

SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT (RB Prol 17; Ps 34:15)

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I want to look at one issue that has enormous implications for community living. It is the question of reconciliation within the community, the things that cause the need for it, how we go about seeking peace and pursuing it, what are some of the processes that might help us to do this. My starting point is the instrument of good works, 4.73, (in Kardong's translation,) If you have a quarrel with someone, make peace before sundown. The source for this text is of course the well known text from Ephesians 4:26, Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil. The New English Bible translation has an interesting nuance, If you are angry, do not let anger lead you into sin; do not let sunset find you still nursing it; leave no loophole for the devil. So the issue is not the anger itself, but what we do with it. We are not to "nurse it", let it lead us into sin, and we are to make an effort to restore the peace – probably the timing of before the setting of the sun is symbolic rather than always possible in practice, but nonetheless indicates that something must be done.

Andre Louf said once, that Christian community is built on human weakness, is a place of pardon, a place of healing. Most of us would know the weaknesses that we experience in the community, but do we know and experience the community as a place of pardon and a place of healing, I wonder? We may well ask, is 4.73 – making peace before the setting of the sun a possibility? It certainly is not so in the world situation, where an eye for an eye seems to be the prevailing basis for actions.

When we look at the text of the Rule, it is obvious that we can't accuse Benedict of mere impossible idealism. If we take only some of the issues he warns about in chapter 4, we can see that he knows such things will happen even in the best of circles. He had probably seen it happening. Here are some of the points he mentions in that chapter that point up the universality of sin, sin which corrodes the community, destroys the peace, and shows that we need to work towards wholeness and reconciliation. He mentions anger, vengeance, deceit, making false peace, giving evil for evil, murmuring, contention, envy, jealousy, hatred, speaking ill of others. Of course what Benedict is doing for the most part, is showing that the community should be one that tries to live out the gospel teaching. At least some of these faults may appear in our own community lives. And if sin is rife, what about reconciliation? I think this is a key issue for us in our living. In the words of David Armstrong, a protestant minister in Northern Ireland who was driven out of the town by the elders of his own church when he tried to bridge the gap between Protestants and Catholics – A community that has nothing to say about reconciliation has nothing to say. What do we have to say about reconciliation?

I would like to develop this session under the following headings

The Corrosion of Community

Community and Tools

Processes of Reconciliation and Healing

- Faults do not go unchecked
- But all is done with compassion
- Reconciliation can be slow and painful
- Rituals play a very important part.

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

God's Forgiveness

The corrosion of community.

A social researcher, Hugh Mackay, wrote in the daily Melbourne paper a few weeks ago, that he believes that the meaning of our lives is to be found in the quality of our personal relationships and nowhere else. We are all part of the same humanity. We learn the most valuable lessons from each other. In general I think Benedict would agree, though we and he would add a faith/God dimension. So if relationships are so important, we need to look at what damages the quality of our personal relationships and to see if we can do anything about it.

I thought I would begin by making some comments about some of these points from chapter 4.

Anger: Apart from the Ephesians text, there is of course the gospel teaching on doing something about anger. The text in Matthew, (5.22) from the Sermon on the Mount makes it very clear. Not only will murder make you liable to judgment, Matthew says, but I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister you will be liable to judgment. Then, if you express this anger by offering insult or calling a brother or sister a fool, you will be liable to the council or even hell fire. And then there follows the familiar text, that your offerings at the altar are unacceptable unless you are reconciled. Only then come and offer your gift. (5.24)

As I said before, it is not the anger in itself, but it is the expression of it in aggressive behaviour that is the problem. Our actions are to be shaped by reason as well as by emotion. Holzherr makes an interesting point, that this instrument follows Prefer nothing to the love of Christ (4.21) so this love of Christ should shape how we conduct our lives. For lovers of Christ, there is no room for malice, for the vicious circle of evil, where injustice begets injustice, violence begets violence and so on. Only love can break this cycle. Someone must absorb the violence, and refuse retaliation.

The desire for vengeance is connected. Dysinger translates this tool as not to store up wrath, awaiting a time of revenge. Here there is indication of a sort of smouldering resentment which eventually, if allowed to grow, will be expressed in aggression.

