

Sermon CCC 11-07-21 Proper 10, Year B.

11th July. Benedict of Nursia, Abbot of Monte Cassino, Father of Western Monasticism + ca 550

In Christ we have been destined to live for the praise of God's glory (Eph 1:11-12)

Today is the first of seven Sundays when we will be hearing readings from the Letter to the Ephesians. Nowadays it is accepted that this letter was not written by St Paul himself, but by a later leader of one of the churches that Paul founded. This takes nothing from its status as Scripture. In the ancient world, it was not regarded as at all dishonest to write under the name of a great figure from the past. In fact, this was seen as a genuine way of handing on that person's legacy, of saying what he would have said in the present context, if he were still alive.

What struck me about the short passage that we heard today is that we were told no less than three times that whole purpose of what God did and continues to do for us in Christ is that we might be people who live for the praise of God. (Eph 1:6. 12. 14). This is a conviction that this later writer has clearly picked up from Paul. For the last few Sundays, we have been hearing excerpts from Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. In that letter Paul repeats over and over that the whole point of our life in Christ is so that God may be praised (2 Cor 1:11). He says we are meant to live for 'the glory of God' (1:20); we always have a reason to say, 'Thanks be to God' (2:14); the more the knowledge of Christ extends throughout the world, the more thanksgiving there is (4:15); and, bringing things down to a practical level, he says that when we respond to a fund-raising appeal, our gift not only gives glory to God but produces a ripple effect, because its recipients praise God (8:19; 9:12-13).

So, Christian life is a life of praise. Every Sunday we sing, 'We worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory.' But what does this actually do for God? Or does it do something for us? Maybe you have come across the British cartoonist, Mel Calman. In the 1970s he produced a delightful little book called, *My God: A Look at the Day to Day Difficulties of Being God*. One of the cartoons shows a rather fed-up looking God—an old man with a beard, of course—reclining wearily on a cloud and saying, 'I think I could do with a few praise hims.' While we might smile at this, it does raise interesting questions about praise.

When I try to grapple with this issue, I find a prayer from the Roman Catholic liturgy helpful. It goes like this:

Father,
We do well always and everywhere to give you thanks.
You have no need of our praise,
Yet our desire to thank you is itself your gift.
Our prayer of thanksgiving adds nothing to your greatness,
But make us grow in your grace ...

Like so many Christian prayers, this one links praise with thanksgiving. Perhaps, thanksgiving is easier to understand. We might think, for example of someone who did something really kind for us and of how that gift has sustained years of friendship. We can never forget that person's kindness. We are determined to make the most of their gift. And being amazed at their goodness to us has somehow overflowed into a relationship that has enriched our life and inspired us to be generous. I think the author of the Letter to the Ephesians may be encouraging us to respond somewhat like this to the way God has blessed us in Christ, destining us for adoption, as a gift, freely bestowed. We are called to let our amazement at God's goodness overflow into a relationship with God that will shape our lives, inspiring us to be open-handed and big-hearted. This corresponds perfectly to Paul's vision of Christians as people who always seek to do good to one another and to all, who rejoice always, who praise God without ceasing and who give thanks in all circumstances.' (1 Thess 5:15-18)

Today, the eleventh of July, happens to be the day when Christians remember St Benedict, the Father of Western Monasticism. The way of life for which he wrote his Rule in the 6th century is centred on constant prayer. By his time, the ideal of praising God without ceasing had evolved into a system of praying at seven set times during the day and of getting up at night to pray. St Benedict stipulated that the prayer should always begin with,

O Lord, open our lips

And our mouth will proclaim your praise.

We recognise this as the beginning of Matins and Evensong, a Christian practice that has its roots in this monastic tradition. Here in the Cathedral, the fact that these services are sung in choir stalls with the singers facing each other is part of this monastic heritage. The wonderful thing about Anglican Morning and Evening Prayer is that they have retained their character as the prayer of the

whole Church, whereas in other strands of Christianity they tended to become the preserve of clergy and monastics.

Over the centuries, St Benedict's Rule has continued to guide Christian men and women, in recent years inspiring innovative new forms of monastic life such as the ecumenical monasteries at Taizé in France, Bose in Italy, and Grandchamp in Switzerland. The Community of St Anselm, established by the Archbishop of Canterbury at Lambeth Palace, drawing much of its ethos from St Benedict's Rule, invites young people to devote a year to the experience of constant prayer, service and living in community.

But the Rule is also valued as a guide by Christians living ordinary lives. I will conclude with a little gem of Benedictine wisdom that I have found helpful during these times of pandemic. Benedict says that the monks are to eat in silence, listening to reading from the Bible or some other edifying book. To read for the community was a real service because in Benedict's time only a few of the monks would have been literate. Before a monk begins his week serving as the reader, he is to say three times, 'O Lord, open my lips and my mouth will proclaim your praise' (Rule Ch. 38). Similarly, those beginning their week as kitchen servers are to repeat three times, 'God, make speed to save me. O Lord, make haste to help me' (Rule Ch. 35). So, the practical tasks of reading to the community in the dining room and serving the meals both begin in exactly the same way as the daily praise of God in the liturgy. Elsewhere in his Rule, Benedict says that all the pots and pans and utensils of the monastery should be carefully looked after 'as if they were the sacred vessels of the altar' (Rule Ch. 31). And his disapproval is just as strong for anyone arriving late for prayer as it is for latecomers to meals (Rule Ch. 43). Again, he is making that connection between the praise of God and the nitty gritty daily chores involved in running a house.

Recently, when we as a congregation eventually had the joy of being able to worship in the cathedral again, some of us were chatting outside afterwards, comparing notes on how we had found the experience of lockdown. One of the women admitted that she really missed being able to go out for a meal, just to get a break from having to cook every single day. I know that this is a real 'first world' problem, but I could resonate with the relentlessness of having to think up a meal and prepare it every single day. But that little insight from St Benedict—that cooking meals is somehow comparable to singing God's praise—really stopped me in my tracks. It taught me that anyone preparing food gratefully and imaginatively is glorifying God just as much as a cathedral choir singing Evensong. And of course, there is the ripple effect as the appreciative

diners say grace, praising God for the produce of the earth prepared for their enjoyment. Meanwhile, all of this praise adds nothing to God's greatness, but makes us grow to maturity, to what the author of Ephesians calls 'the whole measure of the fulness of Christ.' (Eph 4:13).

So, whether we are lifting our hearts for the Great Thanksgiving at the Eucharist, or whether we are in our kitchens preparing the meals that sustain us so delightfully, we are living as we have been destined in Christ to live: for the praise of God's glory.