

The following are excerpts from the address by the Bishop of Gloucester [England], the Rt Rev. Michael Perham, President, at the 2006 Annual Meeting of the Alcuin Club, a society founded in England in 1897 to study the Book of Common Prayer in its various national editions and to publish books on its history, theology, and use.

St Benedict and Anglican Worship

Three times in my ministry I have found myself attached to a religious foundation with Benedictine roots. For three years I shared the life of Winchester Cathedral as the Bishop's chaplain. ...[L]ater, for six years I shared the life of Norwich Cathedral as the Canon Precentor. Herbert de Losinga, the first bishop, had established the Benedictine Rule there in 1095. His tomb was before the high altar. Each day at Evening Prayer we read just a snippet from the Rule of St Benedict. And now I share the life of Gloucester Cathedral, back among the Benedictines or at least their memory and their influence and, I don't doubt, their prayers. In my chapel a stones-throw from the cathedral there is a new Icon of Our Lady with St Francis, holding a cross, and with St Benedict, holding the Rule. His memory, his influence, and his prayers seem very close.

There is one quite general observation I want to make before engaging with some detail of St Benedict's Rule. Its starting point for me is not Winchester or Norwich or Gloucester, but Le Bec [one of the most historic European Benedictine abbeys located in northwestern France]. Never outside the Church of England have I felt so at home in worship as when I arrived one August day 25 years ago in the Abbey Church at Le Bec where they live by the Rule of St Benedict. The worship there in a for-

eign land and a foreign tongue was like coming home. Later, when I was at Norwich where, as elsewhere, it had been 450 years since the monks had left, still you had a very deep sense of being their heirs, of having caught something of their spirituality. I sense it in Gloucester Cathedral sometimes as I let myself in through the cloisters in the early morning.

The followers of St Benedict have been enormously influential in this land, together with the other religious orders that lived with variations on his Rule, and I believe that Benedictine worship—strong on community, strong on continuity, strong on the Divine Office as the heart-beat of life, Scriptural, reflective, understated—has greatly shaped the spirituality of the Church of England.

I sometimes reflect on the huge spiritual influence of the late Basil Hume [the much-loved rugby and squash playing Benedictine abbot who was chosen by the Vatican against his will—at the suggestion of the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury—to be Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster and primate of the Roman Catholic Church in England and Wales, 1976-1999], his attractiveness to people outside his own communion and indeed outside the Churches. In part it was of course a lovely humble holiness. But I think there was more to it than that. I do believe that the fact that he was a Benedictine monk was sig-

Benedictine worship—strong on community, strong on continuity, strong on the Divine Office as the heart-beat of life, Scriptural, reflective, understated—has greatly shaped the spirituality of the Church of England.

nificant. He was a Roman Catholic and a monk, but he was very English and his spirituality seemed to engage with the English temperament. ...Benedictine worship and spirituality have greatly shaped Anglican worship and spirituality, the Prayer Book has a Benedictine flavour to it and, in the providence of God, that Benedictine/Anglican ethos has spoken to the English temperament, or even contributed to it.

I don't want to claim too much, nevertheless remember, in the harsh statistics of Anglican numerical decline, many cathedrals buck the trend. Worshippers in them are on the increase. Could it be that a more Benedictine Church might draw many to Christ? If it could be, then that lesson ought first to be learned by the churches where once the monks sang their praises and offered their prayers.

What can we learn from St Benedict's Rule for our worship today? There are six major themes I want to explore, but, turning to the Rule, I start with two very simple things that can shape how we understand the liturgical code that he sets out in Chapters 8 to 20 of the Rule. In Chapter 9, St Benedict states:

Vigils [Matins, the first Office after midnight] begin with the verse: "Lord, open my lips and my mouth shall proclaim your praise." After this has been said three times, the following order is observed

and he goes on to mention psalms, refrains, and hymns. But what a powerful beginning to the night office that would end shortly before sunrise. Not just once, but three times the verse from Psalm 51:

O Lord, open my lips

And my mouth shall proclaim your praise.

It seems to me that St Benedict, in this repeated opening, is giving emphasis to one of two major pri-

orities in the offering of the Church's worship. There is, in a sense, nothing in it for me. It is all for Him, the Father who opens our lips that our mouths may proclaim His praise. We say it every day at the beginning of Morning Prayer. ... As the opening words of the morning Office, they affirm an important truth. Why do we worship? Why do we celebrate the Divine Office? Why do we take liturgical care? Because we exist to give glory to God. We exist to offer Him praise. But, even that which we exist to do, we cannot do without His Spirit, so we pray that He will touch our lips so that our mouths may proclaim—"show forth" as the Prayer Book [Rite I] has it—His praise.

At this point I need to acknowledge that the writer who has most opened up the Rule for me is Esther de Waal. It is her translation that I shall quote, and they are her reflections in *A Lifegiving Way* that will sometimes come to the fore. And I acknowledge that, with gratitude, at this point, because I want to quote what she says about Chapter 16 of the Rule, which I need to read to you first. It is but one paragraph.

The Prophet says: "Seven times a day I praised you." We will fulfil this sacred number of seven if we satisfy our obligations of service at Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline, for it was of these hours during the day that he said: "Seven times a day I have praised you." Concerning Vigils [Matins], the same Prophet says: "At midnight I arose to give you praise." Therefore, we should "praise our Creator for His just judgements" at these times: Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and Compline and "let us arise at night to give Him praise."

And Esther de Waal comments on this chapter Each of the five quotations from the Psalm

includes the word “praise.” This is what this chapter, and the whole of the liturgical code, is ultimately about. There are so many ways of praying, so many ways of addressing God, in repentance, in petition, in intercession. But in the end we were made “to praise our Creator.” Gratitude puts everything in a different perspective. It prevents me from taking anything for granted.

