Manner's Maketh Man by David Moses

I spoke to our children this week about manners, not because they have shown any lack of good manners but quite the opposite – I have never known such a kindly start to a term. I explained that, when I was at school, a very tough female teacher, who I was quite frightened of, was once coming toward me in a corridor. I held the door open, and she said: “young man, I hope that that you are not holding that door for me because I am a lady.” I replied “No Miss – I am holding it open because I am a gentleman.” I got into trouble – of course.

I held a shop door open for a lady recently. She said to me only: “there are not many of you left.” That was a compliment (I think) but saddened me, and I asked our children always to be thoughtful in their behavior towards others and to prove the aforesaid lady wrong!

Manner’s Maketh Man, Manners are what make us ‘lady’ or ‘gentleman.’ But this value would appear to be becoming now obscure, and though we might recognise good manners, it might also be true that we might struggle to define what manners are. Perhaps they are the unenforced standards of conduct, which show that we are properly aware of others, and cultured and kind. Though through history manners were written down and discussed, they are perhaps now unwritten laws setting standards for human behavior, but also perhaps with no formal system for punishing transgressions – other than social disapproval. “Men and women must be educated, in a great degree, by the opinions and manners of the society they live in,” says Mary Wollstonecraft.

Benedictine monasteries value learning, good manners, discipline and self-respect. The monks taught that these ordinary virtues were part of the call to holiness. St Benedict reminds us that all of these virtues – including holiness – are vital for a civilisation of decency, order and peaceful prosperity. Indeed, from this we could say that if self-respect informs our morals, it is respect and a sensitive awareness of the feelings of others, which guides our manners. ‘Good manners’ is the art of making those people with whom we meet or live easy in our company. “Whoever makes the fewest people uneasy is the best bred in the room,” so says Jonathon Swift. You can get through life with poor manners, but it is easier and more graceful with good ones… and good manners tend to develop into good morals.