

A SPIRITUALITY FOR THE TIMES: The Way of St Benedict

*A talk given to the Templeton Scholars by The Revd Canon Dr Peter Sills,
Vice-Dean of Ely, 14 June 2006*

Being serious about Spirituality

Christianity tends, at best, to get an indifferent press. Culturally this is nothing less than perverse because European civilisation can only be understood as the product of Christian ideas and values. The prime example of this perversity is the refusal of the drafters of the constitution of the European Union to acknowledge the Christian heritage of Europe in the Preamble. Politically the failure is catastrophic, as we see in Iraq. The rise of Islam has brought new urgency to understanding the religious dimension of political issues, in a way that the troubles in Northern Ireland should have done, but never achieved. At the personal level the failure of the press to take Christianity seriously is odd because of the growing interest in spirituality, as demonstrated by the extraordinary response to the BBC series *The Monastery* which followed the lives of five men who spent forty days at Worth Abbey in Sussex, prompting among other things a second series focussing on four women at the Poor Clares Convent in Arundel.

Perhaps the most important thing that these series show is that spirituality is not some free-floating concern with a 'higher dimension', but a basic element in the way we live our everyday lives. Everyone has a spirituality because we all have a spirit. Our spirit is the part of us that animates us and makes us who we are, and our spirituality is the way our spirit expresses itself, bringing together the various parts of our life. Our spirituality may be religious, but equally it may be materialist, or have some other secular basis. The dominant spirituality of the west for a long time now has been economic. As the Cambridge economist Jane Collier has said, 'The language of economics is the language through which the world is understood, the language by which human and social problems are defined and by which solutions to those problems are expressed.' (*The Gospel and Contemporary Culture*, p. 103) The protest of Islam, which the West now experiences, is that this is simply not an adequate way to understand humanity, and the violent expression of that protest is the result of the failure of the West to listen.

A Poverty of the Spirit

But you don't have to be a Muslim to realise that something is wrong with our secular spirituality. Economics and all the other secular ideologies have conspicuously failed to deliver the promised utopia. Recently David Cameron, the Conservative leader, echoed widespread feelings when he said, 'Its time we admitted there's more to life than money, and its time we focussed not just on GDP, but GWB - general well being.' And later in his speech he said, 'well being cannot be measured by money or traded in markets. Its about the beauty of our surroundings, the quality of our culture, and above all the strength of our relationships.' Our surroundings, our culture, and our relationships are the things that feed our spirits, and at the root of all our problems, from global warming to anti-social behaviour, is a profound poverty of spirit. None of these problems will be solved without a change of heart, and we are beginning to realise this.

Our problems are at root spiritual, not just political or technological, and they will not be solved by more and more external controls. What we need is a way of life that will feed our spirits, and that is what we at Ely are about, together with the monks of Worth and the nuns

of Arundel. What we say is this: a spirituality that satisfies our deepest needs cannot be divorced from a religious faith – and you don't have to seek out an ashram in India or become a Buddhist to feed and strengthen your spirit: all the resources you need are available to you in the faith that formed our civilisation. And if the press want to be part of the solution and not part of the problem, then the time has come to be serious about Christianity.

Ely and Saint Benedict

Within the Christian tradition are the truths that transcend the Ages. That is the unspoken message when you enter this church. As you stand at its threshold you cannot fail to be struck by its huge scale and majestic proportions. The massive pillars speak of permanence and the soaring arches lift the spirit, and crowning it all is the magnificent octagon that speaks of eternity. This building is not just a monument, nor just a part of our national heritage, it is a eloquent symbol that speaks across the ages of things that do not change, of faith and values that endure and speak to us of what it means to be human.

For the greater part of its history this Church was a Benedictine monastery, whose life was ordered by the Rule that he wrote. St Benedict is one of the most important figures of European history. He was born towards the end of the fifth century (the traditional date is 480), and the monasteries he founded enabled the faith and learning and values of European civilisation to survive the Dark Ages. Benedict brought a new depth of understanding to life in community, and that is reflected in his Rule which is a manual for monastic life. It deals with practical matters like worship, food, clothing, and daily work, but above all it deals with the personal qualities needed for leadership and what today we call team working. Modern Benedictine monks, like Dom Dermot Tredget of Douai Abbey in Berkshire, work in management colleges and in industry applying the insights of the Rule to commercial life. Benedict offers a spirituality that brings together religion and everyday life in a way that can be life-changing.

Benedictine Spirituality

The heart of the Benedictine way is expressed in the vows that monks take. Vows express commitment, and this is an essential ingredient of a spirituality that is life giving. Vows are a formal expression of the truth that growth only comes through limitation. Just as an artist or writer will not grow in skill unless she gives herself wholly to her art, accepting that her chosen path closes down other options, so humans do not grow unless they accept the limitations that commitment implies. Commitment is something from which we shy away these days, falsely associating freedom with lack of constraint. But if freedom is about growing into our full potential, then constraint is required. Commitment expresses our intentions and gives shape and meaning to our life. This is the way to inner strength, to depth of spirituality, and that is the essential purpose of the monastic vows.

