

Lent 2: Benedict Listening

Last week I told you something about the Rule of Benedict, a short list of rules for religious houses of the Benedictine order. I suggested that the rule was for those who wanted freedom in Christ rather than be tied down with laws and instructions where humans judge our success or failure on merely outward appearance.

I also told you that the Rule of Benedict was revolutionary when compared to the oppressive and ascetic rules of the desert fathers and other early monastic orders. The Gospel teaches us all, those in religious orders and those living secular lives as lay people, the Freedom of Christ. So in this day and age more and more people are trying to live their lives following the general precepts of the Rule of Benedict.

Right at the start of the rule of Benedict, the very first word is "Listen". It is a pity that the icon on the Lent Programme flyer is not bigger so that you can see on the scroll that Benedict is holding there is the Latin word "*Obsculta*" which means listen. Let me read to you the opening sentence of the Prologue to the rule. *Listen my son to the instructions of your Master, turn the ear of your heart to the advice of a loving Father; accept it willingly and carry it out vigorously...*" Here is no thou-shalt-nots and it is obvious that the master referred to is not only the abbot but also God.

Although address to "my son" Benedict's rule calls on all who read it to listen to the Master: to listen to the call of the Master. Now, The bible is filled with examples of calling of people some spectacular, some very ordinary. Moses alone in the desert encounters a burning bush; Samuel is dragged out of sleep; Paul is blinded on the road while Simon, Andrew, James and John are merely going about their daily business. Benedict was writing to those who had listened and heard a call to become monks and were now struggling to fulfil that call, to fulfil the vows they had made.

Even in their vows Benedictine monks and nuns are different. Their vows are not for the usual poverty, chastity and obedience but rather for stability conversion and obedience.

It is this last vow – obedience – which is linked to listening and our theme this morning. It should be the disciples' goal to listen to God. And where does God reveal God-self? In the Word of God. But God also reveals God-self in events and encounters with us. We encounter God constantly. There is a life long encounter between our Master, God and us. And this encounter is a dialogue where we speak to God but also listen to God. And having listened, we obey.

The Latin word for listen I gave just now, *Obsculta* is rich in meaning. It involves a reverent, ready humble way of listening. It involves listening on many levels – not just to the scriptures but to the rule, to the abbot and to the other brothers: and for us today not in the monastery, to our families, our community and our own bodies.

Yes! It also means listening to ourselves and learning to love ourselves. It means paying attention to our body, to its demands and its rhythms. That ache in your back need not be dismissed with protestant stoic fortitude as just merely lumbago. It may be telling you about the stress and tension in your life and giving you the signal to stop making so many demands on your body.

For too long we have associated learning as an intellectual pursuit but the Rule of Benedict helps us to understand that listening and obeying falls into a holistic approach, listening mindfully to our entire selves. To listen with every fibre of our bodies both our minds as well as our physical bodies, is not easy but it is essential if we want to find God.

It is interesting that the word 'obedience' comes from the Latin *oboedire* which shares its root with *audire* to hear. To obey really means to hear. Now, we can obey in many different ways. We can obey reluctantly – because we have to, not because we want to. Benedict says: *The disciples obedience must be given gladly, for God loves a cheerful giver (2Cor9:7)* If we obey grudgingly, even though we carry out the action it will not find favour with God who sees the

grumbling in our hearts. There is no time for the half-hearted response. Benedict and his rule does not find it good enough that I am not really paying attention to the people who have interrupted me, that in my heart I'm actually furious and my calm smile is no more than a façade behind which I am inwardly fuming. *We shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love*, say Benedict in the prologue to his rule.

So obedience is also really about love. It is our loving response to God. The outcome of obedience undertaken in these terms is that it brings with it an inner freedom. *Obedience is a blessing* says Benedict. That statement in the final chapter of the rule that deals with obedience among the brothers in the community and it makes the point that it is not negative or restrictive but positive and leads to God. We go to God by the road of obedience.

Now, Benedict describes that way of going to God as a ladder – a ladder of humility. He offers us a guide to this life long process of learning obedience in chapter 7 of his rule, which is interestingly enough the longest chapter in the Rule. He uses an image of a ladder, similar to the ladder Jacob saw with angels ascending and descending on it. The ladder has 12 rungs and we must ascend them. Our ascent is progressive, we must attain the first rung before we can reach out for the second and as we step up the preceding step is knocked away. The first 7 steps look at the growth of interior disposition and the next 5 at exterior conduct.

The starting point of this ladder is that we should keep the awesome awareness of God always before our eyes; we should never forget that God is omnipresent. *Let him recall that he is seen by God in heaven, that his actions are everywhere in God's sight and are reported by the angels at every hour* Benedict tells us. This awareness of being a creature of God brings with it a sense of responsibility. If I want to know how humble I am the first question to ask myself is, "How aware am I that anything I do in any way is part of the working out of God's will?" Thus God becomes the centre of our existence, not our own projects or plans – but God's. Many go through life without even a firm grasp of this the first rung of the ladder.

The very top of the Ladder carries the promise of serenity in discovering that actually God is in charge of our lives. This is what humility is all about – not being like Uriah Heep and grovelling before all but rather an interior breaking free from the bondage of our own self-seeking ambitions and self-sufficiency. And this is Gospel teaching – in the service of other – we find perfect freedom *Just as you did it to the least of these my sisters and brothers you did it to me...* Jesus tells us in Matthew 25.

Benedict says that his rule *is not meant to be a burden for you. It should help you to discover and experience how great is the freedom to which you are called.* Freedom for what? To be able to do in the depths of your heart what you really want to do. Thomas Merton use to tell his novices at Gethsemani Monastery in Kentucky, "that being obedient means being able to will what God wills for us at every moment; it is what keeps us in touch with that centre, that reality that is the will of God and it demands a response."

Now, in that response we discover that we are collaborators with God. Our obedience is not blind or mechanical conformity but rather us taking responsibility for ourselves. Blind obedience simply does not come into the Rule at all. Our obedience is a free response where we take responsibility for our decisions. At the root of obedience is the free, humble, loving surrender to the will of God; the willing obedience which says, "Yes" with our whole person to the infinite love of God, so that outward observance springs from inner assent, a bending of our free will towards the will of Christ, which will finally make us collaborators with him. To end a poem by the Welsh poet, RS Thomas who was also an Anglican priest

Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence; the sun's light

Ring me. As though I acted
A great role. And the audiences still: all that close throng
Of spirits waiting, as I, for the message.

Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.

Let us Pray:
Almighty God
by whose grace alone we are accepted
and called to your service
strengthen us by your Holy Spirit
and make us worthy of our calling;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen