

Exploring Benedictine Rule for a Balanced Life

Sessions 2 & 3

Tuesday 10th July, 10.00

Introduction

In my few words of introduction yesterday, I spoke of the lack of balance in our lives. We spent yesterday afternoon considering the ways in which the Lord calls us, by name, to his service.

This morning, I would like to begin by looking at the ways in which the Rule, based firmly in the Gospel, speaks to us about “balanced life.”

Is there a lack of balance?

It may be that you are a person who manages to live a beautifully balanced lifestyle – prayer, work, rest time, time with family and friends, diet etc.... Perhaps your aspirations about the way in which you would like to live are frustrated by the pressures of life.

Perhaps even looking just at the work setting – your ministry in hospital or community – things have got a little bit out of kilter. This is not difficult, given the many demands, changing almost by the minute, that we face today.

I spend a lot of time travelling. The car isn't so bad, because I am in my own space. The train is another matter. So many people seem to be working, talking on telephones, working on laptops and I pads. Have we lost our sense of balance? One could take this image much wider, to the financial situation in our banks, our use of the world's resources....

It would be worth our while just spending a few moments, in silence, considering just one or two areas of life where our balance has gone wobbly...

Perhaps I could ask you to turn to the person next to you and share just one thing that has gone out of balance in your life...

What does the Gospel have to say about balance?

The Gospel accounts are concerned, of course, with the public ministry of Our Lord and Saviour. They are not, in the strict sense, biographies or “fly on the wall” accounts. It would be natural for the Gospel writers to concern themselves with what Jesus did and said and not to worry too much about giving a picture of the Lord's lifestyle. When we reach the Passion Narratives, of course, things become more “chronological” in the strict sense, but the events of our Salvation are taking their course at that point.

Despite these considerations, we can see in the Gospels some hints of the way in which Our Divine Saviour lived his life on earth and the picture is more “balanced” than we might imagine.

We find Jesus as prayer. Mark tells us that “in the morning, long before dawn, he got up and left the house, and went off to a lonely place and prayed there.”¹ We know he taught his disciples to pray² and we have, of course, the example of his prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane.³ So, Jesus life was

¹ Mk. 1:35

² Mt. 6:7-15

³ Mt. 26:36-46.

suffused with prayer, with a lived relationship with the Father. The very fact that we find Jesus beginning his day with a time of prayer is a prompt to us to take a look at our day and see how we begin and end. I shall return to this theme on another occasion during our time together.

We also find Jesus spending time with others, in the context of a shared meal. He gathered around him a whole host of people – some of them not considered “polite company”. Mark reports that “When Jesus was at dinner in his house, a number of tax collectors and sinners were also sitting at the table with Jesus and his disciples; for there were many of them among his followers.”⁴ It is also interesting to note here that Mark refers to Jesus having a house!

We find other accounts of Jesus meeting with his friends and the example of the house of Mary, Martha and Lazarus is a clear indication that Jesus had very close friends.⁵ He gave time to them and enjoyed their company.

Much of the Gospel, as we have said, is about Jesus’ ministry – his work – but we can think of other elements in Jesus life as the Incarnate Word that speak to us about our own life choices. We know that Jesus took exercise, for instance, since he walked everywhere. The pace of life was slower in those days too, with communications being so different and everything being guided far more by the seasons than would be the case today.

Some elements of Jesus time were not so different to our own. Society was, in many respects, broken. Jesus lived in a country that was occupied by a foreign power. He lived in a country that was something of a gateway to trade routes – the *via maritima* – passed through Capernaum, bringing trade from the sea to the trade routes of the Fertile Crescent. Although populations were small, towns were busy in proportion and the pressure on traders was great. Dishonest practices were not unknown in Jesus time, as we know from the dealings of Zacchaeus, the dodgy tax collector in Jericho.⁶

There are, then, key elements in Jesus life on earth – and that of his disciples – that indicate a more balanced approach to life than we might first imagine.

Balance in the Rule

Benedict lived at a time of upheaval in society. Invading Goths battered at the gates of Rome, Society was in something of a meltdown and Benedict was appalled at the hedonism and immorality he encountered in Rome. His response was to leave the city and seek a place where he could be closer to God. That may not be an option for us and, in any case, the element of Vocation must not be lost in our thoughts. We are called to serve others in our particular settings, not – probably – to be founders of great monastic communities!

When Benedict came to write his Rule, he had some others to go on – the Greater and Lesser Rules of St. Basil, the work carried out by Pachomius in Egypt, the *Regula Magistri* - The Rule of the Master (an anonymous work but certainly known by Benedict). Above all these, he had his own experience. His life at Subiaco and his encounters with so-called monks who had no real desire to serve anyone but themselves, together with his experience at Monte Cassino and his own deep relationship with Christ, enabled him to write a Rule that is a wonderfully balanced document that has been tested by time.

⁴ Mk. 2:15.

⁵ Jn. 11.

⁶ Lk. 19:1-10

As we saw yesterday, the Rule is divided into chapters and I would like to draw attention to some elements of the Rule that contribute to a balanced life.

