

Home Retreat on St Benedict's Invitation to Life with Christ

25 September 2021

This talk provides a reflection on St Benedict's teaching on the call to life with Christ.

On the following day as John stood there again with two of his disciples, Jesus passed, and John stared hard at him and said, 'Look, there is the lamb of God.' Hearing this, the two disciples followed Jesus. Jesus turned round, saw them following and said, 'What do you want?' They answered, 'Rabbi' – which means Teacher – 'where do you live?' 'Come and see' he replied; so they went and saw where he lived, and stayed with them the rest of that day. It was about the tenth hour. (John 1:35-39)

'Come and see'. This is Jesus's invitation not only to the disciples of John the Baptist in the passage from St John's Gospel that we have just heard, but is also his invitation to all of us. Like the Twelve, as recorded by St Mark, we are invited to be Jesus's 'companions' (Mark 3:14), to be with him, to live and share our life with him, and to bear witness to him in the world.

Monks and nuns are simply Christians who have heard Jesus's call and have responded in a particular way; the life they lead is simply a particular form of the Christian life rooted – as all Christian life is – in baptism, and with the same goal as all Christians, namely, to become holy, to become Christlike. The invitation issued to all of us is an invitation to life with Christ, the love of whom, St Benedict teaches us, is to be preferred above all else (*RSB* 72:11); and if we are to hear this invitation and then respond, we must first listen. Thus, the opening words of the *Rule*:

Listen carefully, child of God, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice. (*RSB Prologue 1*)

The Prologue to the *Rule* is an exhortation to Christian discipleship in which St Benedict encourages us to listen and to respond to the voice of the Lord. He recognises our weaknesses and our frailties, our sinfulness, but at the same time holds out to us the hope of salvation, life in Christ – an offer that comes from God:

Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days? (Ps 33:13). 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 from vicious talk and your lips from all deceit; turn away from evil and do good; let peace be your quest and aim (Ps 33:14-15). Once you have done this, my eyes will be upon you and my ears will listen to your prayers; and even before you ask me, I will say to you: Here I am (Is 58:9). What dear brothers [and sisters] is more delightful than this voice of the Lord calling to us? See how the Lord in his love shows us the way of life. (RSB Prologue 17-20)

Of necessity, the invitation to life with God in Jesus includes the invitation to repentance, to seek forgiveness and turn away from sin, to a renewed attentiveness – and therefore to obedience – to the Word of God and, in recognition of our need, the promise of divine assistance. So, St Benedict continues:

We must, then, prepare our hearts and bodies for the battle of holy obedience to his instructions. What is not possible to us by nature, let us ask the Lord to supply by the help of his grace.... Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts

overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love. (*RSB Prologue* 40-41, 48-49)

So, the Prologue to the *Rule* is both an invitation and an exhortation: an invitation to listen and respond to God's call, so that we may come to true life with Him in Christ; and an exhortation to live a life 'clothed... with faith and the performance of good works' (*RSB Prologue* 21), ever vigilant over our thoughts and desires which can lead us away from God and into sin, so that we might be like the one of whom Benedict says, 'While these temptations were still *young, he caught hold of them and dashed them against Christ* (Ps 14:4; 136:9). (*RSB Prologue* 28) If we are to be holy, then we are to be wholly transparent in our life with Christ.

In Chapter 4 of his *Rule*, St Benedict sets out what he calls 'the tools of the spiritual craft... by which we toil faithfully' (*RSB* 4:75, 78), as we seek to respond to God's call to union with Him, the call to holiness. Unsurprisingly, he begins by encouraging us to '*love the Lord with your whole heart, your whole soul and all your strength, and [to] love your neighbour as yourself* (Matthew 22:37-39; Mark 12:30-31; Luke 10:27). This, as we know from the Gospels, is Jesus' summary of the Law: love of God realised in love of one another; and St Benedict then offers some particular guidance as to how this teaching can be put into practice. So, for example:

Renounce yourself in order to follow Christ (Matthew 16:24; Luke 9:23); *discipline your body* (1 Cor 9:27); do not pamper yourself, but love fasting. You must relieve the lot of the poor, *clothe the naked, visit the sick* (Matthew 25:36), and bury the dead. Go to help the troubled and console the sorrowing. (*RSB* 4:10-19)

