PRAYER

An Advent Address in a series on the Benedictine Themes
of Prayer, Learning, and Welcome.

WELCOME to the first of our three Advent addresses, here in Worcester Cathedral. The main point of an Advent address, I think, is to remind ourselves that we *are* in Advent, and Advent is a season of reflection and prayer, even though the rest of the world thinks it is Christmas already. The Church, for very good pastoral and evangelistic reasons, has to accommodate the world's need to celebrate Christmas during what is properly Advent. But now, this morning, for an hour or so, we can devote ourselves to Advent, to that quiet opportunity for reflection and prayer, for watching and waiting.

And what shall we do with this opportunity? We need a theme, or our minds will wander, and we shall worry about Christmassy things. The theme of the addresses this year reflects the Cathedral's new strategic framework, setting out the kind of Cathedral community we aim to be over the next four or five years. Much of that strategic framework is to do with projects and tasks and funding and resources and all the things that go into any strategic document, but at the heart of it is the aim to be a more deeply Christian community. But that, too, needs a bit of particular focus, or we shall just be swept along by the projects and tasks and funding and resources, and the aim to be more deeply Christian will be no more than a spiritual coating of the real hard stuff underneath. So the Cathedral's strategic framework bases itself on three fundamental values: Prayer, Learning, and Welcome. That is what we say the Cathedral is, and should always be: 'The House of God – a place of prayer, learning and welcome'. And those are the subjects of these three Advent talks.

The strategic framework document spells this out further as follows: '*At the heart of everything we do lies the commitment, as a Christian community inspired by our Benedictine heritage, to prayer, learning, and welcome'*. And because we are the mother church of the Diocese of Worcester, we cross-reference that to the four 'Kingdom Values' adopted by the Diocese some years ago: the values of love, compassion, justice, and freedom. That's another way of encapsulating fundamental Christian values, and it's not in competition with the Cathedral's strategic framework, but we did base last year's Advent addresses on the four diocesan themes, and that is why this year we are focussing on this threefold Benedictine theme.

So this morning I'm talking about Prayer. The Cathedral's strategic framework, just to give it one more puff, says this: *Prayer is offered here* [that is, in the Cathedral], *morning and evening, every day of the year. We pray for the people of the diocese of Worcester, for the city,*

the nation, and the world. We worship God to the best of our abilities. We strive for beauty, integrity, and authenticity, whether the service is large or small.

I now want to take this forwards, by going backwards: back to St Benedict himself, and what we find in his life and his work that can help us to pray. For when we talk, as we quite often do, about our 'Benedictine heritage', we are talking first and foremost about the legacy of one man, Benedict of Nursia, who lived and worked and prayed and died and went to glory in central Italy in the middle decades of the sixth century.

That's a long time ago. The dissolution of the monasteries, which brought the great Benedictine era to an end in England, is almost half a millennium ago; but we have to go a whole millennium earlier than that to reach the beginning of the Benedictine era and the lifetime of its father and founder. Yet sixth-century Italy was not so different from many parts of the world today. The western Roman empire had collapsed, taking with it the infrastructure of society; the economy was in shreds; unstable regimes held sway; the land was torn by war and devastated by famine and disease. The Church was one of the few organisations that still functioned, and offered such social and health care, and such famine relief, as were feasible. And in that troubled world a young man called Benedict decided, with all the enthusiasm of youth, to give his life to God. His parents had sent him to Rome to study, but instead he went into the hills, far from any human habitation, to live a life of solitude and prayer. He lived in a cave at what is now Subiaco. He stayed there three years. It doesn't look as though he had a plan – no strategic document for him.

We may have mixed feelings about someone who turns their back on society. Couldn't Benedict have done more good in Rome, got his qualifications, thrown his energy into helping the poor, feeding the hungry, doing his bit for the community? Well, of course he could; but those who flee the world to find God often find the world coming after them. A person of prayer is attractive; a hermit is intriguing; and people certainly came in search of Benedict. He attracted disciples and followers and people seeking his advice; all sorts of people came to him, including the king of the Goths. Though Benedict had no plan, God evidently did, and the plan was that that diffused yearning for a life of spirituality and prayer, which Benedict felt in himself and excited in others, should be harnessed, and directed, and channelled into what eventually would become one of the greatest forces for good in the history of Europe.

