



**THE RULE OF SAINT BENEDICT
AND ITS IMPACT ON
LIFE IN THE EVERYDAY WORLD**

**TWO TALKS
for
GLOUCESTER CATHEDRAL'S**

R U L E O F L I F E

GROUP

Saturday, 19th May 2018
Prinknash Abbey Monastery Shop & Cafe
Meeting Room

TALK ONE:

Brief Sketch of the Origins of Christian Monasticism

WELCOME & INTRODUCTION

Iwould like to welcome you all to Prinknash on behalf of Abbot Martin and the community, and to say how delighted I am to be able to share the riches of Saint Benedict with you today.

Apart from anything else, this is a new and particularly fitting initiative in ecumenical collaboration between Gloucester Cathedral inasmuch as we are at this moment sitting on land that was, in 1096, gifted to Abbot Serlo of St Peter's Abbey, Gloucester (who died on this day in 1104) by the Giffard family of Brimpsfield, the beginning of a long story.

In this first talk, I would like to set before you a very brief sketch of monastic history. The purpose of this is to show us where what we might call our “Benedictine impulse” came from, and to drop a few hints as to where it might lead us in the future. As is often said in personal therapy sessions, “You have to know where you come from to know who you are and where you are going”.

Monasticism—that way of life by which an individual devotes their life to seek God in solitude away from normal bustle of human affairs—is one of the oldest spiritual impulses the world has known. It is found in some form in all the great world religions, although principally among practitioners of the Hindu, Buddhist and Christian faiths. The very fact of its being

so old a phenomenon should encourage us to enter into dialogue with it; to ask the question, “What is this saying?” “What is this practice offering to the world?” and why?

Flight or Mission?

The monastic call is essentially to *flee from* the world—a concept that Christians find both fascinating and perplexing. While we can readily recognise the need to shun the “kosmos” (world)—the web of sin, ambition and deceit that makes up a lot of human transactions—we yet feel impelled *towards* the world in compassion and in ministry, following our Redeemer: “God loved the world so much, that he gave his only Son”.

The monk or nun retires from the world (sometimes in a mind-bogglingly ascetic way to very remote caves or desert locations) in order that he or she may come to grips with the “demons” (real and imaginary) that assail the world, especially that “world” that is in his or her own heart. They retire from “life”, in order to touch the source of life; they dig a well in the desert, to slake their thirst for spiritual wisdom.

The paradox is that many of the great monastics—Antony, Arsenius, Mary of Egypt, Syncletica, even Simeon Stylites on his sixty-foot-high column—drew more and more people—“the world”—towards them, the more they sought to live removed from human contact. Saint Benedict's own words may give us a clue as to why this was. He writes in the Prologue to his Rule:-

as we progress in faith and in monastic

life, our hearts shall become enlarged, and we shall run with unspeakable sweetness of love in the way of God's commandments.

Was it, perhaps, the “enlarged heart” of the monastic—that capacity for empathy, compassion and wisdom that comes from the Holy Spirit—that draws people to seek them out, to make that often difficult and dangerous journey out into the wilds of the desert in order to find them, and find peace for themselves?

But the “water” that the monastic finds in the desert is not necessarily visible to others; the crowds of people that are being helped by the ascetic journey of discovery of God are not always frequenting the monastery or desert in a physical sense. Official documents about the monastic and contemplative life refer to a “hidden apostolic fruitfulness” which is all the more potent for being unknown, hidden, or even misunderstood. The Russian tradition speaks of the monk as a “magnet” drawing down from God a wave of compassion and pity for the needy world.

I shall hope to say more on this paradox “flight from the world v. ministry to the world” when we come to the second talk, this afternoon, where will look at the practical application of the Rule of Saint Benedict to our everyday lives. Meanwhile, please try to hold that paradox in the back of your minds as we explore this phenomenon a little deeper.

A root question perhaps for us all would be:-

If this monastic phenomenon requires me to separate myself, in some sense, from human contact—to be “alone with the Alone”—how far can I share myself

with people “outside” without emptying my call of its value?”

