

Reflection for July 8 2020

Benedict of Nursia, Abbot [July 11th] c.480- c.540



For the LORD gives wisdom;

from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

[Proverbs 2:6]

Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciples. [Luke 14:27]

Benedict of Nursia:

Listen and attend with the ear of your heart.

Be careful to be gentle, lest in removing the rust, you break the whole instrument.

On this coming Saturday, July 11th, we will commemorate the life of Benedict of Nursia, called the father of western monasticism. Born in about 480 in Umbria, Italy, Benedict went to study in Rome but he was so repulsed by what he saw to be the barbarian assault on civil life and political stability that he withdrew to live with another monk in the hills outside the city. Gradually other men came to join them, and a community grew around them. Over a period of 30 years, Benedict founded 12 monasteries in Italy, including the Abbey at Monte Cassino where he served as Abbot until his death in about 540 and that continues to be the global mother-house of the Benedictine Order.

The Rule that Benedict developed for monastic communities, which may have drawn upon an older document, has been one of the foundational documents for most monastic communities for 1500 years. It has been especially important in the Anglican tradition because it was the basis for Pope Gregory's instructions to Augustine when he sent him as missionary to the Anglo Saxon peoples in 596. Not only are many of the Anglican religious orders profoundly influenced by the Rule of Benedict, but it has been a foundational text in the Anglican spiritual formation.

Benedictine communities are known for their hospitality. Benedict insisted over and over again that we remember that Christ is literally the guest we encounter in every stranger. A carefully structured day of prayer, physical labor, and study is designed to prepare each monk to welcome Christ, to see Christ unmistakably in any person who seeks shelter and sustenance at our threshold. The young man who was disgusted by the barbarians who dominated the culture in Rome grew into a man who recognized that barbarians were not animals, that Christ animates every soul and shapes every relationship.

The Benedictine vow of stability is unique, and it provides valuable guidance to us, even 1500 years after Benedict insisted that each monk promise to remain committed to the community where his spiritual life was formed. This is a promise not to wander from place to

place seeking comfort and self-affirmation rather than facing the challenges from within us or forsaking the needs and challenges of the companions that God has sent into our lives. Joan Chittister has been one of the most contemporary influential writers on Benedictine spirituality, and her book *Monastery of the Heart* [BlueBridge press, 2011] is an eloquent and thoughtful introduction to the way of living to which Benedict invites us. She writes on “stability of the heart”:

*Wherever we have fixed our hearts,
whatever it is to which we have given them,
will determine the way we experience
all that is happening to us now.
indeed, it is stability of heart,
not stability of place,
that is the real monastic gift. [p. 160]*

*When life seems to have abandoned us,
broken its promises,
petered out to nothingness,
it is stability of heart that reminds us
that we are on our way yet
to what we are meant to be—
if we will only stay the course. [p. 161]*

From the perspective of Benedict, the malaise and turmoil that are inevitable in the rhythm our spiritual lives are not temptations of the devil or signs of weakness. They are signs that we are unfinished, both in growing into the wholeness for which we were created and in our journey toward the understanding that we seek. The young man who was so impatient with the wrong-headed impulsiveness of his peers grew into a patient man who “listened with the ear of his heart” and learned that a gentle firmness is more life-giving than the most passionate admonition or the strictest regulations.

Melissa Carmon is an artist who created an icon of Benedict that accentuates his patience and persistence. I end with her meditation on Benedict (melissacarmon.com):

ST BENEDICT OF NURSIA , by Melissa Carmon

Saint Benedict
The fires are burning.
Man who knows,
who watches from shadows
waits, and all the while
tends flame

Little lights
oh yes they are small,
but patiently
your hands set to work
never ceasing

Little lights
set in strings
form veins
bring life

“In the black night of history
you yourself were a star.”

In truth, we have forgotten what the
darkness was like
we have forgotten that many things live
in a dark wood,

and that the hungry grey bark
of trees swallows sound

"The jar is broken, Benedict,"
They say. But Benedict doesn't listen
he is too busy weaving

The monasteries, like knots
monasteries, like diamonds,
set like constellations on the mountains
illuminated letters like gems
they span the skies

Benedict, with peace in death
a steady step, and steady hands
once put in motion, the momentum
rolls across centuries
Dust to dust, perhaps.
But life to life as well.

"The woods are full of ghosts, Benedict."
But he doesn't answer. He only smiles.
And looks down to kindle another light.