The deceit and the false peace, both indicate a lack of honesty. There may be the appearance of all being well, but internally resentment is flourishing. Jeremiah puts it well – They all speak friendly words to their neighbours, but inwardly they are planning to lay an ambush. Jer.9:8

Returning evil for evil speaks for itself. It is the outcome of being unable to accept a wrong without retaliation. There is nothing of the fourth degree of humility in such behaviour. I will come back to this when I speak of forgiveness.

Holzherr notes that murmuring is a kind of fault-finding peevishness. It is an insidious and destructive force in any community, and Benedict condemns it throughout the rule in the strongest possible terms.

Then follows the taking away of another's reputation, hatred, jealousy, envy, all destructive of relationships and the trust we can have in one another. Contention implies habitual quarrelling and is an attitude that can grow if unchecked and can become on-going contentiousness. Like anger, this does not have to be the outcome of conflict. It can be controlled.

Other possible faults are listed throughout the rule, but I won't comment on them except to note them. There are those at the beginning of chapter 23 and in chapter 46. and of course the terrible vice of private ownership. Then as well, people will come late to prayer, the thorns of contention will surely spring up. (13.12) Benedict also feels the need to decry striking another, (70.1) so it must have happened then, and some of these things, and perhaps others, happen now.

In a talk given by Rowan Williams in April of this year, he used a term which is challenging and useful. He asked the question, What is the currency of the community? That is worth asking of ourselves and the

community. Is it murmuring, contentiousness, judging others, blaming others, gossip, lack of forgiveness...? Or is it love of one another, the striving for peace, generosity, acceptance...?

Community and Tools.

In the prologue, when Benedict uses the image of the school, he spoke of the need to rectify faults and safeguard love. Then in chapter 4, which is my starting point, he speaks of tools and workshop as a way to work at this. The tools themselves of course are some of these ways... Do not hate or give way to anger and so on. But perhaps we need more help than simply these statements. In the talk of Rowan Williams to which I referred earlier, he quotes a lovely image of tools for seasoned workers being like an extension of the hand, part of us. One could also use the image of a musician and his/her instrument. The cellist, Stephen Isserlis is someone who reminded me of this recently. He is simply one with his instrument. The tools and instruments are worn smooth with long use. What I would take from this is that it takes a very long time to work at these issues – a life time. Hence the end of chapter 4 on the need for stability while we work at these things in the community. The tools have to become part of us. It is all about being bound up with others, trying to develop a way we can live stably together, and knowing that there will often be the daily discipline of mending. This is why it is so real. Not the magic, quick fix. Now I would like to look at how we might use these tools over a life time.

The processes of reconciliation and healing

Benedict does have something to say about this, so he does not merely give us directions about what would cause divisions. I believe there is much to be gained from a study of chapters 23-30, which I call the corrective code, and chapters 44- 46. These chapters are often neglected as irrelevant, and certainly some of the teaching therein is so. But as usual with the rule, if we look at the principles that Benedict is presenting, there is much to be gained. So one of the issues, after looking at the sinfulness that can appear in the community, is how can we go about reconciliation. There is no difficulty about seeing the faults which are part of the human condition, but it is not so easy to remedy the situations when the faults occur.

I want to make some points about the teaching contained in these chapters,

- Faults do not go unchecked

The first point that is obvious from these chapters is that faults do not go unchecked. Warnings are given, first in private and then if there is no amendment there is public rebuke, and as a last resort the errant one is excommunicated. This means that the person is cut off from the community – no contact is allowed (25.2; 26) and depending on the fault, cannot participate in community meals or prayer. This is a great deprivation for those who love the community. However, it seems to me that Benedict expects that the punishment will be a source of making satisfaction and amending the behaviour, because the isolation enables the person to engage in an honest facing of the truth. (25.3) Misguided sympathy and contact can prevent this. All of it is to bring about healing, as in the final words of this set of chapters, *ut sanentur* – that they may be healed. Those who do not amend, must finally undergo the terrible process of being completely cut off - amputated, and this is graphically described in chapter 28.

- But all is done with compassion..