I think we shall find that this is no idle question, for the answer to it will affect our approach both to our own personal journey, to community, and to ministry.

ORIGINS OF CHRISTIAN MONASTICISM

Asia

We do not have time to study the great Hindu and Buddhist monastics in two short talks like these, But we should nevertheless note that the monastic phenomenon really began with them, or even before them and is, therefore, very much more ancient (perhaps by several thousand years) than Christianity itself. The *sannyasi*, the guru, the wandering holy man-- all these are forms of monastic life that are found even today, and bring many blessings of peace to the surrounding Asian culture.

Judaism

As as far a Judaism and Christianity are concerned, we know of a kind of monastic community, the Essenes, who lived in Palestine just before and during the time of our Lord, and there are even those who think of John the Baptist as having been a member of one of those ascetic communities.

The Essenes were noted for a life of asceticism, and were very likely connected with a school of scripture study which consisted of copying out the scriptures on parchment, fragments of which have survived to our own day.

But they were also known for their prophetic and apocalyptic mission. It is possible, too, that, for some of them at least, there was a political, and even a militaristic note to their life which we today, living in a world of religion-fuelled terrorism, would feel uncomfortable with.

But, that aside, the very fact of their living separately out in the wilds, and in an ascetic manner, combined with an intense life of study of the biblical texts, meant that they were seen both as a criticism of contemporary society, and, on a positive note, a reminder to the people of Israel as a whole, of values that had been lost in the ups and downs of fidelity and infidelity, exile and return, that have their parallels, of course, in our less dramatic spiritual lives. These ascetics were, above all, a sign of hope in the imperturbable stability of God's loving promises, in the midst of chaos.

This last point is something that all people who practise a rule of life could aspire to: to be a sign of hope in the utter faithfulness of God who, despite the unfaithfulness of human beings, always remains loving and attentive towards the human family.

HOW DID CHRISTIAN MONASTIC LIFE BEGIN?

How then, did the Christian form of monastic life come into being?

One *theory* (by no means the only one) has it that, for the first three centuries of the Christian era, Christians had enough to do trying to live in fidelity to

the Lord while they faced persecution and even death for their faith. But as the Church moved further and further towards centre stage (in the middle of the third and early fourth centuries AD); as it became acceptable, respectable and perhaps a little too comfortable in society, there was (so the theory suggests) a lessening of fervour among Christians and, as a reaction, a Spirit-led movement among Christian zealots to try to redress the balance in a somewhat artificial way, moving away from the temptations of worldly life in towns, and taking flight into the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Syria and elsewhere, there to live in prayer, solitude and penance.

In our own day, one view of monastic life might see it as a privileged way of living out the Gospel in its fullness and, crucially, one of the few ways of experiencing *full* Christian community in our rather diverse, fragmented and secularised church. (I'm aware that such a view might spark a lot of comment). Monasticism, while hopefully not taking on airs and graces above its station, can be seen as a necessary complement to what we might call the "everyday church"; a movement of the Spirit that ensures the Gospel is proclaimed—to the monastics themselves first, and, by the depth of their experience in Christ, to the whole world. This points to an important truth that John Paul II once hinted at, talking to a group of religious: "Do not be so intent on the work of the Lord that you forget the Lord of the work". Unless my own heart is clean, and God-centred, I will be quite incapable of useful ministry to others.

Monasticism attempts to achieve this Gospel-

fuelled life by a sort of non-stop recitation of the Bible, in church, in the refectory, in the chapter, and in private *lectio divina*. In a world that has become willingly or unwillingly deaf, lest the Word be not heard, the monastic saturates his or herself in it. Thus, they hopefully become Word, become Gospel, for other people.

The First Practitioners

So, who were the first practitioners of this monastic way of life?

