

The Parish Church of St George the Martyr  
Waterlooville

‘Reflections on St Benedict’  
Lent Course 2020



Revd Dr Colin Lawlor

# Introduction

*To be read before the first session.*

St Benedict is undoubtedly one of the most significant individuals in Western Christianity. The Rule of St Benedict, though intended for those living in a monastic community, has great wisdom for all Christians whether lay, ordained or called to the religious life as monks or nuns. Indeed, in recent years many Christians have discovered elements of The Rule of St Benedict to be helpful for their own Christian Discipleship, not least the practical and spiritual relevance of monastic rhythms to daily living.

Benedict's rule is wide ranging and covers every imaginable area of life. Some elements of it we might find unedifying to modern ways of thinking and we need to consider that it was written in an age far distant from our own. In our Lent course we will only be looking at a few short passages of the Rule of St Benedict and considering how they might aid us in our own Lenten journey and Christian pilgrimage.

Each session will include an opening prayer, a section of the Rule of St Benedict, a short reflection and some questions for us to ponder. The final question in each session asks us to think about how the reading might be applied to our own Lenten journey and Christian pilgrimage. No one should feel compelled to answer any questions they do not want to, but to take from each session what is helpful to them. We will conclude by saying a psalm or prayer together, or listening to a passage of scripture.

For those who might be interested further reading and practical suggestions will be provided at the end of the course.

## **Week One**

### **A Biography of St Benedict**

*Ask for a volunteer (or possibly two volunteers) to read the following brief biography and introduction to the rule.*

St Benedict is generally regarded as the founder of Western monasticism and yet for someone who had such an influence on the Christian faith we know very little about him at all. Much of what we do know of his life was written about 40 years after his death by St Gregory the Great. In Gregory's *Dialogues* written between 593 AD and 594 AD he gives some details about the life of Benedict, said to be based upon the verbal testimony of Benedict's disciples. Gregory tells us that Benedict was born around 480 AD in Nursia (present day Norcia) in Umbria, Italy. For a time he studied in Rome, but became disillusioned by the moral laxity of the city, and so in around 500 AD he became a hermit in a cave in the mountains of Subiaco, east of Rome. His fame as a man of great holiness spread quickly and he was soon joined by a number of disciples. This led to Benedict being offered the leadership of a neighbouring monastery which he accepted, only to find that the ill-disciplined monks were unwilling to submit to his leadership. At some unknown date, probably around 529 AD Benedict founded the Monastery of Monte Cassino, which would eventually become the mother house of the Benedictine Order.

Benedict died around the year 547 AD at Monte Cassino.

## The Rule of St Benedict

This bare sketch is all we know of Benedict's life with any degree of certainty. However, we do have something far more significant in that we have the monastic rule written by Benedict himself. The Rule of St Benedict became the foundation of most forms of monasticism in the Western Church that followed. There had been monks in the West before Benedict, but Western Monasticism was chaotic. Some forms of monastic life were extremely harsh and ascetic, others were incredibly lax. Benedict's rule revealed his profound knowledge of human nature and his Roman genius for organisation.

The significant thing about the Rule of St Benedict is that it steered a kind of middle way between the austere harshness of some of the more extreme forms of monastic life and the laxity of other forms of monasticism. It became so significant in the West because of its moderation, common sense and balance.

The monk's day was to be organised around the following tasks:

Prayer and worship (this was the most important element)

Work ('idleness in the enemy of the soul' he argues in the rule)

Rest

Reading and study

Silence and meditation.

# **Session One: ‘The love of Christ before all things’**

## **Prayer**

*We pray together*

Everlasting God, we give you thanks for the purity and humility with which you endowed your servant Benedict: Grant us grace, in union with his example and prayers, to hallow and conform our souls and bodies to the purpose of your most holy will; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

## **Reading from Chapter 4 of the Rule**

*Ask for a volunteer to read the following*

‘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. Bind yourself to no oath lest it proves false, but speak the truth with heart and tongue.’

## **Reflection**

Lent is a time for repentance, to return to the Lord seeking forgiveness for those times we have failed God and one another. Perhaps a time for putting Christ before all things?