Benedictine monks promise stability, conversion of life and obedience. These vows have particular monastic meanings, but they also point to three vital qualities essential to a full human life, and so they have a relevance beyond the religious life. Stability speaks of our need for roots; conversion of life speaks of our need for growth in compassion and understanding, especially towards those who are different; obedience speaks of our need to accept a source of authority outside of our self. Benedictine spirituality offers fidelity to an age of shallow relationships; openness to a fearful world; and direction to a confused culture.

Roots in a Shallow Age

'Rootlessness, not meaninglessness, is the problem today.' This chance remark I heard on the radio some years ago has remained with me. We are a rootless generation, in large part the result of our economic spirituality. This is examined by Richard Sennet in his book *The Corrosion of Character*. By 'corrosion' Sennet does not mean 'corruption', that is the subversion of character by wrong devices and desires, but the way we are hollowed out as people in today's world. The short-term goals, flexible working practices, constant risk-taking and superficial relationships of the modern economy turn us into short-term, flexible, superficial people who shy away from commitment and moral clarity. Sennet tells the story of Rico, a second generation Italian American. By any standards Rico was well-off: upwardly mobile, well-housed, and able to afford the best education for his children. But to achieve this Rico was constantly on the move, each time having to start his life over again. When he set up his own business the demands of his work meant that he was at his clients' beck and call with no time for his family. He said, 'Its like I don't know who my kids are.' His fear is that they will become 'mall rats', hanging about aimlessly in shopping centres. Rico felt he belonged nowhere, and could not offer the substance of his life as an example to his children of how they should conduct themselves ethically.

Rico's life had been shaped by values of the modern economy, and they had corroded his character, like acid eats away metal. He was no longer sure what he stood for; he was, in a word, rootless. Roots are essential to life; they keep us earthed; they anchor us and sustain us; cut off from our roots we wither and die. Benedict knew this, and required his monks to be rooted in a particular community, and that is what the vow of stability seeks to achieve. It is about being faithful to a group of people, and a determination to remain faithful despite their faults and failings. Stability reminds us that human life is not an individual journey but a shared journey; we travel and grow together or not at all.

Stability and community are two sides of the same coin. The feeling of loss of community is widespread today, and efforts to regain it generally fail because we put purposes before persons, exalting the economic over the spiritual, aiming at the satisfaction of material needs. Community by contrast feeds our spirits because it holds the memories that that give us our identity, and our lives meaning. This is what Rico lacked: a community that held memories capable of connecting together the different episodes of his life, and transcending them so that his life had an enduring sense of meaning. The Christian community is a community of memory. It provides a story in which we have a place, a narrative that gives life meaning and purpose, an inner unity that helps us to grow. Learning to be faithful to that community you learn to be faithful to others.

Openness in Times of Fear

Associations of the like-minded have replaced community, and we have become inward looking, fearful of those who are different. Ethnic cleansing is the most appalling example of this, but gated estates are the same basic phenomenon, designed to keep out those who are different; and similar fears fuel ethnic tensions and drive immigration policy. In much of life Margaret Thatcher's infamous question is repeatedly asked, 'Is he one of us?'

Benedict's stress on the importance of stability meant that his monks had to learn to get on with those whom they would not have chosen, and, more than that, they had to be willing to learn from them. This is expressed in the vow of conversion of life. A modern Benedictine, Anthony Maret-Crosby, says 'the call to conversion of life is in effect a vow to change, never to remain still in either self-satisfied fulfilment or in self-denying despair.'

(*Doing Business with Benedict*, p. 201) This vow expresses a determination to be open to the new, and a willingness to be shaped by the lives of others. It challenges some therapeutic ideas about personal growth. In *Habits of the Heart*, a study of individualism and commitment in American life, Robert Bellah and his fellow authors take the therapist Margaret Oldham as one of their representative Americans. Margaret accepts the world as it is, and operates on the assumption 'that what I want to do and what I feel like is what I should do.' As she puts it, 'What I feel the universe wants from me is to take my values, whatever they might happen to be, and live up to them as much as I can.' (*Habits of the Heart* p. 14) Margaret's vision is for each person to be self-reliant, but in a way that leaves little room for interdependence or relating the purpose of our life to wider goals. Margaret wants people to be autonomous and she does this by affirming that they are worthy of acceptance as they are, with the result that they become independent of anyone else's standards. The danger with this is that there is little or no incentive to change or to engage with other people's values and attitudes. The 'therapeutically self-actualised individual' finds community only with the like-minded; the spiritual journey is self-contained. By contrast Benedict insisted on a journey that would open his monks out, both in fellowship with those who were different – and difficult – and in solidarity with the wider world. To achieve this the monks were to grow in virtue, because virtue is the engine of growth.