But Benedict had no notion of that. Benedict could not see what the Benedictine order would become, nor what John Henry Newman meant when he called the history of medieval Europe 'the Benedictine centuries'. He had no notion of founding an order, and no one at the time would have known what an 'order' was. He simply gathered his followers into a community, and when the numbers became too large he split them into more communities. He moved his base to Monte Cassino, and soon there were in the neighbourhood twelve little communities, each of about twelve men. And Benedict's sister, Scholastica, caught the

excitement too; and soon there were little communities of women as well. From one man to a few hundred women and men was an impressive growth, but hardly a national, and certainly not an international, movement. Benedict entertained no ambitious plans to 'expand'. He did something far more important, and far more enduring, than that: he wrote a Rule for his little communities.

Benedict was not breaking new ground. There had been communities of monks and nuns in the eastern Church, especially in Egypt, under the inspiration of the great St Anthony. Monastic communities had reached France, promoted by St John Cassian and St Martin. Benedict himself had the use of a monastic rule by someone we only know as 'the Master'; rather a long, rambling, idiosyncratic document. Benedict distilled all he could find about community life from different sources, and put it into a new Rule. We call it the Rule of St Benedict. Thousands of monks and nuns across the world still live by it. Hundreds of thousands of ordinary lay Christians across the world still gain inspiration from it. Some of those are 'oblates' – men and women living their ordinary lives but formally committed to living in the spirit of the Rule, and in association with one or another monastic community. They (or we, because I am one) would say it is one particular expression of the Christian life, which helps us live as Christians.

That is what the Rule of St Benedict is: one way to live a Christian life. Benedict never sought to impose it on any one. He never said it was superior to other ways of living a Christian life. I have already used the words 'monk' and 'nun', but even that can be misleading. Even though Benedict knew those words and used them, they didn't carry all that thousand-year weight of later history. A 'monk' or a 'nun' in Benedict's time was simply a Christian man or woman who decided to live their Christian life in a community of like-minded men or women, under a community rule; pooling their practical and spiritual resources for the good of the community, and for the good of that wider society of people suffering all the deprivations of war-torn, disease-ridden, famine-struck sixth-century Italy.

The principal activity of the community was to pray. Everything else was subsidiary to that. Benedict called it 'the work of God' (*opus dei*). 'Let nothing be preferred to the work of God', Benedict famously wrote in his Rule. Praying, that was their work, their job.

Just before we look more closely at the kind of prayer Benedict had in mind, let me briefly refer to those other two Benedictine themes we identified at the beginning: 'learning' and 'welcome'. Benedict doesn't define these separately from the work of prayer. In fact, he doesn't identify them as three specific themes at all. They do not, for instance, reflect the three vows taken by a Benedictine monk or nun. They are simply three big themes woven through the Rule.

Learning. When we talk about the Benedictine heritage of learning, we might think of the great scholars and chroniclers of the medieval monastery, and the great monastic libraries (of which our Cathedral library is an outstanding example) in which they worked. All that came

later. Many of those who joined one of Benedict's communities would have had to learn to read. They needed to be able to read the scriptures and sing the psalms. They needed to learn in order to pray. The community needed to run a school. It was as simple as that. Famously, Benedict described the whole life of the community as 'a school for the Lord's service'. Living the Christian life in one of Benedict's communities meant what we might call 'lifelong learning'.

Welcome. People came to the monastery because they were ill, because they were hungry, because they were travelling, because they were seeking refuge. And every guest, says Benedict, is to be received as if they were Christ himself. That's not one Christ who is the object of prayer, and another Christ who comes in the person of the traveller or the asylum-seeker. There's only one Christ. Benedict teaches the monk or nun to pray to Christ, and then, rising from prayer, to see the face of Christ in those standing at the door. The 'work of God', the *opus dei*, offered in daily prayer and worship seamlessly becomes the 'work of God', the *opus dei*, of reaching out to the poor and the homeless.

But back to the *opus dei* offered in daily prayer and worship. How did Benedict expect his monks and nuns to pray?