## Questions (to reflect on as a group)

1. Is there anything that you find particularly challenging about the passage?
2. Can you think of a time or a situation when you have put Christ before all things?
3. What do you think Benedict means by ‘never give anyone a hollow greeting of peace?’
4. Is there anything you can take from this passage to reflect upon during Lent and throughout your Christian pilgrimage?

*We conclude this session by saying together some words from Psalm 119.*

Happy are those whose way is blameless,  
who walk in the law of the Lord.  
Happy are those who keep his decrees,  
who seek him with their whole heart,  
who also do no wrong,  
but walk in his ways.  
You have commanded your precepts  
to be kept diligently  
O that my ways may be steadfast  
in keeping your statutes!  
Then I shall not be put to shame,  
having my eyes fixed on all your commandments.  
I will praise you with an upright heart,  
when I learn your righteous ordinances.  
I will observe your statutes;  
do not utterly forsake me.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit  
As it was in the beginning, is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

*We say together the Grace*

## **Session 2: The Observance of Lent**

### **Prayer**

*We pray together*

Eternal God, who made Benedict a wise master in the school of your service and a guide to many called to follow the rule of Christ: grant that we may put your love before all else and seek with joy the way of your commandments. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **Reading from Chapter 49 of the Rule on the observance of Lent**

*Ask for a volunteer to read the following*

The life of a monastic ought to be a continuous Lent. Since few, however, have the strength for this, we urge the entire community during these days of Lent to keep its manner of life most pure and to wash away in this holy season of Lent the negligences of other times. This we can do in a fitting manner by refusing to indulge evil habits and by devoting ourselves to prayer with tears, to reading, to compunction of heart and self-denial. During these days, therefore, we will add to the usual measure of our service something by way of private prayer and abstinence from food or drink, so that each of us will have something above the assigned measure to offer God of our own will with the joy of the Holy Spirit. In other words, let each one deny themselves some food, drink, sleep, needless talking and idle jesting, and look forward to a holy Easter with joy and spiritual longing.

## **Reflection**

In hearing this passage our immediate reaction might be to think that Benedict is giving us an impossible task, to act as though every day is like a continuous Lent. We need to remember that Benedict is writing principally for those who are called to the monastic life. There is, however, a great deal that we can reflect on from this passage as Christians. In fact there is much wisdom here. Benedict recognises that few have the strength to live a continuous Lent. Nonetheless he encourages us to strive during Lent to live lives worthy of our calling; to repent, fast (whether that be food, or ‘needless talking’ or ‘idle jesting’ or something else) and to pray so as to come to a joyful Easter, and to carry something of our Lenten pilgrimage into our everyday lives

## **Questions (to reflect on as a group)**

1. Reflect upon your own Lenten discipline. Have you decided to give something up for Lent? Perhaps you have taken something on. Do these things help you to repent, to turn back to God as we prepare for Easter and if so in what ways?
2. What do you think about the idea of our lives being like a ‘continuous Lent’?
3. Is there something ‘extra’ you can do in order to prepare your soul for the joy of Easter?
4. Is there anything you can take from this passage to reflect upon during Lent and throughout your Christian pilgrimage?

*We say together some words from Psalm 112*

Praise the Lord!

Happy are those who fear the Lord,  
who greatly delight in his commandments.  
Their descendants will be mighty in the land;  
the generation of the upright will be blessed.  
Wealth and riches are in their houses,  
and their righteousness endures for ever.  
They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright;  
they are gracious, merciful, and righteous.  
It is well with those who deal generously and lend,  
who conduct their affairs with justice.  
For the righteous will never be moved;  
they will be remembered for ever.  
They are not afraid of evil tidings;  
their hearts are firm, secure in the Lord.  
Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid;  
in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.  
They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor;  
their righteousness endures for ever;  
their horn is exalted in honour.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit  
As it was in the beginning, is now and shall be for ever.  
Amen.