We don't hear much about virtue these days; we hear more about values, but the two are not the same. Virtue has something given about it, an objective quality that values do not have. It is an inner strength that enables us to conform our lives to values that endure. The basic monastic virtue is humility. This is a profound challenge to today's assertive, in-your-face, competitive, confrontational culture, which sees humility as a weakness and not as a strength. Humility comes from the Latin *humus*, meaning earth. Humility is about being earthed, in touch with the source of our being. Humility is not a weak thing; it is not putting yourself down, but an inner strength that comes from a proper appreciation of your place in the scheme of things and within the community. Humility is a strength that means that we do not have to have our way all the time; it frees us from selfish impulses and allows us to be shaped by other people's lives. Humility is the foundation of love, which in a political or business environment means taking other people's interests seriously. It is a spiritual journey that is open-ended.

Direction in a Confused Culture

Making a journey needs a guide; and being guided implies a willingness to accept the authority of another, in other words, to be obedient – not in a slavish or unquestioning way, but in a way that is essentially trusting. The trusted guide who inspired Benedict's life and whom he offered his monks was Jesus of Nazareth. His life is told in the panels above the Choir stalls on the north side, the work of a Belgian artist, Michel Abeloos in the nineteenth century. On the south side the panels depict episodes from the Old Testament that pre-figure the life of Jesus. For example in the first two panels his birth is paired with the creation of Adam. The story of Jesus is the single most significant feature of the decoration of the Cathedral. It is found in the stained glass, most notably in the great east window; it is the subject of the nave ceiling. The last week of Jesus' life is depicted in the five panels of the high altar reredos, and the very plan of the building is a cross, the instrument of torture on which he died. The Cathedral celebrates a person whose life has shaped the community that gathers here to worship.

The person and life of Jesus are celebrated not just for personal achievement or celebrity, but as a source of meaning. Christians believe that his was the most authentic human life ever lived: a life so completely conformed to the nature and purposes of God that in him we see the human face of God. It is by trusting him as our guide that the open-ended journey is made, and so the monk promises obedience to Christ. He also promises obedience to the Abbot, who was believed to be in the place of Christ in the monastery, and to the other members of the community. Obedience is about removing ourselves from the centre of concern, accepting that certain things are given. This is scarcely the way of the world, but it offers a better way than the secular model of individualism.

Brian Palmer is a successful top-level manager in a large corporation. As he worked his way up the corporate ladder his business life left no time for his wife and family and in time his wife walked out. This came as a complete surprise to Brian, and forced him to reassess his life. Eventually he remarried and adjusted his priorities, spending more time with his family and less at work, but his value system did not change. He continued to seek self-satisfaction, except that the things that made him happy changed: less climbing the corporate ladder and more family life.

Brian is another of the representative Americans in *Habits of the Heart*. Commenting on his life the authors say, 'When Brian describes how he has chosen to live, he keeps referring to "values" and "priorities" not justified by any wider framework or purpose of belief. What is good is what one finds rewarding. If one's preferences change, so does the nature of the good. Even the deepest ethical values are justified as matters of personal preference.' (*Habits of the Heart*, p. 6) This thoroughgoing individualism may have realised the American dream and created new wealth and better social conditions, but it has also led to a scandalous inequality between rich and poor, the squandering of the earth's renewable resources, the erosion of community and the collapse of anything that could be called a shared morality. The individual and his utility are not an adequate moral base for tackling the problems that face us. Without a shared morality a just society is an impossible dream, and only the faith communities have the spiritual resources to support a shared morality. Without it there is no growth, no community, no justice – and ultimately no planet.

Obedience can of course be misused, and there are many examples of this in the Church, but down the centuries the good examples have vastly outweighed the bad, and there have been some remarkable social changes brought about by those who have accepted obedience to Christ and have sought to be true to his calling. Just as in the Old Testament the prophets railed against social injustice, so their latter-day heirs have been responsible for the great campaigns to overthrow slavery, to bring about prison reform, universal education and health care, and more recently to remit the unpayable debts of the world's poorest nations. The Church of England, whom many had written off, emerged in the 1980s as the chief critic of the Thatcher government with its landmark inquiry into social inequality, *Faith in the City*, and before the 1997 election the Roman Catholic Church produced the highly influential document, *The Common Good*. Here we see the personal driving the political, as it should, because in the end truth is a person and faith is a relationship.

All you need is Faith

If David Cameron's hope of a society in which our surroundings, our culture and our relationships are properly valued is to be realised, then we need to move away from today's dominant economic spirituality. In other words, a stronger moral framework has to be placed around the market economy, for these things are beyond price. We have to find ways

of enabling people to become rooted, to grow in openness to others, and to accept a source of authority outside of the self. We have all the resources we need in the Christian tradition that shaped our civilisation, and the press should take this more seriously. Even so, I will leave the last word to a Muslim, Salman Rushdie. In his Herbert Read Lecture in 1990, commenting on the collapse of Communism in central Europe he said, 'We cannot fail to observe the deep religious spirit with which the makers of so many of these revolutions are imbued, and we must concede that it is not only a particular ideology that has failed, but the idea that men and women could ever define themselves in terms that exclude their spiritual needs.'