Your way of acting should be different from the world's way; the love of Christ must come before all else. You are not to act in anger or nurse a grudge. Rid your heart of all deceit. Never give a hollow greeting of peace or turn away when someone needs your love. (*RSB* 4:20-26)

Do not repay one bad turn with another (1 Thess 5:15; 1 Peter 3:9)... *Love your enemies* (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27) (RSB 4:29, 31)

You must *not* be *proud, nor be given to wine* (Titus 1:7; 1 Tim 3:3) (RSB 4:34)

Place your hope in God alone. If you notice something good in yourself, give credit to God, not to yourself, but be certain that the evil you commit is always your own and yours to acknowledge. (RSB 4:41-43)

As soon as wrongful thoughts come into your heart dash them against Christ and disclose them to your spiritual father. (RSB 4:50)

Listen readily to holy reading, and devote yourself often to prayer. Every day with tears and sighs confess your past sins to God in prayer and change from these evil ways in the future. (RSB 4:55-58)

Do not aspire to be called holy before you really are, but first be holy that you may more truly be called so. (RSB 4:62)

And finally, never lose hope in God's mercy. (RSB 4:74)

For St Benedict, then, the road that leads to life is the path that Jesus walked, and the call to his disciples is to walk it in union with him, so that they too may come to the fulness of life which Jesus came to bring (John 10:10). But, and this is crucial, St Benedict knew and understood well that, fallen human beings that we are, we cannot do this without God's grace. Hence, the fact that we must never lose hope in His mercy, placing our hope in Him alone, and the advice that we examine our consciences, so that we should grow in self-knowing, learning to identify those thoughts, desires and actions that will lead us to God and those that only lead us into sin. The consequence of this increased self-awareness is that we come to understand and accept our real and abiding need of God – for all that we are and all that we have. This is because our knowledge and acceptance of our

frailties, failures and sin should lead us to recognise what God in His love has done for us, increasing our thanksgiving and love in return.

This growth in self-knowledge is fundamental to St Benedict's teaching in the longest chapter of the *Rule*, Chapter 7 on Humility, the purpose of which is that we should come to understand ourselves just as we really are, and this in relation to God, and in consequence learn to offer ourselves to God just as we are: this is real self-knowledge, genuine transparency before God in Christ. St Benedict's portrait of the monk who has ascended to the twelfth step of humility, manifesting this 'in his bearing no less than in his heart' and 'judging himself always guilty on account of his sins' (RSB 7:62, 64), is not a depiction of misery and dejection, but rather of one who has come both to know his need of God and that he has been forgiven. Thus:

after ascending all these steps of humility, the monk will quickly arrive at that perfect love of God which casts out fear (1 John 4:18). Through this love, all that he once performed with dread, he will now begin to observe without effort, as though naturally, from habit, no longer out of fear of hell, but out of love for Christ, good habit and delight in virtue. All this the Lord will by the Holy Spirit graciously manifest in his workman now cleansed of vices and sins. (RSB 7:67-70)

This is a description of the 'purity of heart' that Cassian teaches is the proximate goal of the monastic life, which will then lead to the final goal, namely the vision of God, which means union with Him.

But living for God alone involves living for other people as well – loved in God and for Jesus's sake, as well as for their own, as explained by Jesus in his Parable of the Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25: 31-46). And St Benedict is equally clear that the Christian life is not simply lived in solitude:

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 (Rom 12:10), supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behavior, 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 altogether to everlasting life. (*RSB 72*)

Some Suggestions

The following short biblical quotations can be used to reflect upon the call to life with Christ and how best to respond. In reflecting on these, the following questions might be helpful:

- In what ways have I heard the call to life with Christ?
- How have I been able to respond positively to this call?
- What are the things that prevent me responding wholeheartedly?
- What are my true desires?

I have come so they may have life and have it to the full. (John 10:10)

For anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation. (2 Cor 5:17)

Life to me, of course, is Christ, but then death would bring me something more. (Philippians 1:21)

I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now not with my own life but with the life of Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in this body I live in faith: faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake. (Galatians 2:20)

The law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:2)

I am the living bread which has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever; and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world. (John 6:51)