However, the seeming harshness of the punishment is very much mitigated by the compassion that Benedict enjoins, and this is my second point. He always speaks of the excluded one as brother, albeit sometimes a delinquent one or simply a wavering or weak or sick one (27.1, 3, 6; 28.5) In one of the most beautiful chapters in the rule (in my opinion) chapter 27 shows great compassion. The abbot who has imposed the punishment, acting as a wise physician sends in older and wise brothers to console the brother and urge him to make satisfaction, thus comforting him, lest he be devoured by excessive sorrow. (27.3) Let love for him be intensified, Benedict says. All of this is to be done out of caring with all solicitude for those who have erred. He also uses the image of the shepherd here, noting that the lost one

is dealt with mercifully and brought back. He adds the idea of mercy to the Gospel text of the Good Shepherd.

- Reconciliation and healing can be slow and painful

The third point that I think emerges from these chapters is that Benedict understands that healing and reconciliation can be slow. The provisions that Benedict makes indicate this –the time for pondering, the isolation, the gradual nature of the re-aggregation. Not only can the healing be slow, but it can also be very painful as one experiences growth in self understanding, comes to be able to admit the fault, grows in understanding of the need to change, and begins to undertake whatever means are necessary for this. Here is real humility, knowing our own weakness and knowing that we must depend on God only. I heard a radio program some time ago, which was an interview with a Tasmanian sculptor who had designed a reconciliation garden. He described the huge rock that is the main feature. This rock is split down the middle, and he commented that this symbolizes you must let the world break your heart before you can forgive and be truly reconciled.

- Rituals play a very important part

Another thing that Benedict so clearly understood about the process of healing is the vital place of rituals. He had already stated this when he noted in chapter 13 about the recital of the Lord's prayer at the end of Lauds and Vespers because the thorns of scandal are likely to spring up. (13.12). And towards the end of the Rule he describes a very important ritual. If the brother is rebuked by the abbot he should immediately and without delay cast himself on the ground at his feet, remaining there to do penance until the turmoil is healed by the other's blessing. (71.8) However, in the present context of speaking of reconciliation after faults, the most significant use of ritual is the gradual re-acceptance of the erring member back into the community as described in chapter 44. I will use this as an example. This chapter describes the one who is being reconciled to the community as having to lie face down, prone on the ground at the feet of all, as the monks leave the oratory. Then when the abbot decides, the erring monk prostrates himself at the abbot's feet and then at the feet of all so that they may pray for him. Then he may be received back into the oratory but not necessarily in his former rank, he can't lead a psalm or a reading, and at the end of each hour of the Work of God he is to prostrate himself in the place where he stands. Finally, when he has made satisfaction, he can resume his place in the community.

Of course we won't be doing it like this, and the danger when we deal with a description of such rituals is that we will then dismiss all of this. But I think we should ask, what rituals do we have ? What rituals do we have when someone distances herself from the community? What rituals do we have for healing, forgiveness and reconciliation?

Forgiveness and Reconciliation.

This is not an attempt to solve the problems caused by sinfulness in our communities, but the issue is, just how do we go about forgiveness and reconciliation. Benedict's teaching on the processes we have just discussed are important, but perhaps we can say a little more.

Let us look at forgiveness first. Without forgiveness, I do not believe that reconciliation can happen. The need for this is plain gospel teaching. How often must I forgive, asked Peter? Seven times? I say to you, Jesus answered, seventy-seven times. (Matt 18:22) That is, over and over and over.

The word forgiveness means letting go of hatred, refusal to maintain the need for revenge, going beyond what is expected. There is a perfect example of this in an article that Sheila Cassidy wrote in the London Tablet some time ago. After a very difficult circumstance in her life and after very painful reflection, she came to say ..however much we have been wronged, however justified our hatred, if we cherish it, it will poison us. Our hearts will become bitter and our vision clouded and our love will wither away. Hatred is a devil to be cast out and we must pray for the power to forgive, for it is in forgiving our enemies that we are healed. A former Australian politician, Tom Uren wrote recently, from the non-Christian point of

view. Hate is always tragic. It distorts the personality and scars the soul. It is more injurious of the hater than it is of the hated. And back to Evagrius, who puts it even more graphically. [Anger] hardens the soul even more and more, it particularly captures the mind during prayer, vividly bringing up the face of an offender, At times lingering in the soul and passing into enmity, it causes nightmares, depicting physical tortures, the horror of death, attacks of poisonous snakes and beasts. Cassian speaks of anger as a deadly poison, the most pernicious disease of the soul.