[St Benedict recognizes] that, although we are made for praise and that we worship because we can do no other, nevertheless the offering of worship, the celebration of liturgy is turned by God into a gift whereby we are strengthened and sustained. Worship is a two-way traffic—the giving of praise and the receiving of grace. We offer the one. God offers the other. Worship is for the Creator, yet it feeds not Him, but us.

If we turn now to some of the major liturgical emphases of St Benedict’s Rule, it is with this twofold truth held before us. The emphases I want to explore are Stability, Community, Rhythm, Season, Psalmody, and Memory.

First stability. Of course liturgical stability for the Benedictines is only part of the wider *stabilitas* that is a fundamental of his or her life. What Benedict sets out to do is to give such a clear framework of worship and such rich resources carefully prescribed that the worshippers are not so faced with choices and decisions on the surface that all their spiritual energy is absorbed at that level, but they are set free to be, to reflect and to pray at a deeper below-the-surface level, an interior experience that can draw them into the prayer of heaven. This is order. This is both predictability and precision. There is liturgical discipline. There is balance. ... [What] Benedict is trying to do is to bring us, through ordered reflection on the Scriptures and through praise to the point where we may pray. ... He does encourage silence. He does make a plea for brevity. But he does not constrain.

When it comes to prayer, the Spirit takes over. It is an important liturgical principle. Structure, shape, outline, rubric, text are all there not to form a strait-jacket, but to create a stability and a security in which we may be free, creative, and spontaneous.

The **second emphasis is community.** It hardly needs saying that St Benedict’s Rule is for people called into community.

Third is rhythm. St Benedict, with his provision for seven Offices, eight with the pre-dawn Vigils [Matins], envisages life punctuated by prayer. Well, not quite that, for these Offices, most of them short, sharp, and prayerful, are not quite so much punctuation marks as points where prayer comes to the surface, while, the rest of the time, it flows quietly below it. If, in any 24 hours, you turn eight times to liturgical prayer, it creates in you an undercurrent of prayerfulness that is part of the heartbeat and rhythm of life. ... [The] message is that rhythm, and rhythm that gives mental space and refreshment, has value in a life that wants to be free of intolerable pressures and stresses.

[Esther de Waal writes of the liturgical phrase “O God, come to my aid, O Lord, make haste to help me:”]

It is a small phrase in common use by monastics as a means of recalling oneself to the presence of God in one’s heart and mind. It prompted Cassian to write some of his most inspiring teaching, in which he said that if these words were repeated throughout the day, at work, in reading, in physical weakness, in moments of temptation, they would lead to a continuous state of prayer and so to contemplation.

The **fourth insight** from the Rule **relates to season.** ... St Benedict... gives central place to the Great Fifty Days from Easter to Pentecost and places the Paschal

Could it be that a more Benedictine Church might draw many to Christ?

Mystery [the events of the Sacred Triduum] at the heart of Christian life and celebration. If we follow his Rule we order the Liturgical Year to bring out the distinctiveness of each feast and fast and season. We give each its appropriate flavour and text. We let the rhythms of the season interact with the rhythms of our life. We let the liturgical cycle help to conform us to Christ. The Divine Office today, as then, is a powerful agent of that process.

The **fifth** of my six liturgical lessons from the Rule **relates to Psalmody**. [In Chapter 18 of the Rule] St Benedict sets out which Psalms should be said on each occasion [in the Divine Office] over seven days so that the entire Psalter is recited every week.

Why recite the Psalter? Why give it such prominence in the Divine Office? I give four reasons. The first is Christological. You cannot understand Jesus if you do not know the Psalms. If you want to get into His mind, you need to pray the Psalter as He prayed it. If you have never immersed yourself in the Psalms, you do not know Jesus as well as you think you do. The second is about being real. The recitation of the Psalter is where the liturgy allows us to encounter, identify with, and express the whole range of human emotions. It is the setting where it is all right to lament. It is the liturgical setting of protest. The third is about the Psalms as the place where God addresses us. ... A voice is speaking. There is a message to be heard. Psalms are not all praise or all lament. They are not only the human heart calling out to God. They are the voice of God.

The fourth reason is rather different, though just as important. It is more a matter of rhythm than of meaning. [In the Divine Office] after an opening acclamation of prayer and praise, the community set-

gles into a rhythm of Psalmody that stills the body and quietens the soul. Gradually, through the rhythmic recitation, sung or said, other concerns fall away, the heart is focused on God, the spirit takes control, and the mind is at peace. In other words, it is the Psalmody that turns us into true worshippers and open recipients of the grace of God.

The **final lesson relates to memory**. In Chapter 9 the Rule enjoins passages of Scriptures [that] are to be recited by heart. ... I believe [St Benedict] is commending the virtue of memorising liturgical text. For indeed, quite apart from the passages that he requires to be recited by heart, the whole style of the Divine Office, with its frequent repetitions, with its weekly recitation of the Psalter, creates an ambience of well remembered text.

It is wonderful to be set free from the search for the right page and to focus the eyes on the liturgical action or on sunshine on the stone or colour in the glass, or to close the eyes and let the imagination create its pictures. But much more than that, it is that we need liturgical memory, we need a kind of memory bank of texts that inspire, inform, challenge, and console, that will resource our praying and come to our rescue when we are far from books and computers and sometimes when we feel far from God.

When I lie old and ill, if that day comes, I want the words of the liturgy to be so fixed in my memory and ingrained in my soul that they can take me through the dark places and refresh me. ... What I have learned and committed to memory, whether by sitting down and working at it or simply by saying or singing it over and over again as it recurs in the liturgical cycle, is somehow in my heart. That's another lesson we need to heed from St Benedict.