

## Home Retreat on Community

21 November 2020

*This short talk provides a reflection on some aspects of the nature and value of Christian community.*

A People called together by God for Salvation

In the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, St Luke the author of this work, describes the early Christian community in the following way:

These remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.

The many miracles and signs worked through the apostles made a deep impression on everyone.

The faithful all lived together and owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and shared out the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed.

They went as a body to the Temple every day but met in their homes for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved. (Acts 2:44-47)

And in writing to the Ephesians, whilst making an exhortation to Christian unity, St Paul provides the reason for this way of living:

There is one Body, one Spirit, just as you were all called into one and the same hope when you were called. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, over all, through all and within all. (Ephesians. 4:4-6)

In baptism, we share in the death and resurrection of Christ, dying to our old selves – dying to our sins – and rising to new life with Christ; and in doing so, we become member of Christ's body, the Church, a community – a people – called together by God for salvation. It is by Christ and through the community that we are saved.

St Paul, again, this time writing to the Romans:

You have been taught that when we were baptised in Christ Jesus we were baptised in his death; in other words, when we were baptised we went into the tomb with him and joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, we too might live a new life. (Romans 6:3-4)

And to the Corinthians:

In the one Spirit we were all baptised, Jews as well as Greeks, slaves as well as citizens, and one Spirit was given to us all to drink.... Now you together are Christ's body; but each of you is a different part of it. (I Corinthians 12:13 & 27)

Christians, then, are people who have been redeemed by Christ and live in Christ, as members of his body, the Church. Our salvation is a gift, not given for any merit of our own but as an act of God's free, gracious and merciful love, by which we are drawn together to form His people. From this it follows that the Christian community is not simply a voluntary association – though, clearly if faith is to be genuine it must be a free act – but rather a spiritual communion that finds its basis and meaning in God.

## Life Together

This communion was lived out by the early Christians in a very particular way, St Luke describing, as we heard, a community of people founded upon a fidelity to the faith passed on from the apostles, united in prayer and worship – including the Eucharist, ‘the breaking of bread’ – and sharing a genuinely common life. No doubt, there were particular friendships and times of recreation, as well as silence and solitude – as are good and normal in any human community or family – but the unity of these Christians was found at a deeper spiritual level of communion and shared life in God, rather than at a level of mere social interaction; and this being so, each member of this community genuinely belonged, had their own role, and their own responsibility for building up this community and its members, for contributing to the Church and thus to the establishing of the Kingdom of God on earth which, as Jesus taught in the Gospel, is among us now. A corollary of this is that as members of the Body of Christ, we are chosen by God and given to each other to make a community, and so are not free simply to pick and choose among our brothers and sisters, but must try to love all equally.

## Mercy and Forgiveness

A particular characteristic – not to say an essential ingredient, if it can be put that way – of such a community is love: love of God and love of neighbour, issuing in a willingness to forgive, just as we have been forgiven our sins in Christ.

Then Peter went up to [Jesus] and said, ‘Lord, how often must I forgive my brother if he wrongs me? As often as seven times?’ Jesus answered, ‘Not seven, I tell you, but seventy-seven times.’ (Matthew 18:21-22)

And Jesus’ conclusion to the parable of the unforgiving debtor: ‘that is how my heavenly Father will deal with you unless you each forgive your brother from your heart.’ (Matthew 18:35)

As Jesus was walking on... he saw a man named Matthew sitting by the customs house, and he said to him, 'Follow me'. And he got up and followed him.

While he was at dinner in the house it happened at a number of tax collectors and sinners came to sit at the table with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, 'Why does your master eat with tax collectors and sinners?' When he heard this he replied, 'It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick. Go and learn the meaning of the words: What I want is mercy, not sacrifice. And indeed I did not come to call the virtuous, but sinners. (Matthew 7:9-13)

Loving mercy is the defining attribute of God – He can be no other way – and so a Christian community, whose members are members of the Body of Christ, must reflect this in its manner of life, in the conduct of its members: it is our responsibility. There is an important reminder of this in Zechariah's prophecy which, having regained the power of speech, he spoke at the circumcision of his son, John the Baptist, saying of him:

And you, little child, you shall be called Prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare the way for him. To give his people knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins; this by the tender mercy of our God who from on high will bring the rising Sun to visit us, to give light to those who live in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace. (Luke 2:76-79)

The Church prays this Gospel canticle every day at Morning Prayer, a reflection of the witness to God that the Christian community is called to offer in its daily life and in the life of its members. The Church must be an icon of Christ for the world, offering God's salvation to all people, a salvation recalled and re-presented each time the Eucharist is celebrated.

In the Mass, the Christian community is gathered in unity at the altar at which Christ's high priestly sacrifice for his people is made present, the bread and wine that are offered truly becoming his body and blood, the work of Calvary and the Resurrection having the power to renew the Church and its members, as these members making up the Body of Christ receive Christ's body and blood in the consecrated bread and wine. It is in this sense that it can be said that 'the Eucharist makes the Church.'

### Monastic Community

Whilst monks and nuns are called to a very particular form of Christian discipleship, their vows often described as an intensification of their baptismal promises, it is however the same baptism that they share with all Christians, and all that has been said about the nature of the Church and Christian community in general applies to a monastic community, a 'school for the Lord's service' (RSB Prologue 45), as St Benedict calls it. The monastery, like any Christian community, is a place in which its members learn to listen carefully – 'with the ear of the heart' (RSB Prologue 1) – to the voice of the Lord, learning how to respond in faith, hope and love, and how to live the Christian life in communion with their brothers and sisters in the Lord.