We could think of many examples where hatred is put aside in the process of working to forgive. Think of the case of Cardinal Bernardine and his accuser. Think of the Trappist monk in Algeria, Fr Christian, who called his murderer- to- be the friend of his final moment, and commended this murderer to the God whose face I see in yours. I was reading the story of Joseph recently (Gen 42 – 47) and I noticed the wonderful statement that Joseph made when he finally told his brothers who he was. Come closer to me... I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. (Gen 45: 4-5) Complete forgiveness, showing the outcome of reflecting on the meaning of the tragic event, an event that should not have happened and that could have engendered great hatred and the need for revenge. It is not hard to think of examples. But it is harder to do it in our own lives.

John Chrysostom makes an interesting point. He says, Two things are required of us here and now: to acknowledge our sins and to forgive others; the first so that the second may become easier. For if we are properly aware of our own behaviour and its shortcomings, we will be more forgiving of others. Knowing our own sinfulness, makes it easier to forgive that of others.

There is a New Zealand writer, Stephanie Dowrick, a psychologist who wrote a book which she called, Forgiveness and Other Acts of Love. There is great insight in that title. Forgiveness is indeed an act of love, and perhaps the issue is, that we do not have enough love.

If we can forgive, we then can make the move to reconciliation. This word implies a move back to union, it is a seeking of wholeness.

Benedict is strong about the abbot's role in the reconciliation process. I thought three things about that stand out, and I selected them because in the end they apply to all of us. They are compassion, service and accountability. Every effort towards forgiveness and reconciliation, must involve compassion. The struggle to maintain this attitude in an endeavour to bring about reconciliation, requires a willingness to serve, both for the good of the person and for the community. Then there is the fact that the abbot is accountable for those in his care. I think these three things are part of our mutual love for one another, and a responsibility for us all, but perhaps the abbot is in a privileged position to ensure that what circulates in the community is an effort towards reconciliation, forgiveness, non-judgment, peace-making. I noticed a striking expression in a commentary of Thomas Aquinas on St John's Gospel. He is speaking of shepherds and he says, No one can be a good shepherd unless he/she is united with Christ through charity... Two things are required of [the shepherd], to be responsible for them and to love them; one is not enough without the other.

God's Forgiveness

I want to end with a reminder of the power of God's forgiveness. This was brought home beautifully to me in a novel of David Malouf (an Australian writer) (Conversations at Curlow Creek. P 138) A convict who was about to die asked his guard, Is there such a thing as forgiveness? And after much thought, the policeman replied, If I were God I would choose to forgive because I could not find it in my heart to do otherwise. This goes to the heart of the matter. And we have to be God-like in this.

The instruments of good works which precede and follow the one I began with – If you have a quarrel with someone make peace before sundown, (4.73) really sum up all I have been saying. 4.72 says Pray for your enemies for the love of Christ. Once more Benedict sees this as only possible if Christ is concerned. Benedict changes the text of the Master to insert Christ, showing that he believed that Christ is central to

everything, and in this case into our power to forgive. One has to pray for one's enemies with our eyes on Christ and with his love. And then he ends the list of tools, full of hope, in spite of the difficulty of all of this, And never despair of God's mercy. (4.74) This has to be one of the most beautiful phrases in the rule – *Et Dei misericordia numquam desperare.*

All of this makes our community living possible and makes it different from the world's ways.

In the cartoon depicting a fence of barbed wire dividing two fields of flowers, I would note that barbed wire is so destructive. It cuts hands and face, it tears clothes, and it even imprisons people. I think reconciliation is about using the tools over a life-time, the tools that have become part of us, to try to remove this division. Maybe some day, if not here at least in heaven we will have the field of flowers without the barbed wire division. This is where our seeking of peace and our pursuit of it can lead us.