'Shaping Holy Lives', a Conference on Benedictine Spirituality - R Williams
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An address given by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, at Trinity Wall Street, New York.

'God's Workshop'

Benedict is, as usual, uncompromisingly prosaic in describing the monastic community as a workshop; it's a place in which we use specific tools – listed with blunt simplicity in chapter 4 of the Rule – which are lent to us by Christ, to be returned on the Last Day, when we receive our wages. It's an imagery that conjures up a landscape in monochrome, a grey sky, a stone wall: the tools worn smooth with long use and skilfully patched up over time, taken from the shelf each morning until finally hung up when weariness and age arrive. The holy life is one in which we learn to handle things, in businesslike and unselfconscious ways, to 'handle' the control of the tongue, the habit of not passing on blame, getting up in the morning and not gossiping. A monastic lifetime is one in which these habits are fitted to our hands. Simone Weil wrote somewhere about how the tool is for the seasoned worker the extension of the hand, not something alien. Benedict's metaphors prompt us to think of a holiness that is like that, an 'extension' of our bodies and our words that we've come not to notice.

In a recent essay on Benedictine Holiness, Professor Henry Mayr-Harting describes it as 'completely undemonstrative, deeply conventual, and lacking any system of expertise' (Holiness, Past and Present, ed. Stephen Barton, London/New York 2003, p.261). Very broadly, that is the picture I want to develop with reference to this early and potent image of the workshop and its tools – though I might, while fully understanding the point about expertise, want to think about what sorts of communicable wisdom it also embodies. At this stage, though, perhaps the most important thing to emphasise is the 'deeply conventual': the holiness envisaged by the Rule is entirely inseparable from the common life. The tools of the work are bound up with the proximity of other people – and the same other people. As Benedict says the end of chapter 4, the workshop is itself the stability of the community. Or, to pick up our earlier language, it is the unavoidable nearness of these others that becomes an extension of ourselves. One of the things we have to grow into unselfconsciousness about is the steady environment of others.

To put it a bit differently, the promise to live in stability is the most drastic way imaginable of recognising the otherness of others – just as in marriage. If the other person is there, ultimately, on sufferance or on condition, if there is a time-expiry dimension to our relations with particular others, we put a limit on the amount of otherness we can manage. Beyond a certain point, we reserve the right to say that our terms must prevail after all. Stability or marital fidelity or any seriously covenanted relation to person or community resigns that long-stop possibility; which is why it feels so dangerous.

At the very start, then, of thinking about Benedictine holiness, there stands a principle well worth applying to other settings, other relationships – not least the Church itself. How often do we think about the holiness of the Church as bound up with a habitual acceptance of the otherness of others who have made the same commitment? And what does it feel like to imagine holiness as an unselfconscious getting used to others? The presence of the other as a tool worn smooth and grey in the hand? The prosaic settledness of some marriages, the ease of an old priest

celebrating the eucharist, the musician's relation to a familiar instrument playing a familiar piece – these belong to the same family of experience as the kind of sanctity that Benedict evokes here; undemonstrative, as Mayr-Harting says, because there is nothing to prove.

The 'tools of good works' listed include the Golden Rule, several of the Ten Commnadments and the corporal works of mercy (clothing the naked, visiting the sick, burying the dead, and so on); but the bulk of them have to do with virtues that can be seen as necessary for the maintenance of stability as a context for growth in holiness. It is as though Benedict were asking, 'What does it take to develop people who can live stably together?' He does not begin by commending stability, but by mapping out an environment where the long-term sameness of my company will not breed bitterness, cynicism and fear of openness with one another. If you have to spend a lifetime with the same people, it is easy to create a carapace of habitual response which belongs at the surface level, a set of standard reactions which do not leave you vulnerable. It is the exact opposite of the habitual acceptance of otherness which we were speaking about a little while back, though it can sometimes dangerously resemble it. With a slightly artificial tidiness, we might see the practices Benedict commends for nurturing the stability of the workshop under three heads. The monk must be transparent; the monk must be a peacemaker; the monk must be accountable. Let's look at these in turn.

