

Equilibrium in Prayer on the Road to Healing and Wholeness

A Retreat for those involved in Mental Health Pastoral Care

Monday

Talk 1 - "Our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee"

Introduction

Welcome to Mount St. Bernard Abbey. May I begin with a few brief words about the Monastery. Monastic life on this site began in 1937, with the present Abbey being built by Pugin in 1844. This is a house of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance – the Trappists. Blessed Cyprian Tansi was monk of this community, from 1950 until his death in 1964, having been a priest of the Diocese of Onitsha, Nigeria for 13 years.

Cistercians follow the Rule of St. Benedict. The Order was founded by Robert of Molesmes in 1098 who desired a stricter interpretation of the Rule. The Order takes its name from Citeaux, near Dijon, where the first house of the Order was built. The monastery in which we are staying is a house of the "Reform of the Reform" – begun at La Trappe in 1663 and becoming an Order in its own right in 1892.

The Cistercians were a very strong presence in this country before the Reformation. Such famous houses as Fountains Abbey and Riveaulx Abbey in Yorkshire were Cistercian. Today, the only Cistercians in the British Isles are Trappists, with houses here, Caldey Island and at Nunraw in Scotland and with 5 houses in Ireland. There are houses of Trappist Nuns in Wales and Ireland.

The expression of the Rule of St. Benedict lived here brings results in a rather different timetable to that of most Benedictine monasteries. The day begins earlier – 03.30 and ends earlier, with Compline at 19.30. The night is marked by the *Magnum Silentium* – the Great Silence – and I do encourage you to keep the Silence. Sharing in the silence and recollection of the community is a valuable part of our time here together, for it is in Silence that we can listen to the voice of the Lord – the "still, small voice"¹ of the indwelling of God at the core of our being.

You will see from the timetable that I have made Vigils and Lauds optional. Rest is an important part of Retreat too, and this may be an opportunity for some of us to rest awhile. Mass is at 08.00.

The fare of the Cistercian is usually a little simpler than that of their Benedictine brothers and sisters. Insofar as we share in this simplicity, we are reminded that we "do not live on bread alone"² and a simpler way of life leaves more space open in our lives for the Lord. We can also see, in the call to simplicity, something of the call being given to the Church through Pope Francis, that Christ might shine through every aspect of our lives.

So, an openness to simplicity and silence are makes of our brief time together here at Mount St. Bernard. These qualities are, too, will help us to find equilibrium that leads to healing and wholeness – but they are qualities, aspects of life, that are so easily lost in the midst of our busy lives. I am in London quite often and not infrequently find myself looking at the people on the street. How many of us fail to look at our surroundings, concentrating on the mobile telephone and the text message? How many people have bumped into you while texting on the telephone? I have developed quite a good side-step!

¹ 1 Kings 19:12

² Mt. 4:4

The converse of this is to be found on Westminster Bridge! It is often covered in tourists, taking photographs and lining up that shot to give the impression that they are supporting the Palace of Westminster! Then, I am the problem – often moving into the road as a “pedestrian fast lane.” While I do find it easier to walk quickly, I am usually in a hurry. My focus is not the text message, but the destination and I miss out on the way as a result.

These are very simple examples, but they speak of that lack of balance and appreciation of surroundings that are first indications that equilibrium is going out of the window.

So, here at Mt. St. Bernard, we have a chance to redress the balance and open our minds and hearts to the Lord who wishes to speak to us and who comes into the busy-ness of our lives to find us:

“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?’*. If you hear this and your answer is “I do,” God then directs these words to you: *‘If you desire true and eternal life, keep your tongue free from vicious talk and your lips from all deceit; turn away from evil and do good; let peace be all your quest and aim’.*”³

So, God calls us to himself, in the midst of the business of our lives. He calls us to new life and to peace in Him. We have, by coming to this place, answered that call from the midst of the marketplace of our world. Let us be open to the peace that the Lord would give us – not just today, but throughout life – for this is the Way of Healing and life in Him.

The Pilgrim Journey of Life

Just as Blessed Cyprian Tansi was called by the Lord to leave his native Nigeria and a fruitful Priestly Ministry and come here to this monastery, so each of us is called to make a journey. This journey begins at the very most moment of our existence, the moment of our conception. From this very moment, we possess an innate dignity. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council addressed the question. “What is man?” and recognises the many difficulties the human person faces in working out an answer:

“He has put forward, and continues to put forward, many views about himself, view that are different and often contradictory. Often he either sets himself up as the absolute measure of all things, or debases himself to the point of despair. Hence his doubt and his anguish.”⁴

It is in this situation of contradiction that you, as those working in the field of pastoral care for those with Mental Health difficulties, place yourselves. The Council Fathers recognised the lack of equilibrium experienced by so many in the modern world – from a misguided belief in the greatness of human strength, to the despair increasingly felt by so many. Wherein lies the answer?

Returning to the Second Vatican Council, the Fathers recognised that the Church is placed to enable humanity to answer its great question. In addressing this lack of equilibrium in the human person, the Council Fathers stated:

“The Church is keenly sensitive to these difficulties. Enlightened by divine revelation she can offer a solution to them by which the true state of man may be outlined, his

³ RB. Prol: 14-17.

