

2026 Pilgrimage Evensong

Address by Bishop Dominic Walker

Every pilgrimage is a walk down memory lane – we are invited to trace the steps of holy people who have passed this way before us and to visit the sights, breathe in the surrounding countryside, sometimes even smell the smells and imagine what it was like all those years ago. Today, we can imagine Father Ignatius and the early monastics in this place with a vision to re-establish the monastic life amidst suspicion and opposition.

The second lesson this afternoon told the account of the Ascension but the apostles were asked, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up towards heaven?’ Whilst St Paul taught we have to keep our minds on things above we need to keep our eyes about us and our feet on the ground. We can't just stand looking up to heaven just waiting for the second coming because we have to live our lives on earth and to do that monks and nuns have followed various monastic rules to enable them to live the gospel life together.

Father Ignatius and his community wisely chose to follow the Rule of St Benedict – a wise choice because the Rule has for hundreds of years been the foundation stone for monks and nuns but also because Anglican spirituality is basically Benedictine. It is about the *via media*, the middle way and St Benedict said, ‘We hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome’ and that the abbot should ‘so arrange everything that the strong have something to yearn for and the weak nothing to run from’.

The Rule of St Benedict and Anglican spirituality both value the divine office, the prayerful reading of scripture, the willingness to listen to others (Benedict says even to the newest member), to welcome others as Christ himself and a down-to-earth pragmatic approach seen best, I think, in what Benedict says about the drinking of wine. Having said that half a bottle a day should be sufficient for each monk he adds, ‘We read that monks should not drink wine at all, but since the monks of our day cannot be convinced of this, let us at least agree to drink moderately, and not to the point of excess’. How very Anglican!

The Rule of course was written to enable monks to live in community and Benedict knew what builds and what destroys communities and I want to suggest that applies to all Christian communities, parishes, churches and families and not just to monks and nuns. We can all learn from the Rule of St Benedict. He tells us to ‘prefer nothing to Christ’ and therefore to become Christ-like. The longest Chapter in the Rule is about growing in humility, which involves a reverence for one another, forgiveness, patience, obedience and humble love.

But perhaps it is what St Benedict says about what destroys communities that should grab our attention today and there are two things in particular. The first is the lack of

restraint in speech. Silence is central to developing a life of prayer and learning to listen to God and others. There are different kinds of silence - there is the 'stony silence' when two people are not speaking to one another - it has been described as aggressive silence. Then there is the silence when a lonely person longs for a visitor or for the telephone to ring. There is the silence of a library when each person needs to concentrate. There is the silence that respects a holy place and there is also a self-imposed silence when we need to listen - to hold back from speaking and practice restraint and not jump in first to share our supposed wisdom which may silence others.

You may know the kind of people who have an opinion on every subject under the sun and who are more than willing to express it, but we don't need to have an opinion on everything. St Benedict taught that silence is golden and a good rule before speaking is to ask - is it necessary? Is it true? Is it kind? At meetings there are some people who listen and rarely speak but when they do everyone pays attention.

But what St Benedict sees as being most destructive of community is what he calls, 'murmuring' or 'grumbling'. Five times in what is a gentle Rule he warns against murmuring and how if monks grumble they should be warned twice privately, then publicly and if they continue they should be excommunicated. Now murmuring is not the same as complaining and Benedict tells his monks how to do that with humility. Nor is it the same as seeking justice for another. Murmuring is about constantly grumbling about things so as to create a negative atmosphere and a culture of discontent. One negative person can feed the negativity of others and destroy a Eucharistic community that should be full of thanksgiving and joy.

I remember being at the life profession of a young German brother at Taizé in France. The Prior, Brother Roger, read the opening chapters of their Rule. I remember it began with, 'The life to which you have been called is not a natural life and can only be lived by supernatural grace' and then a little later it said, 'If you have reason to be angry with another brother, keep it between the two of you'. Yes, discontent spreads and destroys.

I expect Fr Ignatius and his monks, like Benedictines I have known, would check themselves and one another when they grumbled - by saying, 'Oh dear I am murmuring?' or 'Brother, are you grumbling?' And perhaps we constantly need to check ourselves when we hear ourselves murmur or grumble. C.S Lewis wrote that the malcontents - those who are bitter or unhappy with life and the cranks and misfits praise God least whilst the humblest and most balanced praise God most.

St Benedict taught his monks to prefer nothing to Christ, and so we pray for the gift of humility and restraint and a lack of murmuring and we ask St Benedict, the Father of monks and nuns, to pray for us - and to God be the glory. Amen.