Transparency: those who belong to a community such as Benedict describes are required 'not to entertain deceit in their heart' (24 in the list of 'tools'), and, intriguingly, 'not to give false peace (25); to acknowledge their own culpability in any situation of wrong (42-3 – a principle regularly stressed by the Desert Fathers); to be daily mindful of death (47); to deal without delay with evil thoughts, breaking them against the rock of Christ, and to make them known to the spiritual father (50-51 – again a familiar precept in the desert). These and other precepts suggest that one of the basic requirements of the life is honesty. First, honesty about yourself: it is necessary to know how to spot the chains of fantasy (which is exactly what 'thoughts', logismoi, meant for the Desert Fathers), to understand how deeply they are rooted in a weak and flawed will, and to make your soul inhospitable to untruth about yourself. Exposure of your fantasies to an experienced elder is an indispensable part of learning the skills of diagnosis here. In the background are the analyses of Evagrius and Cassian, pinpointing what simple boredom can do in a life where ordinary variety of scene and company is missing. The mind becomes obsessional, self-enclosed, incapable of telling sense from nonsense; the reality of the other in its unyielding difference is avoided by retreat into the private world where your own preference rules unrestricted. Hence the stress on making thoughts known: it is a simple way of propping open the door of the psyche, a way of making incarnate the consciousness that God sees us with complete clarity in every situation (49).

To become in this way open to your own scrutiny, through the listening ministry of the trusted brother or sister, is to take the first step towards an awareness of the brother or sister that is not illusory or comforting. The recommendation against 'false peace', I suspect, belongs in this context: one of the ways in which we can retreat into privacy is the refusal to admit genuine conflict, to seek for a resolution that leaves me feeling secure without ever engaging the roots of difference. If we are to become transparent, we must first confront the uncomfortable fact that we are not naturally and instantly at peace with all.

This could of course read like a commendation of the attitude which declines reconciliation until justice (to me) has been fully done; but I don't think this is what Benedict is thinking of. The recommendation follows two precepts about anger and resentment (22, 23), which, taken

together with the warning against false peace, suggests that being wary of facile reconciliation is not about a suspicion of whether the other has adequately made reparation but about whether I have fully acknowledged and dealt with my own resentment. It is a hesitation over my honesty about peace, not the other's acceptability.

One of the most profound books I know on the subject of Christian community is the late Donald Nicholl's wonderful journal of his time as Rector of the Ecumenical Institute at Tantur , between Jerusalem and Bethlehem, The Testing of Hearts. A Pilgrim's Journal (London 1989). Here he records a conversation with a visiting Spanish scholar, who observes that many members of the community have come 'with much heavy matter of unforgiveness and resentment lodged inside them from previous experience...it is precisely those who talk most about community-building who block the flow because they are the ones least aware of the matter of unforgiveness that they are carrying around with them, like a lead ball attached to their waists' (p.62). Is this what is meant by 'false peace' – to talk about community-building as an alibi for addressing the inner weight of anger and grief? And it isn't irrelevant that Nicholl contrasts the attitude of the Catalan Benedictines who live at the core of the community with that of the more transient scholars, who all come with an agenda that connects to other settings and other communities; the issues are different for those who are not living with stability.

All this gives something of a new edge to the commendation that the monk should be a peacemaker. The precepts are clear enough: there should be no retaliation (29-32), no malicious gossip (40), no hatred or envy or party spirit (64-67). And the climactic items in the list of tools make the priority of peacemaking very plain indeed:

70. To pray for one's enemies in the love of Christ.
71. To make peace with one's enemy before the sun sets.
72. And never to despair of the mercy of God.

Stability requires this daily discipline of mending; it is the opposite of an atmosphere in which one's place always has to be fought for, where influence and hierarchy are a matter of unceasing struggle. As Professor Mayr-Harting notes, the idea that position in the community depends on seniority of entry (ch.63) may seem banal to us now, but it was a most unusual way of understanding hierarchy in late antiquity. It seems obvious because the Rule has had such a sustained impact on the institutions of our culture. But we need also to note that the same chapter that establishes the principle of seniority insists that specific responsibilities in the community do not depend on age but on the discernment of the abbot and that the order of age should not become a ground for insisting on rights and rank. It is a delicate balance, but one whose goal is evidently to secure an ethos in which open conflict over position or influence is less likely. And while rumour suggests that monastic communities are not completely immune to power struggles, the point is that the Rule provides a structure that will always challenge any assumption that conflict is the 'default position' in common life.

To put this another way, what the Rule outlines is what is to be the 'currency' of the community. All communities need a medium of exchange, a language that assures their members that they are engaged in the same enterprise. It involves common stories and practices, things that you can expect your neighbour to understand without explanation, ways and styles of doing and saying things. Once again, Donald Nicholl has a pertinent story; this time, he is listening to a visiting English priest, who relates the experience of a university mission. Fr Aidan is, naturally, interested in what the currency of the university is, and he spends time trying to pick up what

people talk about and how. ' "And eventually", Aidan said, "one day the penny dropped. What did those people exchange with one another when they met? You'd be surprised – they exchanged grievances. So the currency of that University is grievance"'.