Paul of Thebes, b. 227AD, is generally considered to be the first hermit who went out into the Egyptian desert. He was followed by **Antony of Egypt**, around the year 250 AD. We do not know exactly how many hermits there were living in the desert around this time: estimates vary from hundreds to thousands. But it was certainly a group substantial enough to have been recorded in history. From later sources, we know that they lived alone, or in small groups, as far as possible at a remote distance from towns and cities; they practised an ascetic life, eating little, working with their hands to provide daily bread, and reciting the psalms continually, psalms they would learn by rote. They did not have “liturgy” in any recognisable modern sense, and they attended Eucharist in a parish setting when possible, which might have been as little as once a year, and that at Easter or thereabouts. So they were strangers not merely to the world, but also, in some sense, to the local church, though, in another sense, right at the heart of it.

Memorisation of Texts

Here we can digress for a moment to emphasise the importance of knowing texts off by heart, something that our world of books, photocopies, and Google has made rather difficult for us. We no longer need to memorise things, which also means that, to some extent, we never learn things properly, never “interiorise” and digest things.

This practice of memorisation, started by our Asian brothers and sisters, continued among medieval monastics and would have been practised by our forefathers in Gloucester Abbey itself, so that, for a choir service, all that was needed (generally in the middle of the choir on a huge lectern) was a large illuminated Antiphonal which contained merely the antiphons which are the “pepper and salt” that give flavour to the psalm that they accompany, going before and after each psalm and providing a key to the musical tone to which it would be sung. The monks would have known at least the Psalter off by heart. We know that at Rouen Cathedral, right up until the French Revolution, it was forbidden to the Canons to have any kind of Psalter, because they were supposed to know the psalms.

But we have jumped forward a thousand years into the High Middle Ages!

Let us return to the desert, where, in about the year 320, **Pachomius**, influenced by Antony, decided that the time was ripe to organise individual monks into

communities with some kind of formal structure. Armand Veilleux has provided us in recent decades with a three-volume study of the institutes of Pachomius. He seems to have instilled an almost military discipline into his monks, who lived in barrack-like buildings and may even have numbered several thousand.

About the same time, **John Cassian**, born in what is now part of Romania and Bulgaria, visited the monks in Palestine and Egypt, and brought their wisdom to the West by founding a monastery at Lerins in southern France. Cassian's "Institutes" and "Conferences" are well-known and readily available texts, cited by Saint Benedict. The importance of Cassian is that he brought the wisdom of the East (Egypt, Palestine) into the West.

Around the same time, in the East, **Basil of Caesarea** and **Gregory Nyssa** were organising monastic communities in Cappadocia along similar lines, but with a more social aspect and a concern for the poor. Basil is known to have criticised the hermit life with the phrase, "Whose feet will you wash?", leaving us with a healthy tension that still plays itself out in monastic circles: doesn't living in community, isolated from the world, lead you to be too introspective, ignorant of the needs of the poor outside the monastic enclosure? It is a salutary question.

Saint Benedict

What emerges from this, is that Saint Benedict came into a ready-made tradition. The drop-out student from Nursia came to the valley of the Aniene near

Subiaco, Italy, around the year 500AD where we now know from recent studies, there were considerable numbers of hermits and monastics, of both Greek and Latin traditions. So it is fair to assume that the person who formed him in monastic life, named by Gregory the Great in Book Two of his *Dialogues* as Romanus, was probably from one of these already existing communities.

Also prior to Benedict there existed a very rigid and strict rule known as **The Rule of the Master** which has in the past been attributed to Benedict himself. Certainly, he lifted parts of his own rule straight out of it. Most experts now consider it to be the work of another person entirely.

Benedict's greatest overall contribution to the monastic life is that, by his wise experience encapsulated in his Rule, he made it possible for ordinary mortals to attempt to live in community. His insistence on the vow of stability (which tied the monk to one particular community and prevented him from wandering from place to place)—something that was the cause of scandal in the West but a much revered form of life in the East—gave rise to a stable and sane growth of moderate monasticism, which would eventually take over the whole of old Europe.