*We say together the Grace*

## **Session 3: Humility**

### **Prayer**

*We pray together*

Merciful God,

Who gave such grace to your servant Benedict that he served you with singleness of heart and loved you above all things. Help us to forsake all that hold us back from following Christ and to grow into his likeness, from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

### **Reading from Chapter 7 of the Rule on humility**

*Ask for a volunteer to read the following*

‘The second step of humility is that we love not our own will nor take pleasure in the satisfaction of our desires; rather we shall imitate by our actions that saying of Christ’s: ‘I have come not to do my own will, but the will of the One who sent me’ (John 6:38).’

### **Reflection**

This is just one of the steps of humility in the rule, there are 12 altogether, and they are very challenging because they go against so much that we really value. It is quite natural for us to want to pursue what we desire. Perhaps we need to consider whether what we desire hurts others? Perhaps we are asked to consider the impact of our words and actions on our own Christian community, the wider society and God’s created order. Perhaps the challenge is not so much as to go against our own desire but to conform our will to God’s will.

## Questions (to reflect on as a group)

1. What is your immediate reaction to this passage?
2. What does 'humility' mean to you? Can you think of examples of humility or people who you regard as humble who may have inspired you?
3. How might we seek to conform our will to God's will?
4. Is there anything you can take from this passage to reflect upon during Lent and throughout your Christian pilgrimage?

*Ask for a volunteer to read the following*

Luke 14:7-11

When Jesus noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable. 'When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, "Give this person your place", and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher"; then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

*We say together the Grace*

## Session 4: Prayer

### Prayer

*We pray together*

O God, who filled your most blessed servant Benedict with the spirit of all the righteous: grant us, your servants that filled with his spirit, we may faithfully accomplish, with your assistance, that which we have promised. Through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

### **Reading from Chapter 20 of the Rule: Reverence in prayer.**

*Ask a volunteer to read the following*

‘Whenever we want to ask a favour of someone powerful, we do it humbly and respectfully, for fear of presumption. How much more important, then, to lay our petitions before the God of all with the utmost humility and sincere devotion. We must know that God regards our purity of heart and tears of compunction, not our many words. Prayer should therefore be short and pure, unless perhaps it is prolonged under the inspiration of divine grace.’

## Reflection

The chapter on reverence in prayer is very short but very instructive. There is much in the Rule about praying as a community. This is not surprising since Benedict is primary writing for monks living communally. The teaching on private prayer is sparser but Benedict is clear about the conditions that should be at the heart of private prayer. It is to be humble. It is to be pure. There should be tears of compunction (this is perhaps to be understood as acknowledging those times we have not behaved well or as God would wish). Prayer should be short and simple, not complicated ('unless under the inspiration of divine grace')

## Questions (to reflect on as a group)

1. In your own prayer life what do you find most helpful. Is it, for example, praying together as a church family or private prayers or silence?
2. What might Benedict mean by being humble and pure in our private prayers?
3. What might be meant by 'under the inspiration of divine grace'?
4. Is there anything you can take from this passage to reflect upon during Lent and throughout your Christian pilgrimage?

*We say together some words from Psalm 112*

I cry aloud to God,  
aloud to God, that he may hear me. In the day of my  
trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched  
out without wearying; my soul refuses to be comforted. I  
think of God, and I moan; I meditate, and my spirit faints.  
You keep my eyelids from closing;

I am so troubled that I cannot speak.  
I consider the days of old,  
and remember the years of long ago.  
I commune with my heart in the night;  
I meditate and search my spirit:  
'Will the Lord spurn for ever,  
and never again be favourable?  
Has his steadfast love ceased for ever?  
Are his promises at an end for all time?

Has God forgotten to be gracious?  
Has he in anger shut up his compassion?'  
And I say, 'It is my grief  
that the right hand of the Most High has changed.'  
I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;  
I will remember your wonders of old.  
I will meditate on all your work,  
and muse on your mighty deeds.  
Your way, O God, is holy.  
What god is so great as our God?  
You are the God who works wonders;  
you have displayed your might among the peoples.  
With your strong arm you redeemed your people,  
the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.  
When the waters saw you, O God,  
when the waters saw you, they were afraid;  
the very deep trembled.  
The clouds poured out water;  
the skies thundered;  
your arrows flashed on every side.  
The crash of your thunder was in the whirlwind;  
your lightnings lit up the world;  
the earth trembled and shook.

