

Exploring Benedictine Rule for a Balanced Life

Session 4

Tuesday 10th July, 16.30

Introduction

We have spent time reflecting on our sense of call and, especially this morning, on the theme of prayer and the ways in which we can ensure that prayer has its proper place at the centre of our lives.

This afternoon, we shall open up a couple of other themes that feature in the Rule and which are responses to the Gospel message.

Care for others

All of us in this room, in one way or another, are engaged in care for others. Either as clinicians or as chaplains – or in my own case as Bishop – we have others for whom we care and for whom we have a level of responsibility.

The Gospel imperative here is clear, for care for others is an expression of our love for God. We see this in the famous passage about sheep and goats in Matthew's Gospel: "Insofar as you did this for the least of these, you did it for me."¹ Jesus makes it clear that it is on this principle that we shall be judged when our time comes.

We are blessed with talents and these talents are to be used. This is not an optional extra for the Christian and Jesus makes plain the fate of the one who does not bother to use the gifts he has been given. "As for this good for nothing servant, throw him out into the dark where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth."² Again, in the parable of Dives and Lazarus, the rich man is condemned on account of his total lack of care for the other.³

This aspect of care for the other grows out of lives of prayer and openness to God's presence in our lives. It is not for nothing that the two-fold commandment of love is placed in the order it is given.

"One of them put a further question, 'Master, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?' Jesus said to him, 'You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second resembles it: You must love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang the whole Law and the Prophets also.'⁴

Finally, in this context, let us consider one of the texts in the Gospel about leadership:

"Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that among the gentiles the rulers lord it over them, and great men make their authority felt. This is not to happen among you. No, anyone who wants to be great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.'⁵

¹ Mt. 25:40.

² Mt. 25:30.

³ Lk. 16:19-31.

⁴ Mt. 22:35-40.

⁵ Mt. 20:24-28.

These texts give us a very clear vision of service that is, in itself, the ideal of leadership. Ultimately, the leadership, the reign, of Christ is seen on the Cross. The self-emptying love of Christ is our model.

Service, Leadership and Respect in Rule

Chapter 2 of the Rule concerns the office of Abbot. As leader in the monastic community, he holds a very special place and an immense responsibility. However, it is clear that much of what is said about the Abbot is of relevance to anyone who is at the service of another, especially in that relationship of a clinician or chaplain to patient or service user. Speaking of the Abbot, then, Benedict says that:

“He is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery...therefore the Abbot must never teach or decree of command anything that would deviate from the Lord’s instructions.”⁶

This will truly be the case in our ministry and service if we strive to live out of that relationship of prayer about which we have spoken this morning. Benedict also insists upon equality in the monastery:

“The Abbot should avoid all favouritism. He is not to love one more than another unless he finds someone better in good actions and obedience...Therefore, the Abbot is to show equal love to everyone apply the same discipline to all according to their merits.”⁷

Benedict then goes on to counsel the Abbot in the ways in which he approaches those in his care:

“He must vary with circumstances, threatening and coaxing by turns, stern as a taskmaster, devoted and tender as only a father can be. With the undisciplined and restless, he will use firm argument; with the obedient and docile and patient, he will appeal for greater virtue; but as for the negligent and disdainful, we charge him to use reproof and rebuke.”⁸

Finally, from this chapter of the Rule, we find this warning from Benedict:

“The Abbot must remember what he is and remember what he is called, aware that more will be expected of a man to whom more has been entrusted.”⁹

The exercise of all these qualities demands a spirit of discernment – something which is not always easy. It comes, of course, with experience, but we should never be ashamed of seeking counsel from those more expert than ourselves when this is appropriate. Benedict legislates for consultation in the Rule also, perhaps in surprising ways to us, given the age in which he wrote.

When anything important needs to be considered for the community, the Abbot is to call the community together, so that the Abbot may consider his action having heard the voice of others.

⁶ RB 1:4

⁷ RB 1:16,22.

⁸ RB 1:24-25.

⁹ RB 1:30. cf. Lk. 12:48.

“The reason why we have said all should be called for counsel is that the Lord often reveals what is better to the younger.”¹⁰

The principle that action following counsel is more reliable is an important one for us. It will demand that we take a little more time over things, but our action will be all the more sure for that. We must remember, in thinking about the ministry to which you are called, that the care of those who are at a vulnerable point in their lives is a highly sensitive matter and we should not be so proud as not to seek advice when needed.

Chapter 4 of the Rule is given over to “The Tools of Good Works” and there is a wonderful, simple, aphorism there which is a wonderful watchword for all ministry:

“Reverence the old and love the young.”¹¹

The following of this principle will ensure that we treat experience and wise advice with the attention and respect it deserves and will also ensure respect and care for the young. When it comes to pastoral care, the same principle clearly applies. We have a special duty in this regard in a society where respect for and the rights of those of every age is under threat.

The Care of the Sick

Following the text of the Gospel in Matthew 25, to which reference has already been made, Benedict places the care of the sick before all else.¹² This mirrors, of course, the Lord’s care of the sick and his miracles of healing during his public ministry. “Sick brothers must be patiently borne with, because serving them leads to a greater reward”¹³ the Rule states, but Benedict also places a certain responsibility on those who are sick not to be over demanding on those who care for them.¹⁴ The Rule also provides for a number of mitigations for the frail and sick, including the possibility of meat in the diet and more frequent baths, and the Abbot must give the care of the sick to a member of the community who is “God-fearing, attentive and concerned.”¹⁵

The care of the sick, then, has a special place in the life of the community. This is reflection of the deeply held understanding in the life of the Church of the place of suffering as a path to unity with the sufferings of Christ, which, in turn, means that we must recognise the person of Christ in a very particular way in the lives of those who suffer.

A great responsibility, therefore, is laid upon the shoulders of those who have care for the sick. Returning to the theme of vocation, this is a lofty calling, carrying with it immense responsibilities as well as great joys. It is a ministry that truly mirrors the love of Christ and which calls from us the use of our talents as servants and leaders, as well as the skills of those around us.

¹⁰ RB 3:3.

¹¹ RB 4:70.

¹² RB 36:1

¹³ RB 36:5.

¹⁴ RB 36:4.

¹⁵ RB 36:7.