

Sermon 24th July 2022

Rule of St Benedict



As most of you know, this is the last Sunday that I will be here at St Hilda's.

Thinking about what to preach about today, I decided to speak about myself and how I see my spirituality.

As you may know, I am an associate of the Southern Star Abbey in Kopua, just north of Dannevirke, which is a Cistercian abbey and follows the Rule of St Benedict.

The time when Benedict lived was when the Roman empire was falling apart. Its disintegration had taken a long time with the farther reaches of the empire, such as Britain, being taken over by others earlier and the Roman empire had divided into west and east at the end of the fourth century. The official date for the fall of the western part of the Roman Empire was in 476 when Odoacer deposed the last western emperor, Romulus Augustulus, although the empire continued in the east for another thousand years.

It was a very turbulent time politically, although many of invaders were Christian, there were differences in belief, particularly about the position of Jesus in relation to the Father.

The following passage is from the Universalis page for that day:

St Benedict (480 - 547)

Benedict was born in Nursia, in Umbria, and studied in Rome; but he was unable to stomach the dissolute life of the city, and he became a solitary hermit at Subiaco. His reputation spread, and some monks asked him to be their abbot; but they did not like the discipline he imposed and tried to poison him.

Benedict organised various small communities of monks and nuns in various places, including the great monastery of Monte Cassino. He drew up a set of rules to guide the communal life of monasteries. Although this was not the first monastic rule ever, the Rule of St Benedict has proved so wise and balanced that it has served as the foundation of practically every attempt at communal living ever since – and not only in religious communities. The Rule of St Benedict recognises that people aim at perfection but often fall well short of it, and aims to be a “rule for beginners” in which even the least perfect and least able can grow in spiritual stature. To visit a Benedictine monastery of almost any kind is to find oneself spending time among a group of people who, by their strivings to live and grow together, have become more and more *themselves*, as God intended them, instead of being crushed into false uniformity by some idealistic and authoritarian regime.

Pope Benedict XVI said this:

‘With his life and work St Benedict exercised a fundamental influence on the development of European civilization and culture and helped Europe to emerge from the “dark night of history” that followed the fall of the Roman Empire’

For those of us in the world, too, the Rule of St Benedict has much to say: it drags our eyes up to the stars but keeps our feet firmly on the ground; it calls us to perfection but keeps us sane.

Benedict didn’t invent monasticism or write the first monastic rule but he did write a rule that is much more liveable than some previous rules.

People had gone into the desert to live lives of holiness and some had gathered together and lived under a rule of life but often they were extremely harsh.

Benedict describes his rule as “a little rule for beginners” and he seeks to stretch those who are strong but support those who are weak, spiritually and physically.

Ruth Haley Barton writes:

‘A rule is a way of ordering our life around the values, practices and relationships that keep us open and available to God for the work of spiritual transformation that only God can bring about.’ (Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation).

‘The word rule comes from the Latin word *regulus*, and one of the meanings of this word is “trellis”. In the same way that a trellis gives a plant structure and support for its flourishing, so also a rule of life can provide that for individuals and for communities.

The Benedictine Rule, roughly broken down, gives instructions that bring shape and support to four areas of life in community: prayer, work, relationships, and rest. The desire of the community was to make room for God and make room for love.’ (Lectio 365, July 11th 2022).

Here are some sections from the rule:

Put Christ before everything

Whenever you begin any good work you should first of all make a most pressing appeal to Christ our Lord to bring it to perfection; that he, who has honoured us by counting us among his children, may never be grieved by our evil deeds. For we must always serve him with the good things he has given us in such a way that he may never – as an angry father disinherits his sons or even like a master who inspires fear – grow impatient with our sins and consign us to everlasting punishment, like wicked servants who would not follow him to glory.

So we should at long last rouse ourselves, prompted by the words of Scripture: *Now is the time for us to rise from sleep*. Our eyes should be open to the God-given light, and we should listen in wonderment to the message of the divine voice as it daily cries out: *Today, if you shall hear his voice, harden not your hearts*; and again: *If anyone has ears to hear, let him listen to what the Spirit is*

saying to the churches. And what does the Spirit say? Come my sons, listen to me; I will teach you the fear of the Lord. Hurry, while you have the light of life, so that death's darkness may not overtake you.

And the Lord as he seeks the one who will do his work among the throng of people to whom he makes that appeal, says again: *Which of you wants to live to the full; who loves long life and the enjoyment of prosperity?* And, if when you hear this you say, I do, God says to you: *If you desire true and everlasting life, keep your tongue from evil and your lips from deceit; turn away from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it.* And when you have done these things my eyes will be upon you and my ears will be attentive to your prayers; and before you call upon my name I shall say to you: *Behold, I am here.* What could be more delightful, dearest brothers, than the voice of our Lord's invitation to us? In his loving kindness he reveals to us the way of life.

And so, girded with faith and the performance of good works, let us follow in his paths by the guidance of the Gospel; then we shall deserve to see him *who has called us into his kingdom.* If we wish to attain a dwelling-place in his kingdom we shall not reach it unless we hasten there by our good deeds.

Just as there exists an evil fervour, a bitter spirit, which divides us from God and leads us to hell, so there is a good fervour which sets us apart from evil inclinations and leads us towards God and eternal life. Monks should put this fervour into practice with an overflowing love: that is, they should *surpass each other in mutual esteem*, accept their weaknesses, either of body or of behaviour, with the utmost patience; and vie with each other in acceding to requests. No one should follow what he considers to be good for himself, but rather what seems good for another. They should display brotherly love in a chaste manner; fear God in a spirit of love; revere their abbot with a genuine and submissive affection. Let them put Christ before all else; and may he lead us all to everlasting life.

The Rule is about helping people to live together in following Christ. A monk's day begins before sunrise with prayers and psalms and seven times throughout the day it is interspersed with further Prayers and psalms, mass until bed in the evening. The Lord's prayer is said twice to remind the monks to "forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us". There is no room for false belief about anyone being more saintly than anyone else.

Between the routine of prayer there is time for private prayer, reading and meditation, work at whatever it is that the monastery does to pay the bills and routine housework, time together to relax and talk and time to rest.

It is a balanced life that ensures that no one thing gets too much emphasis while at the same time remembering that preferring Christ is at the heart of everything that is done.

Many groups have the rule of Saint Benedict at their heart and the Anglican church is based on it as well.

In the past, we had matins or morning prayer and vespers or evening prayer. On Sunday, often communion was optional after Matins whereas now, normally, we have communion every Sunday. If you look in the prayer book you will see services for morning prayer, midday prayer and evening prayer or Compline. We used some of these prayers when we were in lockdown and were meeting online and some people use them for their daily prayer times, alone or as a family.

People, such as me, have a connection to a monastery and have taken vows as a lay person as an associate or oblate (depending on the monastery and the order) to follow the rule insofar as we can in our normal daily lives.

There are a growing number of meditation groups that are connected to the World Community of Christian Meditation that has a “monastery without walls” and is based on the rule of Saint Benedict. People may also now have a deeper involvement and become an “oblate” of that community.

For me, meditation has become a more and more important part of my life, alone and as part of meditation groups and so I am leaving St Hilda’s to pursue that. I am not sure where I will end up but will still living in Upper Hutt and will no doubt see you around about.

It is a new time for me and, also, with Andrea and Lance leaving, a new time for St Hilda’s. That can be a time of loss but also it can be the beginning of new things.

Saint Benedict calls his rule: a little rule that we have written for beginners”. I hope that we can all be beginners as we see, what ever our age and circumstances, that there is always something new to move into.

Amen.

Judy Youmans