Benedict, who devotes about a quarter of his Rule to the daily liturgy, adapted the choral services from the primitive Roman Rite, giving them a new arrangement of the psalter, and adding Ambrosian hymns. With Benedict, we see the beginning of “monastic liturgy” properly so called, with its emphasis on singing all the

psalms in one week, and reading the scriptures in a continuous thread, *lectio continua*; all this in contrast to the so-called “Cathedral” tradition of popular singing of only certain user-friendly psalms, accompanied progressively by the ceremonial use of lights, incense and processions. These two strands would cross-fertilise one another throughout the Middle Ages.

Benedict's Rule would gradually become the basis for most forms of religious life, not least in our own country. His idea of the Chapter is behind our idea of Parliament; his Refectory arrangements have been inherited by Oxbridge Colleges; and it does not take much imagination to see that our Cathedrals, several of which were run by monks before the 16th century, are the inheritors of the daily choir offices. Thus, the Benedictine life goes on; and will yet further develop as groups like yourselves live out that tradition in a way that is both new and old.

CONCLUSIONS TO THE FIRST TALK

1. *There is something monastic in every human being, and we neglect it at our cost.*
2. *We are invited to learn from the Mothers and Fathers of the monastic past. They speak to us still.*
3. *In the words of Meister Eckhart, 15th century German mystic, we are invited to “Go out, while remaining within”.*
4. *Our mission to the world depends on facing up to the “demons” we have within ourselves, else we risk merely projecting ourselves on to others. Monastics of the past can help us with this.*
5. *What appears most selfish in monastic asceticism, can in fact be most pastoral, helpful and outgoing.*
6. *Where is my personal desert, my waste space where I face only God?*



TALK TWO:

Practical Application of (parts of) the Rule of Saint Benedict to Christian Daily Life in the World

A WORD OF CAUTION

Today there are many books showing how the Rule of Saint Benedict can exert a benign and salutary influence on the life of a layperson living in the world. There has been a real burgeoning of lay Benedictine spirituality in recent years, for which we rightly rejoice and give thanks. Part of this is fuelled by the growth of lay oblates, or groups like yourselves, a development that has, in turn, exercised a reciprocal and beneficent effect on the Benedictine Order, the monks and nuns, as a whole.

Joan Chittister, the famous American Benedictine sister, speaking to the 4th International Congress of Benedictine Oblates in Rome, November 2017, even said that the future of Benedictine Oblates (i.e. of lay people trying to live in the spirit of the Rule) will be the determining factor in the future of the Benedictine Order as a whole. She has been criticised for saying it, as if it were claiming for the “wagging tail” something that belongs, as it were, to the “dog” itself, but I believe that she meant, not that committed celibate monks and nuns will no longer be found, but that the palpable influence of the Benedictine spirit *on the world at large* (in a way comparable to its influence on the Middle

Ages), will come principally from *lay* associates living *outside* monasteries. It is a challenging and sobering thought, as those same monasteries dwindle and close down, in the old world of Europe.

The Rule, then, has been, and is still, a mightily influential document.

But we need also to admit to a difficulty: The Rule is a problematic text for us in the 21st century. It prescribes, for instance, the whipping of boys of the cloister who misbehave (and corporal punishment is also mentioned for adults). The Prologue of the Rule speaks of how God, like an angry father, might want to disinherit us, his recalcitrant children, who refuse to obey him. The domestic and hygienic arrangements of the Rule, though relatively liberal by the standards of the day, would not measure up to our requirements. Guests are not to be spoken to. Laughter is forbidden. Our deeds are constantly being reported to God by the “grassing” Angels, who seem to be a sort of celestial secret service in RB! Benedict describes the monk's task in military terms (“take up arms to fight for the true king, Christ”) words that might make us uncomfortable.

These, and similar difficulties will remind us, as we pursue the very necessary task of studying the Rule of Saint Benedict, of the vast cultural gap between 6th century Italy and our own day.

