

## **Benedictine Spirituality - Stability**

Perhaps I need to start this week's sermon by presenting to you what I'm trying to achieve by this course of sermons this Lent.

We are looking at Benedictine Spirituality. What do I mean by spirituality? It is how we live out what we believe. So, in the case of Benedictine Spirituality it is how Benedict assisted the monks of his monasteries to live out their belief in God and Jesus Christ. He did this through his Rules consisting of a prologue and seventy-three short chapters. The total length is less than 120 pages and many of the chapters are less than a page long.

The Vows the Benedictine Monks are called upon to make are drawn from the precepts of this Rule; the precepts of stability, conversion of life and obedience. These vows together with the Rule enable Benedictine monks and nuns to live a balanced life. Theirs is not a life of asceticism and punishment of the body; not one of hair shirts, self-flagellation and hours after hours spent on one's knees in prayer in the chapel. In fact the Rule and these vows create a balanced lifestyle. So balanced that people like Esther de Waal and many other Christians today decided that this would enhance their lives even if they lived in the world outside of the monasteries. What is this balanced lifestyle? It is to ensure that in each person's life there would be sufficient time and space for **Prayer, Study, Work and Rest.**

Prayer, Study, Work and Rest. It sounds so simply and for many of us charging around trying to do too much in too short a space of time – it sounds like heaven. It can be achieved if we follow the general precepts of Benedict's Rule and the precept of his Vows.

Last week I spoke about Listening leading us to the vow of obedience. Today I'm going to look at Stability. Stability should be an affirmation but it does at first sound a bit negative, placing restrictions and limitations on us. In order to obtain a balanced life style all of us, monks and nuns and those of us living in the secular world, have to face some basic needs or requirements – stability being one. The need not to run away from what life might bring us: the need to be open to changes that occur on our spiritual journey and the need to listen and follow through on what Jesus has planned for us in our lives. This is all based on commitment that is total and continuing. But this brings freedom to us. Remember the first sermon in this series An Invitation to Freedom in Christ?

Stability for a monk in a monastery means of course the enclosure of that monk within the walls of the monastery for the rest of his life: in other words a stability of a geographic space. But for us living in the world, stability can have a different but just as significant meaning. Stability is the same as the biblical concept of steadfastness and should be comparable to the faithfulness of God to the Hebrews. God has kept God's side of the bargain. God was reliable like a rock. So, the Benedictine rule of stability is recognition that stability is not some idealistic concept but a realistic need within every human being.

Everybody needs to feel "at home" somewhere or other. Think merely of the story of the Prodigal Son. When things were going badly he returned home – to the stability that home brings. Now, it is impossible to ask, "Who am I" without first asking "Where am I? Where have I come from? Where am I going?" These were perhaps the very questions the prodigal asked himself as he looked after the pigs. Without roots we can neither discover where we belong nor can we grow. Without stability we cannot be our true selves.

Today we who live in the world rather than the monastery are pulled apart by so many conflicting demands that we end up flitting from one good cause to another. Our lives end up as a rat bag of well-intentioned but half-thought-out ideas and ideals. Our spiritual lives end up as confused and superficial.

For the monk "Stability" means accepting a particular community, this place, this people - this and no other as the way to God. For us NOT in a monastery "Stability" means how we relate as people to God and each other. Thomas Merton says "Stability is the total acceptance of God's plan in one's life where one is inserted into the Mystery of Christ."

We understand Benedictine Stability as being achieved through perseverance, holding on even under great strain, through endurance - a virtue we don't often talk about today. Jesus said "He who stands firm to the end will be saved."

Benedict was aware of the difference between ends and means. Stability and good order within a monastery is not "the end" Benedict was aiming at. In fact, it is "the means" by

which the community and the individual in the community may have space and time to enter into his or her personal dialogue with God. This leads us to a greater awareness of the balance between the individual and others in the community. It means an individual in any community – whether the community of a husband and wife, the community of a family – parents and children, community of an organization – club, society church, all have to love each other and persevere in that love. That is the stability we can all practice.

I believe that one part of persevering in any loving relationship is allowing the other person or people in the relationship room to be themselves and to grow. Although it might sound a paradox, stability can prevent such relationships becoming static and life-denying. Unfortunately, many people find themselves in the negative side of stability that has become a limiting trap from which all they want to do is escape. We do this by day dreaming; by saying things like “if only this or that would happen”. This occurs in family life, in marriages and in our jobs. Our response to overcome this trap is usually the barest minimum lacking any creativity.

Have you thought that limitations such as these in fact lead to creativity? We all have heard the phrase, “thinking out of the box”. Well, without the limitation of “a box” we cannot think out of it. Colours and canvas size restrict painter yet they can still create masterpieces. But we must apply this concept to the humdrum of daily life, to the home, the shop floor, the factory, the school, the university.

We have to attend to the reality of life. Stability brings us from alienation – perhaps living in a fantasy and dream world to reality. Stability is not monotony so we cannot use it to evade the inner truth of what we have to do however dreary and boring that might be.

Henri Nouwen, after teaching for many years at famous universities such as Harvard and Yale, entered the Genesee Monastery for a year in order to seek the stability that he felt was lacking in his life. In his *Genesee Journal* he speaks about the sameness of the monks and their task that he had joined for a year. He wanted to be different, to attract attention, do something special and make some new contribution. Yet the monastic situation called him to be the same and more of the same.

In fact only after we have given up the desire to be different and admit that we deserve no special treatment is there space to encounter God. Then we discover that in fact we are unique; that God calls each of us by our name.

We live lives constantly punctuated by expectations of a busy life. From the alarm in morning until we switch off the light at night, our lives are filled with demands we would never have chosen. Yet within these demands we will find God. How do we do this?

Orthodox Church leader, Metropolitan Anthony Bloom says that at the heart of stability there is certitude that God is everywhere because the Kingdom of God begins with us. As he says “If I can’t find God here then I can’t find him anywhere”. For Anthony Bloom stability means standing “immobile” because wherever we stand it is before God. Where – the geographic position – does not matter. Stability for Bloom is in his heart – stability of the heart

Stability is standing still because there is something to be done wherever we are. Monks had in the past gone into the desert to find God but we can find God wherever we are. We must begin in your heart, not a geographic spot like Church or some religious site. To find God in our hearts means saying “yes” to ourselves while we are before God; saying “yes” means persevering, perhaps suffering, being patient; saying “yes” means accepting ourselves knowing ourselves and the ways we try to run away from ourselves through busyness – flitting from one thing to the next a long escape routes avoiding God and other people with whom we are in a supposed relationship.

Standing before God means being at the foot of the cross and participating in the suffering of Christ. “Participating in the suffering of Christ” is a term we Christians often use. If interpreted literally it is negative but if we see it in the context of stability, it is a continuing process of holding out against all odds. It is not important to get by unscathed but it is important not to run away because it is at the foot of the cross or through the suffering of Christ that we can achieve our final resolution. Until then it will remain a mystery to many of us, a mystery sometimes lived out in great daily weakness and confusion.

The stability we can hold on to is, in fact, God. For God is certainty. Our stability is a response to that promise which reassures us that he is faithful and steadfast and that we should, to quote Benedictine's rule, "never lose hope in God's mercy".

A Final quote to put all this into context:

The reason for stability? God is not elsewhere. Amen