

St Benedict
(Proverbs 2: 1-9 / Matthew 9:25-27)
11.07.2018

Peter said to Jesus: What about us? We have left everything and followed you.

How important to hold the whole of that Scripture verse together! We must surely be on our guard when it comes to Peter's initial words, for there is a risk for us to hear his question in a way that is simply not correct. The danger would be to think of Peter's query in what I can only call a '*What's in this for me?*' attitude. That should not be how we approach life and certainly not the way whereby we situate ourselves when it comes to ministering in the Lord's name. A readiness to leave everything, commitment to discipleship with all its requirements, a firm engagement to follow Jesus wherever that may lead us... all this is fundamental to a life of Christian service which, if genuine, will exclude egoism.

Very clearly as disciples of the Lord we should not think in self-centred terms. Our whole attitude in regard to service in the Christian community should be that of the One we have been called to follow: Christ-Jesus. If the Master could say that He stood among His disciples as one who served, so should we; if He showed by His whole way of being that He gave of Himself without counting the cost, so should we; if He made a free-will offering of His life so that others might live, so should we.

Jesus' concern in life was not about Himself, but others. For this reason, very appropriately, He has been referred to as *the man for others*. If Dietrich Bonhoeffer used that phrase to describe Jesus this was the standard by which he tried to live his own life: being there with and for others, giving himself in the service of others. The standard of self-giving love should also be ours. I wonder if it is. Are we men and women for others?

On this day when we celebrate St Benedict, as Benedictine monks, we are invited to reflect on the meaning of our life. We would do well to ask ourselves whether or not we live our monastic vocation as the Lord would have us do: *not for ourselves alone, but for Him and because of Christ* for all our brothers and sisters in the wider Church and indeed the whole of humanity.

Vatican II invites us to see our life as *the humble and noble service of the Divine Majesty*. What the Council emphasises here is that monastic life is all about loving service. This leads me to ask once again whether or not we can truly echo Jesus' statement about being *a servant to all*.

All Christians are called to give their lives for others as Jesus gave His, but *a fortiori* those of us who are called to live our Christian discipleship in a monastery. As monks we should manifest by our whole way of being that we are generous servants – men ready to give our all, people willing to offer our lives so that others may live their lives to the full. Our monastic Profession engages us to live what St John-Paul called *unbounded generosity in the image of Jesus*. Is that what we live? Are we recognisable as men ready to give our all, without holding anything back for ourselves?

We will only ever be able to live our lives in *unbounded generosity* by giving them totally, placing them entirely in the hands of One to whom we dare to say in all confidence and trust: *Do with me as You will*.

The key to living in an attitude of *unbounded generosity* is to keep our eyes fixed upon Jesus; it is to keep our hearts rooted in His loving heart. If we are to be strengthened, if we are to be able to do whatever is asked of us, then we must see that the work we are engaged in is not

our work alone, but *God's work* in and through us: what St Benedict calls *Opus Dei, the work of God*. (While the Rule of St Benedict uses the term *Opus Dei* to speak specifically of the Divine Office, we must remember that the entire monastic tradition – Benedict included here – also uses the term *Opus Dei* to refer to all the constituent elements of our way of life.)

If we are to give without counting the cost, making *a living sacrifice of our whole being* as Paul puts it writing to the Romans, retaining nothing for our personal advantage, then we must turn to Christ-Jesus for the grace we require to do what is asked of us. We must draw inspiration and force from the thought that Jesus left everything for us; including that to which He could have clung: *His equality to God*.

Jesus' love was certainly not self-centred love; it was self-emptying love. Jesus' love was other-centred love!

Blessed Angela of Foligno could say: *If any of God's children were to know and taste divine love (...) they would give themselves completely to Him*. A little further on in her *Sayings* she makes the following bold statement: [Such a person] *would love this God of love, to the point of being completely transformed into the God-man*.

I would add that those who are *completely transformed into the God-man*, naturally become men and women for others.

The point I want to stress this morning is that if any of us is to live what is asked of us as Christians – and *a fortiori* as monks – then we must live *in Christ*, allowing Christ to live in us.

This was clearly Benedict's vision in his *Rule for Monks*. The Rule constantly underlines for us the importance of living *in Christ*, seeing Christ in everyone around us and in everything that befalls us, while showing those around us by our way of whole way of being that Christ lives in us.

When others look at us, can they, do they see Christ alive in us? This is a fundamental question. It touches the very essence of the monastic charism in the Church which we could say is to make Christ present in the world, bearing witness to the primacy of God in all things. How important it is for us to remember that all those around us are called to see Christ in us: Christ reaching out to them and loving them through us. But that is not all. Again and again Benedict's *Rule for Monks* makes the point that there must be a two way flow of grace in all our relationships. Christ is present in the community of all those who are gathered in His name; He is there with us in each and every person with whom we are called to share our lives. In a special way we are to see Christ in those who come from outside to the monastery. Christ comes to us through our guests in a privileged manner. Bearing this in mind, we must recall that if Christ wants to minister in and through us, in regard to all the we are called to love and serve, by the same token, He also wants us to recognise that He desires to reach out to us lovingly in and through those who seek to show us their care and esteem; those who strive to serve us in the diverse ways the Lord inspires them to do so.

This last point is an important one.

It can be so much harder for many of us to allow ourselves to be loved than to show love. It can be a real challenge for some of us to accept that the Lord wants to reveal His care and consideration for us through the cordial affection others manifest in our regard.

However hard this may be for us to accept, it is vital for our sense of well-being that we strive to be simple and humble enough to allow ourselves to be loved and served by those the Lord sets on our path or sends our way for the purpose of revealing His compassion and benevolent proximity to us.

Such people are the brothers and sisters whom the Lord gives us a hundredfold, are they not?

St Benedict insists on love as a two-way affair in his Rule for Monks. We see this is what he has to say about loving affection in the community between the old and the young, the young and the old, between the abbot and the brethren and the brethren and the abbot.

To conclude this morning, I'd like to reflect for a moment on that most important aspect of love in our lives which is the call to allow ourselves to be loved; the call to allow ourselves to experience grace.

In a Letter to the Subiaco Congregation entitled '*Conversio*': *The Abbot and the Monk* Dom Denis Huerre made the following observation: *Monastic affection, filial or fraternal, has often been feared and repressed, but it should be encouraged and, above all, encouraged to be authentic.*

Recognising how the very idea of loving one another in community can pose a threat to some, he went on to tease out what this means. He insisted: *We have to remember the full meaning of Christ's new and disturbing commandment to love one another (as I have loved you), that is, to death of self.*

Chapter 72 of the Rule comes to mind. In it we read: *Let monks love their abbot with a love which is humble and sincere and let them love each other with the chaste love brothers should hold in their hearts for each other.* Benedict couldn't be any clearer. Our life calls us to allow ourselves to be loved as much as it calls us to love others. To receive love can be something we shy away from in our life, but we shouldn't! Abbots can be shy of the love of their community and monks shy of the love their fellow-monks.

In that famous circular letter from which I've already quoted, Abbot Denis went on to speak of something he witnessed once when visiting a Charterhouse (a monastery of Carthusian monks).

I find his simple story both encouraging and challenging. It corresponds to something we experience here in the life we share day after day. Dom Huerre recounts: *When I visited a Charterhouse once, the prior received me; and when we reached his door, he realised he had to explain why it should have so many flowers and things growing in pots outside. It turned out that he had just returned from a visitation of another monastery and these potted gifts were a typical Carthusian greeting and sign of affection. A monk who doesn't feel the cold will give his firewood to one who does; a monk who gets things to grow easily will give cuttings to one who can't.*

For Father Huerre to explain: *These signs and tokens are embellishments of affection, of monastic affection, which is the extension of Benedict's injunction that monks love their abbot with humble and sincere affection, an extension of preferring Christ to all things, since through Him our affection is wide enough to embrace everyone and doesn't get monopolised by abbots and abbesses.*

Perhaps the somewhat demanding conversion which is demanded of some of us is in regard to the reception and welcoming of others' love for us.

Let us pray this morning for the grace we need not only to graciously give of ourselves, but equally to graciously receive what others wish to offer us. May we allow ourselves to experience real joy and deep peace in the love others hold in their hearts for us and dare to manifest in our regard. May we welcome the ways in which loving brothers and sisters affirm and bless us.

If Benedict would have us go about the monastery requesting from others the grace of a blessing as we encounter them (this is something he calls for in the Rule), it can be taken for granted that he also wants us to recognise the importance of allowing ourselves to be blessed – something that demands of us a grace of humble receptivity.

Amen!