Benedict reminds his followers that everything they do must be rooted in prayer: “First of all, every time you begin a good work, you must pray to him most earnestly to bring it to perfection.”⁷ Every action of life should be born out of our desire to be at one with the will of God for us – “Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”⁸

Prayer should be at the centre of all we do and, in Benedictine life, Prayer is described as the *Opus Dei*, the Work of God. Everything in the monastic day is geared to prayer times. They come first. The central element of prayer for the monk is the Divine Office and Benedict gives over a great deal of his Rule to the prescriptions for the *Opus Dei*. For many, this is part of the Rule which is rather boring to read – lists of psalms and the hours at which they are to be prayed – but what is achieved here is a regime of prayer that is not burdensome in the context of the monastery. Benedict laments the fact that “modern” monks cannot manage the whole psalter of 150 psalms in a day – so he spreads them across a whole week!⁹

Benedict even allows for late comers – prescribing that the first psalm at Lauds is to be prayed rather slowly, so that everyone can get there.¹⁰

The prayer of the monastery is the purpose of the monk, so everything else must be fitted in around that. Nothing comes before prayer and, when the bell goes for prayer, all must abandon what they are doing and hasten to church.¹¹

It must be recognised that we are not monks and so the regime of prayer in a monastic community cannot be ours. We are not called to that. However, the place of prayer in the life of the monk – at the centre of all things – is applicable to us too.

With prayer at the centre of Benedictine life – just as it is at the centre of the life of the Saviour – we might ask ourselves the question: “What is at the centre of my life?” If I may use an image of a set of scales, it is as if Prayer is the point of balance. Placing prayer at the wrong point of balance will lead us to have an unbalanced life. This is really very important indeed. In considering this theme, we need to return to yesterday afternoon’s thoughts about our call. May I give you an example?

I had been ordained only a short time when a woman in the parish approached me. She said that she wanted to come to see me, with her husband, because there were difficulties in the marriage. I said yes, but wondered what this might be about. I was a very new priest and wasn’t qualified! Anyway, along they came and she explained that her husband had “found God” and wanted to pray all the time. He had obviously read something about monks, so was getting up at 04.00 to say his prayers. I explained to him that he wasn’t a monk, but a married man. Prayer was wonderful, but it had to be according to his state in life.

This is a part of balance. If you are a monk, the set of scales will look rather different to that used by everyone in this room. Furthermore, the scales change, as it were, according to time of life, responsibilities and the circumstances of life. This requires regular attention on our part. It is often difficult to keep the scales balanced without some help. In the ideal world, every person would have

⁷ RB Prol. 4

⁸ Mt. 6:10.

⁹ RB 18:22-25.

¹⁰ RB 13:2.

¹¹ RB 43:1.

a Spiritual Director to walk alongside them on their pilgrimage of life – someone who can be something of a mirror and help to keep the scales in balance.

I put these thoughts before you today, because prayer should be at the centre of all we do. If it truly is, then our ministry to others will be so much the richer. This does not mean that we need to be inviting those in our care to pray all the time. Indeed, there may be some for whom we have care who would not be helped at all by any suggestion to pray – but we must always pray for others and a real openness to growth in our own spiritual lives is more important than I can put into words.

Let me put it another way. If we allow ourselves to become people of prayer, then we shall “live out of that space, that relationship with God.” In Catholic theology, the Mass is the “summit and source”¹² of the Christian Life. Everything we do stems from our celebration of the Eucharist and leads us back to our encounter with Christ in the Eucharist. Prayer is intimately connected to our celebration of the Eucharist, for it is the same person of Christ whom we meet in prayer and in Holy Communion. Our lives grow from the Eucharist and from Prayer. Our lives – all our encounters, all our experiences – are taken to prayer and to the Eucharist. We live in that relationship at all times.

In placing prayer at the centre of his community’s life, Benedict was simply following Christ, who went to pray alone and who went from that encounter with the Father into his ministry.¹³

This relationship calls for a good deal of listening. Benedict speaks about this at the very beginning of the Rule. He is speaking of the relationship between Abbot and monk, but the principle of listening is just as important for all of us:

“Listen carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions, and attend them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice.”¹⁴

Listening demands an attentive ear, then, and if we are to be truly attentive, we must remain silent. Silence has an important place in the life of the monk, as we saw yesterday, but it also has a place in our lives too. Benedict seems strict in his requirements for Silence, in the Sixth Chapter of the Rule, stating:

“Speaking and teaching are the master’s task; the disciple is to be silent and listen.”¹⁵

This is an important principle in prayer and one that is sometimes lost. Prayer is a conversation – not a monologue. If we are to listen to what God has to say, we must cultivate at least a little silence. May I recommend a little silence, therefore, in your regime of prayer? This does not need to be as long as all that. When I began seminary formation, our Rector told us that we should spend 15 minutes a day in private prayer. I thought this was too short – I wanted calluses on my knees before Christmas! The Rector pointed out that if we aimed too high to begin with, we would abandon all our efforts. Rather, he said, start with something small and allow the time to develop naturally. By the end of formation, six years later, the fifteen minutes had become an hour.

Again, this is a matter of balance. Reflect on your day and the demands that are made. Fix a time and remain with it, reviewing it from time to time. Don’t make it too long, but do your best to remain silent. Listen with the ear of the heart.

¹² SC, n.10.

¹³ Mk. 1:37-38.

¹⁴ RB Prol. 1.

¹⁵ RB 8:6.