Your way was through the sea,  
your path, through the mighty waters;  
yet your footprints were unseen.  
You led your people like a flock  
by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it  
was in the beginning is now and shall be for ever. Amen.

*We say the Grace together*

## **Session 5: Silence**

### **Prayer**

*We pray together*

Stir up in your Church, O Lord, the spirit that animated Saint Benedict, that filled with this spirit we may learn to love what he loved and practice what he taught. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen

### **Reading from Chapter 6 of the Rule: Concerning Silence**

*Ask a volunteer to read the following*

‘Let us follow the prophet’s counsel: ‘I said, I have resolved to keep watch over my ways that I may never sin with my tongue. I was silent and was humbled, and I refrained even from good works’ (Psalm 39.1-1). Here the prophet indicates that there are times when good words are to be left unsaid out of esteem for silence. For all the more reason, then, should evil speech be curbed so that punishment for sin may be avoided.’

## Reflection

I remember once speaking with one of the monks at Worth Abbey. He told me that he was mystified by a member of staff at the Abbey who always had a pair of headphones in her ears listening to music and so he gently asked her why she always felt the need to have some background noise in whatever task she was performing. She answered: 'Because I am frightened of what might come into my mind if there were silence.'

It seems to me that we live in a world which has become increasingly noisy. As a university lecturer I was very aware that many of the undergraduate students, particularly the younger ones, lived lives that were full of noise. And yet alongside this a large number of books have been written in recent years about silence and about meditation. Clearly people value silence. Although chapter 6 of the Rule is short, silence is a cornerstone of Benedictine life. This is not just refraining from gossip or 'evil speech' it is also about approaching God in silence in order to 'listen'. 'Silent' is an anagram of 'listen'. St John of the Cross, a sixteenth century monk, once wrote: 'That which we most need in order to make progress [in our spiritual life] is to be silent before God, with the desire and with the tongue, for the language God best hears is the silent language of love.'

## Questions (to reflect on as a group)

1. How do you respond to the quotation of John of the Cross?
2. Do you value silence in your prayer life or is it something that makes you fearful?
3. Do you manage to find time during busy lives just to be silent in prayer?
4. Is there anything you can take from this passage to reflect upon during Lent and throughout your Christian pilgrimage?
5. How might we use silence effectively in our worshipping life at St George's.

*Ask a volunteer to read the following*

### **1 Kings 19:9-12**

Then the word of the Lord came to Elijah, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away. He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.

*We say together the Grace*

## **Conclusion (to be reflected upon after the end of the Course)**

Clearly Benedict wrote his rule for those living together in a religious community. He wanted the lives of monks and nuns to be ordered and balanced in such a way that the communities would be both physically and spiritual healthy. Most of us do not feel called to the religious life as monks or nuns but this does not mean that a rule of life might not assist us in our daily life. Perhaps the Rule of St Benedict offers a wisdom that would aid us in our pilgrimage not least the balance of prayer and worship; work; rest; reading and study, silence and meditation. Many Christian lay folk live under a simple rule of life. If this is something you might like to think about feel free to speak with one of the clergy. The important thing to remember is that any rule should be aspirational rather than compulsory - busy lives often get in the way and there will be times when things will slip!

### **Further resources**

There are numerous editions of the Rule of St Benedict. You can also access it free on line.

Carmen Aceveto Butcher (2006), *Man of Blessing: A Life of St Benedict*. Paraclete Press

Joan Chittester (2010), *The Rule of St Benedict: A spirituality of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*.

Anselm Grun (2006), *Benedict of Nursia: His message for today*.

Christopher Jameson. *Finding Sanctuary: Monastic steps for everyday life*. Orion Publishing.

Christopher Jameson. *Finding Happiness: Monastic steps for a fulfilling life*. Orion Publishing.



[www.stgeorges.church](http://www.stgeorges.church)