Nicholl comments by translating this into the image of the circulation of the blood in a body: what you receive is what you give, what you put into the circulation. 'If you put in grievance, you will get back grievance' (p.142). And he refers to an elderly religious in Yorkshire, unobtrusive and to the untutored eye rather idle; but it is he 'who sets the currency of goodness and kindness circulating through that community' (143). Without some such input into the 'circulation', communities will be at best dry and at worst deadly.

Peacemaking, then, is more than a commitment to reconciling those at odds. On its own, a passion for reconciliation, we have seen, can be a displacement for unresolved angers and resentments. What it may put into circulation is anxiety or censoriousness, certainly a situation of tense untruth when there is pressure to 'make peace' at all costs. The peace which the Rule envisages is more like this 'currency' we've been thinking about, a habit of stable determination to put into the life of the body something other than grudges. And for that to happen, the individual must be growing in the transparency we began with, aware of the temptations of drama, the staging of emotional turbulence in which the unexamined ego is allowed to rampage unchecked.

It's all quite difficult for us in the twenty-first century. We have been told – rightly – that it is bad to deny and repress emotion; equally rightly, that it is poisonous for us to be passive under injustice. The problem, which half an hour on the street outside will confirm, and five minutes watching 'reality' programmes on television will reinforce as strongly as you could want, is that we so readily take this reasonable corrective to an atmosphere of unreality and oppression as an excuse for promoting the dramas of the will. The denial of emotion is a terrible thing; what takes time is learning that the positive path is the education of emotion, not its uncritical indulgence, which actually locks us far more firmly in our mutual isolation. Likewise, the denial of rights is a terrible thing; and what takes time to learn is that the opposite of oppression is not a wilderness of litigation and reparation but the nurture of concrete, shared respect. The Rule suggests that if concern with right and reparation fills our horizon, the one thing that we shall not attain is unselfconsciousness – respect as another of those worn-smooth tools that are simply an extension of the body.

None of this is learned without the stability of the workshop. The community that freely promises to live together before God is one in which both truthfulness and respect are enshrined. I promise that I will not hide from you – and that I will also at times help you not to hide from me or from yourself. I promise that your growth towards the good God wants for you will be a wholly natural and obvious priority for me; and I trust that you have made the same promise. We have a lifetime for this. Without the promise, the temptation is always for the ego's agenda to surface again, out of fear that I shall be abandoned if the truth is known, fear that I have no time or resource to change as it seems as I must. No-one is going to run away; and the resources of the community are there on my behalf.

I realise that I am describing the Body of Christ, not just a Benedictine community. But how often do we understand the promises of baptism as bringing us into this sort of group? How often do we think of the Church as a natural place for honesty, where we need not be afraid? Hence the need for these localised, even specialised workshops, which take their place

between two dangerous and illusory models of human life together. On the one hand is what some think the Church is (including, historically, quite a lot of those who actually run it...): an institution where control is a major priority, where experts do things that others can't, where orderly common life depends on a faintly magical command structure. On the other hand is the modern and postmodern vision of human sociality: a jostle of plural commitments and hopes, with somewhat arbitrary tribunals limiting the damage of conflict and securing the rights of all to be themselves up to the point where they trespass on the territory of others - so that the other is virtually bound to be seen as the source of frustration. The community of the Rule assumes that the point of authority is not to mediate between fixed clusters of individual interest but to attend to the needs and strengths of each in such a way as to lead them forward harmoniously (as the chapters on the abbot's ministry make plain); and it also assumes that each member of the community regards relation with the others as the material of their own sanctification, so that it is impossible to see the other as necessarily a menace. Neither simply hierarchical (in the sense of taking for granted an authority whose task is to secure uniformity in accord with a dominant will) nor individualistic, the Rule reminds the Church of how counter-cultural its style of common life might be.

But we have already begun to move into thinking about my third element in Benedictine holiness, accountability. At the simplest level, this is almost identical with the transparency already discussed; but it is made very clear that the exercise of the abbot's rule has to be characterised by accountability. Although what the abbot says must be done, without complaint (ch.5), the abbot is adjured at some length to recall his answerability before God, his call to be the image of Christ in the monastery and to 'leaven' the minds of those under his care, and his duty to ignore apparent claims of status among the monks. His work is seen as, centrally, one of instruction and formation, and Mayr-Harting is absolutely right to see this as grounded in the language of St Paul: authority exists so as to create adult persons in Christ's likeness, and all discipline is directed to this end – with the added emphasis in the Rule of attention to the requirements of different temperaments (ch.27 is the most humanly subtle of the various accounts of this in the text).

