Meditation: The Wisdom of St. Benedict in a Pandemic – Reflections by Fiona

This reflection and meditation can be done without the Youtube video (recommend the use of Youtube if you can). For those who struggle with hearing, the text below can also be used to support the video. Our Youtube presentation is an invitation to spiritually join regular meditators at Wisdom Centre (presently isolated and meditating in their own homes). The tradition we meditate in is Centering Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

The text is on the screen with narration. Music and a countdown timer are part of the presentation.

Begins with usual opening prayers and introductions (Audio Visual or follow using text below)

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centering Prayer Tradition

Opening Prayer: **Opening Prayer:** Eternal God, through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, stability, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Reflections on Benedictine Spirituality for Today

Introduction: We meditate in the Centering prayer tradition, a movement bourne out of the Rule of St Benedict through the Cistercian Order. The over-arching Benedictine family is the most ancient religious order in the church. In its 1,500-year provenance, it has existed through every pandemic in the Western world.

When we reflect on the organised way of life that Benedict sets out in his Rule we think of a peaceful household focused on a common spiritual life rather than the management of a health crisis. For sure, the first half of Benedict's life was a time of relative affluence, peace and good governance, but this came to an abrupt end, and the last decade or so of his life was a time of conflict, dissolution and hardship with scarcity of food and basic provisions. There were natural disasters and a pandemic that affected Benedict during this period of his lifetime. Firstly, a climate crisis, caused a sudden change in weather patterns, then in the year 536 the sun was barely visible for almost a year, obscured behind a layer of dust, shining weakly with an eerie blue light. This was not global warming; it was sudden cooling, there were floods, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes. Crops failed and much of Europe experienced famine.

After the climate crisis there followed the plague of Justinian, a black death type pandemic which peaked in 542 and persisted from 541-49, with further outbreaks occurring for two centuries. At the height of the crisis, one account suggests up to a half of the population of Europe died. Another account puts the figure at 100 million deaths over the course of the plague's two centuries of recurrence. Although used in a different context in his Rule, Benedict recognised the value of isolation. "lest one diseased sheep infect the whole flock"

(RSB 28), at the same time Benedict also recognised the value of hospitality, a central tenant of his Rule.

St Benedict has a lot to teach us about hospitality during a time of pandemic. St Gregory the Great, Benedict's biographer tells us that his response to the plague was practical; Benedict provided food and olive oil to local people to ensure good health. Of the sick, Benedict says the sick must truly be served as Christ, who said: "I was sick and you visited me." Benedict provides a separate room for their care, he also believes care of the sick should rank before and above all other concerns. I wonder how St Benedict would have cared for the sick in the pandemic of the 6th century, or the famine victims from the climate crisis a few years earlier? Would the monastery doors have closed? I feel sure Benedict would have found a way to minister as safely as was possible. St. Paul, in a reading for the feast of St Benedict said: "Do not give up if trials come; and keep on praying. If any of the saints are in need you must share with them." Romans 12:12-13

Benedict taught the brothers and sisters of his spiritual family to embody the hospitality which is central to the Rule. Benedict teaches this virtue saying: "All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me' (Mt 25:35); (RSB, 53:1). Proper honor must be shown to all, especially to those who share our faith (Galatians 6:10) and to pilgrims" (RSB 53).

St Gregory, Benedict's Biographer tells a story which helps one imagine the kind of hospitality he might have offered in a pandemic: Gregory writes about the man who in hard times came to Benedict's monastery to beg for oil. Oil was the staple of the time: It gave light and provided heat in bad weather, made food preparation possible and could even provide the beggar an opportunity to earn a little money if he could sell some of it.

The business manager of the monastery, a careful businessman, knew how important oil was to the monastery itself and refused the beggar the oil.

When Benedict heard what he had done, he told the business manager to bring the vial of oil and summoned the entire community. When all had assembled, he took the oil from the business manager, handed it to another monk and told him to throw it out the window. Point made, he directed a third monk to bring the vial in again and present it to the beggar. Then, when Benedict knelt down to pray, the half-full vial of oil began to overflow.

Benedict shows that Hospitality is the cornerstone of the truly faithful community. Those affected by crisis are the very people that the religious community need to be accessible to. In today's terms those affected may be people affected by the virus, along with those with mental illness, the lonely or the economically challenged. Of course, for Benedict, like today, certain groups will be more vulnerable. Today we need to consider those of colour who are more vulnerable than Caucasians to this infection, yet, often those of colour in Europe are among the groups of people most exposed to the virus through work in the care sector, supermarkets and food production facilities.

The balance of hospitality and isolation means finding ways to include and welcome as many groups of people as possible within our ministry while protecting the vulnerable among us. Over the past few months of Covid-19 Christian and other faith communities have had to learn to balance these seeming opposites of hospitality and isolation.

