

Feast of St. Benedict

Romans 6:3ff

Matt. 5:20ff

+In the Name of the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen+

If you attended elementary school in the middle years of the last century eventually English grammar replaced spelling in terms of language arts. What had been learned simply by hearing and imitating parents and siblings by way of speech now was under scrutiny. Subjects and objects, nouns and verbs, adjective and conjunctions, and numerous clauses had to be identified and their purpose known. Eventually, every student came face to face with a chalkboard, eraser, and the prospect of diagramming sentences. With a little practice it became possible to identify the patterns of this strange new world of English. Perhaps you can still rise to the task!!

What if you were asked to diagram your life journey and purpose? What would be the objects on your chart including the truly critical and meaningful events? Might there be a defining pattern and flow to the story that is you, or would it be haphazard and accidental? It is likely we have all experienced times of focus and clarity and others of uncertainty and dispersed energy. It is in these latter moments that the sense life has a purpose and ultimate meaning seems most elusive. For the Christian the core of existence is to seek God, be alive in Him, and to enjoy what that brings. “Seek, be alive, enjoy” are the operative words. To do that requires a certain disposition and discipline so as not to become lost. Dante, in his monumental work, *The Divine Comedy*, begins with these words,

“Midway this way of life we’re bound upon,
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.
Ah me! How hard to speak of it—that rude
And rough and savage forest! The mere breath
Of memory stirs the old fear in the blood:
Death is hardly more bitter.”

In modern parlance Dante had reached a period of personal crisis. But what is clear is he had lost clarity about purpose and direction and thus was without joy or hope. He comes to require a guide and the capacity to listen once again to God’s purposes that had become occluded in culture and habits of his day. As a church we need to realize that vast numbers of people around us are living with the same uncentered experience, and often do not have the words to describe it.

In the Epistle today St. Paul suggests an antidote. He invites us to do something simple and yet incredibly deep; **Consider your baptism!** He is not asking us to think back, if we can, about a date on the calendar or to look at a photograph that might have been taken of us if we were infants, or to see if we can conjure up some set of feelings long forgotten. He is making a revolutionary claim; our lives, our futures, our core meaning and search has been imprinted/stamped on us in our Baptism into Christ. The journey you and I now live with Him is one where sin, and confusion is put to death, and death has been put in the grave!!! The pattern, the diagram of the Christian’s life is one of letting die that which cannot give life—whether a value of the culture around us, or whether it is a personal attribute—so that space can be made for the life God gives us in Christ. Look at the Prayer Book rite for Baptism and notice it is not a warm and fuzzy symbol of induction into membership. It is re-arranging the molecules in our souls so that we can seek and rejoice in the life God gives. Everyday there are moments of death, of letting go of confusion, hatred, lethargy, and everyday there is room being made for God in us. Paul’s words are quite deliberate and intentional; notice the tenses of the verbs. (a little grammar lesson!!). When he speaks of death it is always

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in the past tense; “we who have died, we who have been baptized, we who have been ‘co-buried’ with Christ will be raised with Him.” What should we make of this? It is that there is no future or promise or hope in life that is given over to sin and the loss of direction. Paul is telling us to remember who we are and that the paradigm and pattern and model of the Christian life is one of dying and rising. Paul discovered it on a backroad to Damascus.

Baptism grants us this gift—it is a visionary way of seeing life from God's point of view. Receiving it is the beginning. A disciplined life allows it to grow so that we are converted into Christ's image daily.

Today is the feast day of the St. Benedict of Nursia—the boy in the cave. We spoke of his influence on our tradition last Sunday. But there is much more to our Great-Great Uncle in the faith. He was born in the 5th century in Nursia, Italy and sent to Rome to study. It was in the aftermath of the collapse of the Roman Empire and considerable chaos reigned. The values of the Empire were in disarray, the economy disrupted, education failing, social systems lost, and threats from outside were left unmet due to the conditions in the military and government. It was the beginning of the Dark Ages. Benedict found himself repelled by the raucous and degenerate lifestyle in the city and among his cohorts. In frustration he left Rome, still a teenager, and went to Subiaco where he lived in a cave for 3 years. I invite you to read about those days as you can imagine what people must have thought about a boy living in a cave. But over these years Benedict developed a disciplined life marked by prayer and physical work. He structured his seeking after God around Scripture and especially the praying of the Psalms in rotation throughout the day. Others began to come to him for direction and eventually the Benedictine Order evolved and moved to Monte Cassino. It was through this monastic community that education, hospitals, care for the poor and ill, saving of critical writings, establishing a stable currency, and other vital aspects of community life came about. The Rule of St. Benedict, which guides monastic life has been in publication for over 1,500 years. Only the Bible has been as widely produced. But why should you, who are not nuns and monks, be concerned about this as more than a bit of history? As we saw last week there would be no BCP without Benedict. But there is more. The pattern and diagram of a life of faith consistent with St. Paul's vision is something we can learn and internalize from Benedict. In doing so we come more and more to seek, be alive, and enjoy God's life in and among us.

First, Benedict reminds us that nothing is to be preferred to what he calls the “work of God” meaning prayer and reflective study of the Scriptures. We become what we do. If you are an athlete, you practice over and over until you ‘build into your muscle memory’ what is essential, and it becomes part of you. By means of the daily offices, such as Mattins or Evening Prayer or Compline a life of communication with the source of faith is built and nurtured. The structured reading of Scripture and reflection on it, called *lectio divina*, leads us to understanding and then to ask ‘what action do I need to take based on what I believe and know?’ You nor I could conceivably maintain a relationship with children or friends without communication. How much less could we seek communion with God without these practices? They simply make space for God in our lives—not as one among many—but as the chief relationship. In praying we listen with the ear of our hearts.

Second, Benedict calls us to ‘stability’. One of the signs of a disordered spiritual life is to be constantly seeking novelty and distraction. The reason is that these usually mean we are not focused, and we are trying to escape from something or someone we don't want to face. Stability is the quality of ‘sticking with it’ when situations become uncomfortable. It means closing easy exits. I often tell couples who are getting married that the relationship is not a contract which concludes once the terms are met. It is a covenant in which both times of joy and times of adversity can be lived with integrity. Stability is what allows that to occur.

Finally, one other aspect of Benedict's advice to all of us is to ‘listen with the ear of our hearts’. He means that to know what is good, true, beautiful, and holy is not merely a cerebral activity, but involves the innermost parts of our selves. It means to be sensitive and open to hearing God and the possibility that we

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may encounter God in all things and times. Listening is closely related to obedience. We are not fond of thinking about having to 'obey' orders, but the word derives from listening. In hearing God at the deepest spaces in our souls, we are converted to act in new ways. We learn the joy of trusting God and the peace that brings in an anxious world.

The Collect for the Fourth Sunday after Easter sums up the Benedictine ideal. "O Almighty God, who alone can order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men; Grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou does promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."