⁴ GS. 12.

weakness explained, in such a way that at the same time his dignity and his vocation may be perceived in their true light.”⁵

As Christians, as Catholics, we recognise that our way forward lies in the person of Jesus Christ who came “that they might have life, and have it to the full.”⁶ – in Christ who is “the Way, the Truth and the Life.”⁷

The Fathers of the Council recognised the Pilgrimage nature of the People of God, following the Way that is Christ Himself.

“His will is to make men holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people might acknowledge him and serve him in holiness.”⁸

St. Augustine put it rather differently:

“You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee.”⁹

And St. Irenaeus:

“The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God. If the revelation of God through creation already brings life to all living beings on the earth, how much more will the manifestation of the Father by the Word bring life to those who see God.”¹⁰

Our destiny lies in the Kingdom of God, through the saving work of Jesus Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity, that we might share in his divinity.¹¹ This is our Pilgrim Journey, it is in this journey that we find our meaning and our fulfilment, for even here on earth we are builders of the Kingdom of God.

Ultimately, therefore, the dignity of the human person stems from our creation and our destiny in the Kingdom of the Father. Returning to the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* on the Church in the Modern World, we find an expression of equal dignity that we all share:

“All men are endowed with a rational soul and are created in God’s image; they have the same nature and origin, being redeemed by Christ they enjoy the same divine calling and destiny; there is here basic equality between all men and it must be given even greater recognition.”¹²

This is surely the foundation for all that we do in this vital field of the Church’s pastoral activity, for those who find difficulties on their journey of life share in the dignity that is common to all and we,

⁵ GS. 12.

⁶ Jn. 10:10.

⁷ Jn. 14:6.

⁸ LG. 9.

⁹ ST. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, 1:1.

¹⁰ ST. IRANAEUS, *Adversus Haereses*, IV,20:7.

¹¹ cf. Offertory Prayers of the Mass.

¹² GS 29.

as members of the Church, as called to enable them to find that road to healing and wholeness, for true wholeness lies in the person of Jesus Christ, in whom we are truly alive.

The Problem of Fearfulness

For many – perhaps for us too – the prospect of this journey is daunting. The task of enabling others to find their way is yet more daunting still.

It is here, I believe, that Jeremiah can help us. He is, I think, my favourite prophet. His name has become synonymous with gloom. We describe someone as a ‘Jeremiah’ when they are a person of pessimistic view, seeing the worst possible scenario in everything. He was called to be a prophet – a task he really didn’t want – at a most difficult time in Israel’s history. The people did not want to listen to him. His relationship with God is marked by great frankness – a refreshing honesty in his conversations with the One who had called him.

“The word of the Lord was addressed to me, saying:
‘Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you;
before you came to birth, I consecrated you;
I have appointed you as prophet to the nations.’
I said, ‘Ah, Lord; look, I do not know how to speak: I am a child.’ But the Lord replied,
‘Do not say, “I am a child.”
Go now to those to whom I send you
and say whatever I command you.
Do not be afraid of them,
for I am with you to protect you –
it is the Lord who speaks!’¹³

Let us look more closely at these words, for they have much to teach us about our journey. God reminds Jeremiah that he knows him in the context of eternity – even before the moment of his conception. Does God not know each one of us in exactly the same way? For God to know means that God loves – for God cannot know without loving. To reflect on the fact that God loves each one of us, by name, in that context of eternity is both mind-blowing and ultimately consoling.

In his love for us, he calls us – just as he appointed Jeremiah. We may not be called to be prophets to the nations, but we have been called to the particular work of the Church that has brought us together here at this monastery. We are called to carry out this work in the context of the NHS, the context of our parish communities, the context of the Church in England & Wales. This calling has an immense dignity, for in answering it we are responding to the love of God, manifested in the gifts that he has given to us. When much is given, much is expected¹⁴ and, like the servants entrusted by their master with the talents, we must make the best possible use of them.¹⁵

We might feel ourselves to be frightened children. We must be honest enough to recognise our frailty before God. This is a vital step on the road to the Kingdom. St Paul speaks in these terms when faced with his own weakness.¹⁶ It is only when we recognise that we are weak that we shall give ourselves over to the power of Christ. Before that moment, we shall tend to think that we can do everything on our own – and that is the road to disaster!

¹³ Jer. 1:4-8.

¹⁴ Lk. 12:48

¹⁵ Mt. 25:14-30.

¹⁶ 2 Cor. 12:10.

Jeremiah shows us the way here. He recognised that, in the face of the task before him, he was nothing but a child. In being truthful before God he was open to the gift that God would give him – the gift of being with him at all times and the gift of speech too, for God goes on to assure Jeremiah that he will give him the right words to say.¹⁷

The Lord gives us the same promise:

“Do not worry about how to speak or what to say: what you are to say will be given to you when the time comes; because it is not you who will be speaking; the Spirit of your Father will be speaking in you.”¹⁸

In Conclusion

The first step on the journey, then, lies in recognition. Recognition of the One who speaks to us in the marketplace, calling us to himself and to his service; recognition of the dignity of the human person – including recognition of our own dignity as children of God; recognition that we are unable to manage alone (with the renunciation of Pride that this entails) that we may be open to the Spirit who will give us the words and show us the way.

Let us, then, set out on the road in a spirit of prayer and trust, for it is the Lord that we follow and it him whom we serve in those in our care.

¹⁷ Jer. 1:9.

¹⁸ Mt. 10:19-20.