Read, then, with caution; read with discernment; read with the help of an experienced guide; chew well on the sometimes rather tough meat of Benedict's prescriptions, in order to extract from it real, timeless

goodness that so many generations have found, over the last fifteen hundred years.

AN ARBITRARY SELECTION

In what follows, I shall discuss just a few themes chosen arbitrarily from the Rule's 73 chapters. In your own reading, you will no doubt encounter other ideas that fascinate, invigorate, or perhaps even confound you. It is right that we should each have our own approach.

LISTENING/OBEDIENCE

The very first word of the Rule is *ausculta*. “Listen, my child, to the precepts of the master and incline the ear of your heart”. The whole of the monastic system of values revolves around the subject of listening. We have to learn a new skill. This is listening with the heart—it is more like loving. In secular terms, the model for this kind of listening is *falling in love*—with the caution that we are not here speaking about emotional highs; it is a question, rather, of *wanting to be with someone* (God, in this instance) and being willing to sacrifice anything and everything, in order to enjoy that person's company.

Those of you who have been or are in lifetime commitments of one kind or another will know that, in order for my heart to listen—which is what I both deeply want to do and yet find myself unable to do—there has to be a kind of unclogging of the heart: the

removal of those things, akin to dead leaves, that are blocking communication, stunting growth; those alternate paths—the leaves—might be fascinating, but they are at best an unnecessary distraction.

Letting ourselves be liberated, bit by bit, probably over a period of many years, from these noisy and intrusive alternatives, is what we are all called to do, so that our heart may become free to listen, and to love.

For Benedict, we have gone astray from God simply by *not* listening, by what he calls “the sloth of disobedience”. Bearing in mind that the root of our word “obedience” is the Latin verb *audire*, with the maximising prefix *ob-*, we can see that obedience, far from being the sort you find on a military parade ground—I say jump, and you say, “How high”?--is instead a deep form of listening; a listening so intense that we actually put into action what we have heard. How much better daily life would be if people at large could cultivate this kind of obedience.

THE DEIFYING LIGHT

The theme of light also comes into to the early part of the Rule where Benedict invites us to its “deifying” potential. This light, that will help us to share in the very life of God, comes to us from several sources, principally from the Holy Scriptures, which we will meditate on day by day, from the teaching of the spiritual father (the Abbot) and from the experience of life in the community under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

THE SCHOOL OF THE LORD'S SERVICE: sharing by patience in Christ's suffering

We are at school again, the school of the Lord's service; and that implies that we recognise our need to listen, to learn, to change our behaviour, to be corrected. We are, if you like, learning to read again—not books, but our life experiences.

The big problem many people have in the world outside (and many monks have on the “inside”) is the *inability to read aright life's experiences*; that is, to detach themselves from life's hurts (or sometimes, even from life's blessings) and look at things from a distance; with the unfortunate result that, far from assigning the praise and the blame where they really belong, they turn instead to blaming everyone and everything except the real culprit, or perhaps praise themselves to the exclusion of everyone else.

We all do this, to a greater or lesser extent; and the reason we do is, essentially, because it is far too scary for us to question our own bases, our principles of behaviour; if we did, our whole world might come toppling down over our ears, and nothing would be where it was before. It is so much easier to sit with our bit of comfortable darkness, thinking it is glowing with light, rather than allow Benedict's “deifying light” to penetrate the hidden places and light them up. It is much “safer”, we feel, to project our problems on to other people or “circumstances”, rather than to contemplate an alternative explanation.

In a magnificent passage at the end of the Prologue of his Rule, Benedict lays out the essentially

educational task of monasticism, when he says:-

“Therefore must we establish a school of the Lord's service; in founding which we hope to ordain nothing that is harsh or burdensome. But if, for good reason, for the amendment of evil habit or the preservation of charity, there be some strictness of discipline, do not be at once dismayed and run away from the way of salvation, of which the entrance must needs be narrow. But, as we progress in our monastic life and in faith, our hearts shall be enlarged, and we shall run with unspeakable sweetness of love in the way of God's commandments; so that, never abandoning his rule but persevering in his teaching in the monastery until death, we shall share by patience in the sufferings of Christ, that we may deserve to be partakers also of his kingdom. Amen.”

VARIOUS TENDENCIES IN MONASTIC LIFE:

Sarabaites & Gyrovagues

Chapter 1 of the Rule speaks of the four kinds of monks. At first reading, this seems bizarre. We can recognise cenobites (monks and nuns living in community); and most of us know what a hermit is; but what about “Sarabaites” and “Gyrovagues”? Weird terminology for odd people, we may think.

Today, we are not likely to find monks or nuns wearing such labels; but it can be helpful to think of Sarabaites and Gyrovagues as two tendencies that,

despite the exotic names, do exist very commonly among us. The **Sarabaites**, says Benedict:

“have not been tested, as gold in the furnace, by any rule or by the lessons of experience, and are as soft and yielding as lead...They live in twos or threes, or even singly, without a shepherd, in their own sheepfolds and not in the Lord's. Their law is their own good pleasure: whatever they think of or choose to do, that they call holy; what they like not, that they regard as sinful”

It doesn't take much imagination to be able to see ourselves here: “their law is their own good pleasure”, and “what they like not, that they regard as sinful”. It is the tendency, found in human beings the world over, *to canonise our own preferences* as if they were some kind of sacred precept. I become the determining factor in ruling me.

Put like that, we can recognise that this is simply the way of the world, the way of business, the way of politics. But it is the very antithesis of the monastic way, where I submit to an authority *outside* of myself. In practical terms, a layperson who does not have an abbot readily to hand, will check out regularly at least his or her major decisions with some kind of spiritually-minded person. For our lay Oblates, here at Prinknash, there is a monastic community to turn to. You, on the other hand, have the Cathedral, with its very welcoming and pastorally-minded clergy and staff. At any rate, some kind of external check is needed; not every five minutes (we don't want to encourage scrupulosity) but

at regular intervals. So that, in the words of the hymn:

*The dearest idol in my heart,
Whate'er that idol be;
Grant me to tear it from Thy Throne
And worship only Thee.*

The **Gyrovague** is a variation on this theme. Here the difficulty is that he cannot complete anything, cannot commit to one particular place or way of life. He is “ever roaming and never stable”. Benedict will counteract this tendency with his vow of stability, which links a monk to a particular community; but we can all see that human beings have a general tendency to wander, to not complete any particular task, to dabble in this or in that; and when we get bored, or the going gets tough, we move on.

To allow ourselves to be confronted on this level, to make a stand in a world that is afraid of commitment, is a very powerful witness. This is, I feel, what you are called to do in embracing Benedictine spirituality. Finding a way to practice stability will be one of the challenges you face.

AUTHORITY FIGURES AND THE USE OF AUTHORITY

If you studied Latin at school, you will know that *auctoritas* (authority) comes from the Latin verb *augeo* which means, “I increase”. Authority, then, is meant essentially to be a service of fostering growth among the people of God, rather than a heavy weight imposed

from on high. Benedict, coming from an authoritarian Roman background, seems nevertheless to be very much aware of this.

If you read nothing else in the Rule, please read Chapters 2 and 64 on the Abbot, and Chapter 31 on the Cellarer of the monastery. Here you find wisdom, balance, discretion, and a great deal of growth promotion. Every head teacher, head of a company, anyone in any kind of leadership role, would profit from studying them.

In Chapter Two, for instance, Benedict tells the Abbot to remember that he is a “father”, standing in the place of Christ. That should be enough to frighten anybody who takes on a role of authority. They are not the final arbiter or supreme court; Christ is above and beyond them, looking on, and looking for an account from him of profit and loss. The abbot has to “infuse his teaching into the hearts of his disciples”, not hammer it in with blows. He shows what is to be done mostly by his behaviour, but also by his words and teaching, and must not let his behaviour contradict his teaching. He should be careful not to have favourites. He must adapt himself to each one of his disciples, now using severity, now using kindness, so that he brings about true growth in the spirit—a very arduous task; especially so if the community, already experienced and set in their ways, are not really open to being changed or to doing new things. The abbot will often find this very discouraging. He must seek first the Kingdom of God, as the gospel says, and not complain about lack of means.