The abbot makes distinctions not on the basis of visible difference (rich or poor, slave or free) but on the basis of his discernment of persons. You could say that his accountability is both to God and to the spiritual realities of the people he deals with. And this perhaps fills out the significance of the idea of accountability in the Rule as a whole: we are answerable to the concreteness of the other. Obedience to the abbot is the most obvious form of this, but that obedience itself refers to the life and health of the whole community, since the abbot exercises discipline only in that context, and is ultimately accountable in those terms. In short, everyone in the community that the Rule envisages is responsible both to and for everyone else – in different modes, depending on the different specific responsibilities they hold, but nonetheless sharing a single basic calling in this respect. The workshop is manifestly a collaborative venture with the aim of 'mending vices and preserving love' (Prologue).

So the Rule envisages holiness as a set of habits – like goodness in general, of course, but not reducible to goodness only. The holy person is not simply the one who keeps the commandments with which the catalogue of tools for good works begins, but one who struggles to live without deceit, their inner life manifest to guides and spiritual parents, who makes peace by addressing the roots of conflict in him or herself, and, under the direction of a skilled superior, attempts to contribute their distinctive gifts in such a way as to sustain a healthy 'circulation' in the community. You can see why Benedict is clear about the need for long probation of the

intending solitary, and why he is so hard on wanderers, who can never have adequate experience of living with the same people, becoming habituated to charity with these particular, inescapable neighbours (ch.1). Until stability has soaked in, it isn't much use reading the Desert Fathers or Cassian or Basil: to borrow a notion from Jacob Needleman's remarkable Lost Christianity (New York 1980, esp. pp.117-9, and ch.8 passim), the words of the Fathers are addressed to 'people who don't yet exist'. To know even a little of what the great spiritual teachers are saying, you need to have lived through the education of instinct that the Rule outlines. It is just worth noting that there are seventy two 'tools of good works' to correspond to the first seventy two chapters of the Rule; it is the seventy third chapter that points forward to the greater challenges of the Fathers. And this suggests that the seventy two tools are precisely, like the seventy two chapters, a preparation for hearing what the Fathers have to say, a method by which persons who can hear the questions may come into existence.

The product of the workshop is people who are really there; perhaps it's a simple as that. What Benedict is interested in producing is people who have the skills to diagnose all inside them that prompts them to escape from themselves in the here and now. Just as much as in the literature of the desert – despite his insistence that he is working on a different and lower level – Benedict regards monastic life as a discipline for being where you are, rather than taking refuge in the infinite smallness of your own fantasies. Hence he can speak, in one of those images that continue to resonate across the centuries, of the expansion of the heart that obedience to the Rule will bring. The life is about realising great matters in small space: Cael neuadd fawr/ Rhwng cyfyng furiau – 'inhabiting a great hall between narrow walls'. That is the definition of life itself offered by the Welsh poet Waldo Williams in one of his best-known poems, and it is not a bad gloss on the Rule.

But I have already hinted at some of what makes the Rule hard reading these days, and in the last bit of these reflections I want to draw out just a little more on this, so as to suggest where the Rule is salutary reading for us, individually and corporately. The idea fundamental to the Rule (and to practically all serious religious writing) that there are some good things that are utterly inaccessible without the taking of time is probably the greatest brick wall. And it is not just a matter of personal neurosis; given the twenty four hour pattern of news provision, we are discouraged very strongly from any suspicion that the significance of events might need time to understand. Recently, of course, in the aftermath of the war, those who were doubtful of its wisdom or legitimacy have been urged to retract, since we have, after all, won; it doesn't seem to be easy to convey that until you can see how relations of various kinds are properly mended it might be premature to speak of victory - even of endings. It is rather symptomatic of our urgency in wanting what we these days call closure. But the truth is that serious and deep meanings only emerge as we look and listen, as we accompany a long story in its unfolding – whether we are thinking about the meaning of a life (mine or anyone's) or the meaning of a period in international affairs. Stability is still the key, a staying with that gives us the opportunity ourselves to change as we accompany, and so to understand more fully.

And what we have been thinking about in relation to peacemaking has an uncomfortable pertinence just at the moment. Are we capable, as Western societies of peace that is not 'false' in Benedict's terms? That is, are we sufficiently alert to the agenda we are bringing to international conflict – resentments, the sense of half-buried impotence that sits alongside the urge to demonstrate the power we do have, the desire to put off examining the unfinished business in our own societies? And, for that matter, there is the falsity that can also afflict would-be peacemakers, who are more concerned with condemning what's wrong than with planning

for what might change things, and who derive some comfort from knowing where evil lies (i.e. in someone else, some warmongering monster). What do we do to help our culture discover or recover habits of honesty? Is there a healing of the 'circulation'? 'Peace work', writes Donald Nicholl (p.224), 'demands a far higher degree of self-discipline, spiritual preparation and self-knowledge than we are generally prepared to face.'