It's important to hold on to that basic notion that Benedict and his followers were simply living out an ordinary Christian life in a particular way. It's true that in the Rule there is more time spent in prayer than would be possible outside the community. Few labourers, farmers, traders, families caring for children or elderly relatives, could find the time to do all the prayer specified in the Rule. Benedictine oblates today do not generally attempt more than a fraction of what is laid down in the Rule. So *quantitively*, Benedict required a lot more time to be spent in prayer than could be undertaken by people outside the community; but *qualitatively*, he wasn't asking for anything different. He didn't invent, or inherit, some exclusively monastic way of praying. He inherited the traditional ways of praying that the Church had taught for centuries; and that is what he taught his followers to do – only to give more time than most other people could give.

Now what I am going to say next may come as a bit of a surprise to some of you, depending on what the word 'prayer' means to you. Let me take a step sideways, and tell you what I was brought up to think prayer was: it was certainly rather different from what Benedict thought it was.

I was brought up in a Christian family of a rather protestant persuasion. While the family attended church on Sundays – services according to the Prayer Book and hymns from *Hymns Ancient and Modern* – with 'prayers' (in the plural) said by the vicar in the course of those services – 'prayer' (in the singular) meant something rather different. It was a different activity from public worship, and it went on outside and alongside church services. A 'committed' Christian prayed daily. They prayed on their own, and if they were *really* 'committed' they met weekly to pray in a group – again, an activity quite different from a church

service. And prayer of this kind was supposed to be extemporary. A 'committed' Christian was someone who prayed freely in their own words. They did not read prayers out of books. They did not sit in silence. And this was a decade or so before the charismatic renewal reached the Church of England, so emphatically they did not speak in tongues. I say nothing against praying conversationally in your own words, whether alone or in a prayer group. It's just that I never got the hang of it, and it took me a long time to shed the guilt that I did not pray like that. It took me even longer to realise that most Christians, in most parts of the world, in most of the centuries of the Christian era, have not understood prayer to be like that.

So what was the heart of prayer, for Benedict? (And remember, what he thought about prayer was simply what he had inherited from the teaching of the Church over the centuries.) He thought, and the Church for centuries before him had thought, was that when a Christian prays, they should pray as Jesus prayed. Now there is of course a deeper way of understanding that, which is that when a Christian prays, the Spirit of Jesus is offering his prayer through them, 'with sighs too deep for words' as St Paul says. But I'm not exploring that avenue this morning. We'll stick to the simple idea that when a Christian prays, they should pray as Jesus prayed. So how did Jesus pray?

We are given glimpses. Yes, sometimes Jesus prayed in his own words, and in the Rule of St Benedict that is allowed for, for those who wish. But Jesus also prayed as any good Jew would have prayed, using the words of scripture (which meant for him, of course, what we call the Old Testament); and most especially, as any good Jew, he prayed the psalms. They were on his lips as he died. And when his disciples asked him for instruction in prayer, he gave them what we call the Lord's Prayer, both as formula and as model. And of course he celebrated the Last Supper and told his disciples to do that in remembrance of him.

All of this we find in the Rule of St Benedict, because that is how Christians had always prayed. There was opportunity for individual prayer. There was provision for celebrating the eucharist. The community recited the Lord's Prayer several times a day (remembering that a very ancient Christian text, the *Didache*, only just later than the time of the New Testament, recommended saying the Lord's Prayer three times a day). But the most substantial part of the day set aside for prayer was spent in singing the psalms. Benedict's communities sang the whole psalter every week.

Day by day, and hour by hour, Benedict's communities took on their lips the words that Jesus had taken on his lips. Those songs of praise and lamentation and confession and anger and despair. Those songs in which every human mood and feeling is taken up and offered to God, sometimes in a very raw state; sometimes in words which we prefer to skip over. Morning psalms at morning prayer. 'I laid me down and slept, and rose up again, for the Lord sustained me' – that's Psalm 3. And evening psalms at evening prayer. 'I will lay me down in peace and take my rest, for it is thou, Lord, only, that makest me dwell in safety' – that's Psalm 4. There's

nothing wooden about Benedict's arrangement of the psalter: it flows through the day and the night and the week and the year.

Benedict clustered these outpourings of psalmody into eight services, or offices. The night office was at two o'clock in the morning ('At midnight I will rise to give thanks to thee'). Now this was not quite as ascetic or heroic as it sounds to us, but that is because we have almost entirely forgotten the Second Sleep – that pattern of sleep not unfamiliar to ancient and not-so-ancient societies of breaking the night into two halves, with a waking period between them. The other seven offices were spread throughout the day, from dawn to dusk, including the three hours of prayer familiar from both the Old and the New Testament. It ended with Benedict's new invention, the bedtime office of *completorium*, the completion of the day, which we call compline. The night office was very long; the offices at the third, sixth, and ninth hour (terce, sext, and none) very short; but long or short, the divine office, the *opus dei*, punctured day and night with prayer and praise; and that is the first and foremost way in which Benedict's communities prayed.