Wisdom Centre, our usual meeting place has also had to negotiate these two opposites. We have been unable to welcome guests because of the pandemic, we like many other communities have had to self-isolate. Yet we, like Benedict do not want to send the person who needs a supply of oil away empty handed. We have sought to change our way of working, expanding our use of IT and welcoming galleries of virtual faces on Zoom into our homes.

Perhaps this past few months represents a radical re appraisal of how the Rule of Benedict and other religious congregations might be reinterpreted. Benedict's call to 'receive all guests as Christ himself' has become a calling to find inclusive ways of developing digital contact and spiritual community.

What would St Benedict and is sister St Scholastica have made of this present time? Because of St Benedict's own experience of climate crisis and pandemic, I feel sure that he and St. Scholastica would have first reflected on what church is in actuality and then how Benedictine life might be reshaped in the wake of the crisis.

At this point it is worth mentioning that Benedict would have been familiar with the early Latin and Greek understanding of church, a word with it's roots in Latin ecclesia and the Greek ekklesia. The original meaning of both is 'to call out.' Only later did the meaning become replaced with 'assembly, congregation or council,' words we associate with organisation and officials.

St Benedict himself started religious life isolated in cave with only a raven for company. Benedict knew better than anyone that the hospitality of a Church or spiritual community is not bound to a building but is more about the faithful personal attitude of generous hospitality. The correct context is as described in the parable of the sower where Jesus 'called out' and said: 'Let anyone with ears to hear listen!' (Luke 8:8). Here, Jesus reminds us that he calls us out of our buildings, and our earthly concerns to hear the call to the kingdom and receive God's hospitality into our hearts, this is how the cup or vial of oil becomes overflowing.

Those who embody this faithful hospitality become the church. The religious community, the spirituality centre and the meditation room are only ecclesia when filled with those who incline the ear of their hearts in obedient listening as described in St Benedict's Prologue. Thus, any place in the created world can be church for us. We are reminded of this In Chapter 7 of the Rule where Benedict makes clear that the Work of God can take place in the garden, or when travelling, or anywhere else, and just as effectively as in a religious building. Similarly, we often understand the sacraments as rituals performed by the priest. Sacraments are an outward sign of God's grace and evident in the ordinary human experience of God's created world as St Gregory's story of the oil shows.

As we proceed as a community over these next few months, we must continue to navigate the tension of welcome and isolation. The risk of infection will be a concern at the front of mind as we begin to open our doors again and welcome guests, retreatants, parishioners, friends, and staff to commune around the metaphorical cup. A new inclusivity means answering the call to find ways of developing digital contact and spiritual community which includes people both inside and outside the 'enclosure,' those too vulnerable to join in person, must somehow receive the same cup of hospitality as those physically with us. I feel sure that St Benedict would not have encouraged communities in an attitude of self-protection or self-interested privilege at the expense of the sick or the weak. Benedict strove

to cure such unhealthy ways (RSB 2) by applying the ointment of encouragement and the medicine of Divine Scripture (RSB 28). Likewise, I feel sure that St. Benedict would have reprimanded brothers and sisters who stockpiled basic items at the expense of others, as he did with the cellarer who guarded the oil. In our time such behaviour has included the hoarding of staples such as toilet rolls or hand sanitiser. In fact, his Rule says when something is not available we must not grumble (RSB 40) Rather, he asks his communities to collaborate when times are difficult (RB48). Benedict also talks about the 'proper amount' and is concerned about excess. For Benedict, resources are shared according to need, the antithesis of stockpiling.

Benedict was a saint whose wisdom guided the world through the dark ages and continues to offer us a ray of light. The hospitality, the love and the compassion he shows can guide us through periods of isolation while encouraging us to bear one another's burdens of body or character with grace and patience.

Beginning Meditation: Before beginning our meditation, you may wish to adjust your posture, you may wish to pay particular attention to the rhythm of your breath, taking a calming deep breath in through your nose, and a slow breath out, letting go fully. Then repeat this a few times. If you have a sacred word you might notice its rhythm, perhaps noticing your how your word is in time with the breath. Continues…

Bell Sounds…25-minute meditations begins…Count down timer starts

Bell Sounds…Meditation ends

Reflection after meditation: Macrina Wiederkehr, in Abide, which she wrote before she died teaches us to let go.

"O Tree of God—Tree of Life, In the gift of your shade, I stand, my heart raised to your Creator. Your branches call me to reach out in all directions to many people. Your branches remind me of the sheltering arms of God. Your roots call me to be rooted in all that is good and nourishing. Your roots ask me to spend time in the ground of my being. Teach me, like you, to praise God in the silence of my being. Help me to surrender unnecessary words. Draw me, like a magnet, into the abiding love of God…Teach me to let go as you let go of your leaves each autumn…

Closing Prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…Amen

Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon

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Our peaceful outdoor spaces promote wellbeing and are open to all, free of charge.