And as for accountability – we tend these days to pride ourselves on taking this seriously; we have introduced the notion of audit into most of what we do, and are encouraged to challenge anything that looks like non-accountable exercising of authority. But I suspect that all this is actually rather a long way from what the Rule has in mind. First of all, the accountability of the Rule depends on a clear common understanding of what everyone is answerable to: the judgement of Christ. The Rule has nothing resembling a speculative Christology; but all the lines lead to Christ, the central instance of authority rightly used and attention rightly directed to God and the immediate other. There is no interest at all in the Rule in challenging authority on abstract principle. What there is is a clear commitment to listening, as a central and necessary aspect of making decisions, listening even to the most junior (ch.3); the possibility of explaining difficulties and asking for consideration of special circumstances (ch.68); and the repeated insistence that the abbot is measured by and must measure himself by the standard of Christ's pastoral service, with its focal principle of self-gift for the sake of the life of the other. When abbatial decisions are made, the monk must ultimately obey; but the context remains one in which we are being urged to think not about an audit, in the sense of an assessment of whether the processes in use are delivering the desired results, but about the degree to which the community is genuinely working with a shared focus and common language, in which both discussion and decision are possible.

The Rule is in no way a primitive democratic document, and its appeals to obedience are undoubtedly counter-cultural these days. But what the discomfort arising from this misses is the sense of standing together before Christ, becoming used to Christ's scrutiny together. In this way, we both see ourselves under Christ' judgement and see others under Christ's mercy; and we are urged not to despair of that mercy even for ourselves. Not to despair of mercy is the last of the tools of good works; we could say that the final point of accountability before Christ was that we should have as the extension of our natural bodily being the habit of hope, trust in the possibilities of compassion. And the abbot is in a unique position to put that into circulation.

What the 'audit' culture lacks is usually a positive shared focus. We have a clear sense of what counts as breach of responsibility, and usually a clear (if often artificially clear) account of what effective exercise of responsibility should produce. What we don't often have is the tacit or explicit reference to the shared focus of meaning that allows real mutuality in the life of the group under authority. Challenges belong in the context –yet again – of a stability that guarantees we all know what we are talking about and what we hope for.

So the Rule's sketch of holiness and sanity puts a few questions to us, as Church and culture. It suggests that one of our main problems is that we don't know where to find the stable relations that would allow us room to grow without fear. The Church which ought to embody not only covenant with God but covenant with each other does not always give the feeling of a community where people have unlimited time to grow with each other, nourishing and challenging. We have little incentive to be open with each other if we live in an ecclesial environment where political conflict and various kinds of grievance are the dominant currency. And, believers and unbelievers, we'd like to be peacemakers without the inner work which alone

makes peace something more than a pause in battle. We are bad at finding that elusive balance between corrupt and collusive passivity which keeps oppression alive and the litigious obsessiveness that continually asks whether I am being attended to as I deserve. And no, I don't have a formula for resolving that, I only ask that we find ways of reminding ourselves that there is a problem.

So we'd better have some communities around that embody the stability that is at the heart of all this. 'Each [religious] house is meant to be a model – an 'epiphany' rather – of the condition of mankind reconciled in Christ' wrote Fergus Kerr in an essay around 1970 (p.44 in Religious Life Today, John Coventry, Rembert Weakland and others, Tenbury Wells, n.d.). And he goes on to say that this is impossible unless we face the real condition of unreconciledness in and between us; which is why religious houses are not always exactly easy places...But in the terms of these reflections we should have to say that without the stability the work isn't done; the tools don't become extensions of the hand in such a way that the other's reality really and truly ceases to be an intrusion and a threat. How right Benedict was to say that it is only when community life has done its work that someone should be allowed to take up the solitary life: only when the other is not a problem can solitude be Christlike – otherwise it is an escape, another drama.

A monochrome picture? Perhaps, but the self-indulgent technicolour of what are sometimes our preferred styles needs some chastening. The workshop is at he end of the day a solid and tough metaphor for that spirituality which is a lifetime's labour, yet also an expansion of the heart; just as all good physical work is an expansion of the body into its environment, changing even as it brings about change. Holiness is a much-patched cloth, a smooth–worn tool at least as much as it is a blaze of new light; because it must be finally a state we can live with and in, the hand fitted to the wood forgetful of the join.

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