Alongside the hours of community prayer, there was reading. Benedict's disciples, having learned to read, read the scriptures and the early Christian authors. Not for information, not for purposes of scholarship or research, not for preparing a sermon, but for the purpose of prayerful meditation, a quiet mulling over the text. Benedict calls it *lectio divina* – divine reading, or, as we would say, spiritual reading. At the beginning of Lent, we are told in the Rule, 'each one is to receive a book from the library, and is to read the whole of it straight through'. (That's a challenge to those of us who browse, or start at the end, or abandon a book in favour of another one.) And a book is read to the whole community during meals. But this is all prayerful reading, *lectio divina*; it's not study for its own sake, or entertainment, it's there to help the monk or nun or guest to stay prayerfully present to God.

And, then, because there is spontaneity as well as regularity in the Rule, Benedict insists that the oratory (the church or chapel) must not be used for any purpose other than prayer and worship, and that silence should be maintained in it, so that 'if at other times someone chooses to pray secretly, he may simply go in and pray, not in a loud voice, but with tears and heartfelt devotion'. This, of course, is the outer expression of that 'inner room' of the heart where Jesus tells us to pray to our heavenly Father in secret.

I have given you the barest sketch of the praying life of an early Benedictine community. It survived; and it has come down to us over the centuries. Benedict's eightfold office, sung in Benedict's Latin, survived the dissolution of the monasteries, including this one, and was still sung by the first Dean and Chapter of Worcester until the introduction of the first English Prayer Book in 1549. In that book, Cranmer combined elements of Benedict's daily office into the two offices of morning and evening prayer, retaining the essential elements of psalmody, the reading of scripture, and the Lord's Prayer. Morning and evening prayer, whether recited by a

small congregation without music, or with all the added glory of choral evensong, is nothing more and nothing less than the *opus dei* of which Benedict wrote. It remains at the heart of our life as a cathedral community inspired by our Benedictine heritage.

It is easier today for people to build the daily office into their personal daily prayer than it has ever been. Not just the plentiful availability of office books, but the wonders of the app as well. If I feel a little self-conscious reading midday prayer while sitting on a train with an office-book in my hands (and Jesus told us not to parade our piety before others) I am not at all self-conscious reading midday prayer on my phone. So individual Christians, unable physically to join a congregation in church, can still join in the great daily prayer of the whole Church. And the emergence of livestreamed worship has further eroded the distinction between the congregational and the individual.

'Let nothing be preferred to the work of God', wrote St Benedict. Hard, sometimes, especially in the life of a busy cathedral, to remember that. Not easy to put prayer and worship before all else. But if I have a hope and a prayer for the community of Worcester Cathedral, emerging from the pandemic, looking forward to the next four or five years, seeking inspiration from our Benedictine legacy to help us to become the praying heart of our diocese, it would be to see a corporate renewal of the daily office, whether celebrated together, or celebrated in virtual reality, or celebrated in solitude. It is what cathedrals do. And it is what cathedrals, including this one, can always do better.

Let me close with some verses of a well-known hymn. Thirteen centuries separate the young Benedict, zealous for a life of solitude, and the young James Montgomery, zealous campaigner for the poor and for the emancipation of the slaves. Yet their hands join across the gap between their respective centuries and the gulf that separated their respective cultures. Their hands join in prayer.

Lord, teach us how to pray aright
with reverence and with fear;
Though dust and ashes in thy sight,
we may, we must draw near.

We perish if we cease from prayer;
O grant us power to pray;
and when to meet thee we prepare,
Lord, meet us by the way.

Faith in the only sacrifice
that can for sin atone;

to cast our hopes, to fix our eyes
on Christ, on Christ alone;

Patience to watch, and wait, and weep,
Though mercy long delay;
Courage our fainting souls to keep,
And trust thee though thou slay.

Give these, and then thy will be done;
thus strengthened with all might,
we, through thy Spirit and thy Son,
shall pray, and pray aright.

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