The Cellarer, the man in charge of the material administration of the monastery, will take special care of the poor, the sick, and guests, seeing in them the presence of Christ. He will, says Benedict, “be like a Father to the whole community”, providing them with what is necessary without becoming arrogant about it; but at the same time, he will not be a “push-over”, he will know “how to refuse an improper request charitably”.

FORMAL and INFORMAL PRAYER

Benedict devotes about a quarter of his Rule to precise instructions about how the choral office is to be performed. A modern psychologist might find him a little obsessive/compulsive about this: what Psalms are to be said, and where; what is to be read; whether there should be antiphons or not; and so on.

But his overall attitude is one of reverence. We must supplicate the Lord God of all things with all humility and devotion, and we must do it frequently: seven times a day, and even that is but little, compared with the Desert Fathers, he says, who sang 150 psalms in one day. There is a sense that one must just “do it”, come what may. Benedict inherited a framework that was already in place in his time, the hours of Vigils, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline.

By contrast, prayer in community (and by that he means, I think, silent prayer after the Work of God, as he calls it, is finished) should be “very short”. The

monk who wishes, at other times, to pray, should simply enter the Oratory and pray (no long treatises about methods, here) and he should do so with “tears, and fervour of heart” knowing that we shall be heard for our purity of heart and devotion, not for our many words—a bit of a contrast, you might think, to the “many words” that have been spoken in the office itself, even if those words are largely from the Bible!

SILENCE

Monks should practice silence at all times, says Benedict, but especially at night. I suspect we are not very good at that, during the day at least, though at night we still have the Greater Silence, where we do not speak at all from the end of Compline until Mass next day. And the purpose of all this is not to be anti-social—quite the reverse: Benedict knows that true communication can only be born out of the reverence that I engender in my heart for the other person, something that I can only bring to birth in silence and prayer. Superficial talk costs lives! There is, as you no doubt already appreciate, a great deal to be said for silence, especially in a world where superficial communication (“Am just enjoying a sandwich and a pint with friends” of Facebook and elsewhere) abounds, in sometimes very destructive ways.

HUMILITY

Benedict devotes a whole long chapter (7) to Humility, something that we will, hopefully, explore more fully

next time you come to visit—says he, rather presumptuously expecting there to be a “next time”! So here I will only mention the gist of the chapter.

I think Christians in general, at least in the West, have a whole range of attitudes towards humility, ranging from the seriously harmful to the carelessly casual. Humility is not—though it is often thus portrayed—a beating yourself up and a telling yourself how bad you are in the sight of God and humankind (and, as an aside: how easy it is to tell yourself that you never do this, and yet find, in practice, that you do!).

Humility does matter (to quote the title of a book you may have seen, by American Benedictine sister Meg Funk). The spiritual life is not just an affirmation of self but neither is it self-flagellation. It is somewhere in the middle: seeing oneself as one really is, in the sight, and in the grace, of God: “miserable offenders” (to use BCP's phrase, with its 16th century use of the word “miserable” which does not, as you know, mean “down in the dumps” but “wretchedly poor”; miserable offenders who are infinitely loved by God, the jealous lover, who will take no refusal and pursues us “down the nights and down the days and down the labyrinthine ways...” to quote Francis Thompson's “Hound of Heaven”. When the light shines through the window that we thought we had so zealously cleaned, says Saint John of the Cross, we begin to see all the dirt that we had rather not see.

“Welcoming the dirt” might be said to be a Benedictine task!

Well, my dears, these are my thoughts! I hope they have been helpful to you and, as I conclude I make the prayer that appears on the lips of our Sovereign Lady Queen Elizabeth, when she opens Parliament: "I pray that the grace of God may light upon your deliberations".

Thank you for listening!