us, to help us to keep going. And at other times I will be the one who needs to offer support, to be encouraging for others. It does work both ways. Balance is the key once again. We need time alone, for silence and prayer, so that we may become sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit deep within us. We need to encounter God within so that we may grow in our relationship with God. We also need time together, for mutual support and upbuilding. We need time to pray together, to listen to God speaking through others. This can be much more challenging of course. In many ways the art of listening is at the heart of a Benedictine community. Benedict knew all too well that it is not always easy to listen attentively. Most of us if we are honest already have clear mindsets and ideas how things should be done. And often that is how it should be – we can be inspired by a vision of how things can grow and develop, we might be asked to come up with ideas. And I don't think St Benedict would have any problem with that, what he finds difficult is when we choose to hold on to our views and ideas obstinately. Benedict believes that there should always be some level of openness within a community so that we are willing to change or adapt after hearing differing viewpoints in order to come to the best solution which is not necessarily mine. Yes, listening is not always easy but essential if we are to take the road that leads to life. St Benedict says that at first the road is 'bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.' (Prol 48-49)