In Chapter 4 of his *Rule*, St Benedict describes what he calls 'the tools of the spiritual craft' (RSB 4:75), and beginning from the dual-commandment of love of God and love of neighbour sets out a way of Christian and monastic living, which includes particular ways of living a communion of love. So, for example:

Your way of acting should be different from the world's way; the love of Christ must come before all else.

Never give a hollow greeting of peace or turn away when someone needs your love.

Speak the truth with heart and tongue.

Do not injure anyone, but bear injuries patiently. Love your enemies.

Place your hope in God alone.

Listen readily to holy reading and devote yourself often to prayer.

Do not aspire to be called holy before you really are, but first be holy that you may more truly be called so.

If you have a dispute with someone, make peace with him before the sun goes down.

And, then, very realistically, as we all know once confronted with our failures in living the Christian life and our sin:

Never lose hope in God's mercy.

St Benedict teaches that monks and nuns should cultivate a 'good zeal' in their discipleship of the Lord, their relationship to him and to one another being of a piece:

Just as there is a wicked zeal of bitterness which separates from God and leads to hell, so there is a good zeal which separates from evil and leads to God and everlasting life. This, then, is the good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love. They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other, supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behaviour, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another. No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else. To their fellow monks they show the pure love of brothers; to God, loving fear; to their abbot, unfeigned and humble love. Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life.

This, ultimately, is the purpose and value of a Christian community: that through it and within it we are enabled to respond to God's call – made to each of us individually, but lived out in community – a call to salvation, to eternal life, to life with God.

Glory be to the Father....

### Suggestions

For those who would like to reflect a little more on the meaning and possible relevance of Christian community to their own lives, some texts and questions are offered below for prayerful, meditative reflection in the circumstances of one's own life.

I, the prisoner in the Lord, implore you to lead a life worthy of your vocation. Bear with one another charitably, in complete selflessness, gentleness and patience. Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together. There is one Body, one Spirit, just as you were all called into one and the same hope when you were called. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God who is Father of all, over all, through all and within all.

Each one of us, however, has been given his own share of grace, given as Christ allotted it.... And to some, his gift was that they should be apostles; to some, prophets; to some, evangelists; to some, pastors and teachers; so that the saints together make a unity in the work of service, building up the Body of Christ. In this way we are all to come to unity in our faith and in our knowledge of the Son of God, until we become the perfect Man, fully mature with the fulness of Christ himself. (Ephesians 4:1-7 & 11-13)

What is my call from God and in what ways do I share this with other people?

Adam prefigured the One to come, but the gift itself considerably outweighed the fall. If it is certain that through one man's fall so many died, it is even more certain that divine grace, coming through the one man, Jesus Christ, came to so many as an abundant free gift.... If it is certain that death reigned over everyone as the consequence of one man's fall, it is even more certain that one man, Jesus Christ, will cause everyone to reign in life who receives the free gift that he does not deserve, of being made righteous. (Romans 5: 15 & 17)

What does baptism really mean for me?

There is a variety of gifts but always the same Spirit; there are all sorts of service to be done, but always to the same Lord; working in all sorts of different ways, it is the same God who is working in all of them.

Just as a human body, though it is made up of many parts, is a single unit because all these parts, though many, make one body, so it is with Christ.... You together are Christ's body. (1 Corinthians 12: 4-6, 12 & 27)

In what ways is my life an act of service to God in my family and the wider Christian community?

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, escorted by all the angels, then he will take his seat on his throne of glory. All the nations will be assembled before him and he will separate men one from another as the shepherd separates sheep from goats. He will place the sheep on his right hand and the goats on his left. Then the king will say to those on his right hand, 'Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take for your heritage the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me,

sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me.’ Then the virtuous will say to him in reply, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you; or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you welcome; naked and clothe you; sick or in prison and go to see you?’ And the King will answer, ‘I will tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me.’ Next he will say to those on his left hand, ‘Go away from me, with your curse upon you, to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you never gave me food; I was thirsty and you never gave me anything to drink; I was a stranger and you never made me welcome, naked and you never clothed me, sick and in prison and you never visited me.’ Then it will be their turn to ask, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, a stranger or naked, sick or in prison, and did not come to your help?’ Then he will answer, ‘I tell you solemnly, in so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me.’ And they will go away to eternal punishment, and the virtuous to everlasting life. (Matthew 25: 31-46)

Do I really recognise Christ in other people and love them accordingly?

Now as they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and when he had said the blessing he broke it and gave it to the disciples. ‘Take it and eat,’ he said ‘this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and when he had returned thanks he gave it to them. ‘Drink all of you from this,’ he said ‘for this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, which is to be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. From now on, I tell you, I shall not drink wine until the day I drink the new wine with you in the kingdom of my Father.’ (Matthew 26:28-29)

Do I think to offer myself to God and for the service of others as Jesus gave himself for me?

At this sacred banquet at which Christ is received, the memory of his passion is renewed, our lives are filled with grace, and a promise of future glory is given to us.

*O sacrum convivium*

What does the Mass mean to me?

There are the anchorites or hermits, who have come through the test of living in a monastery for a long time, and have passed beyond the first fervour of monastic life. Thanks to the help and guidance of many, they are now trained to fight against the devil. They have built up their strength and go from the battle line in the ranks of their brothers to the single combat of the desert. Self-reliant now, without the support of another, they are ready with God's help to grapple single-handed with the vices of body and mind. (*Rule of St Benedict* 1: 3-5)

How has my life with others strengthened my Christian faith, enabling me to live it out daily?

Pope Francis' recent Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* could also be read.