

Homily for the Solemnity of St Benedict 2010

By Dom David Tomlins

Dear Brothers and Friends,

There is a sense in which I feel that St. Benedict has "always been there" in my life. How come? Well, to start with, my parents were married on this day seventy-five years ago. Next our Australian founded Good Samaritan Sisters, who follow the *Rule* of St. Benedict, taught me and my five siblings the three secular Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic), plus a fourth, religion, in our initial years of education in Ayr. Then, in the mystery of God's call, I have found myself attempting to be guided by his *Rule* in a Cistercian community for the past fifty years. I thank God for the continuity of his graces through this man, Benedict. Many of you, my Cistercian brothers and our friends, have likewise been blessed through him whom Pope St. Gregory the Great, playing on the Latin word *benedictus*, remarked was "Blessed in grace as well as in name" (*Dialogues*, Book 2, Prologue). On this, his feast day, let us ask to be blessed yet again.

What blessing do we seek? The first reading (Proverbs 2:1-9) suggests the very great boon of **applying our heart to learn wisdom**. Those who are familiar with the *Rule* of St. Benedict will hear echoes of his Prologue in the words of the book of *Proverbs* we heard a few minutes ago:

... take my words to heart,
tuning your ear to wisdom,
applying your heart to truth...
Cry out for discernment...
search for it as for buried treasure...

"Tuning your ear to wisdom": these are beautiful words, and the reality is even more so.

What was the wisdom Benedict found and wishes to share with all those who tune their ear to catch wisdom? Without a doubt it is, in the words of St. Paul **"Christ... the wisdom of God... By God's doing he has become our wisdom"** (1 Cor. 1:25, 30).

Benedict's *Rule* is a rule of life for a monastic community. But monastics and non-monastics through the ages have found there "wisdom... buried treasure". This wisdom is presented by him in a variety of ways and sayings. For me it is gathered in its essence into the recommendation, twice repeated: **"the love of Christ must come before all else... Prefer nothing whatever to Christ"** (RB 4:21; 72:11). This primacy of Christ and his love is what Peter claims for himself and his fellow apostles in this morning's gospel (Mt.19:27-29): "We have left everything and followed you". Yes, true. Yet I think we will all recognise ourselves in Peter's hedged bet revealed in those words, "What about us? What are we to have?" We look for a reward *in addition to Christ*. This is because we are *still learning* the wisdom of

preferring nothing to the love of Christ. He *is* our great reward (Lk.6:35). Insistently Jesus re-focused Peter: "Do you love me?... Do you love me?... Do you love me?" (John 21:15-17). In Benedict's school of wisdom this is the question and the lesson which he hammers away at time and again. Do you love Christ?

Pope St. Gregory reveals something of the heart of Benedict in an attractive little story. It goes like this: There was a venerable man named Martin who lived as a hermit on Mount Marsico in Campania and dwelt for many years in a very narrow cave. When he first took up his residence there, St. Gregory writes, "he took an iron chain and tethered himself by his leg to the rock, so that he might go no farther than the length of the chain". When St. Benedict heard this he recognised Martin's good intentions, his desire for commitment, but he knew he was missing the mark. He sent one of his monks to Martin with this message: "**If you are a servant of God, let no chain of iron hold you but the chain of Christ**". Martin immediately removed the chain "and yet never thereafter went farther from his cave than he had done when his leg was chained". (Pope St. Gregory the Great: *Dialogues*, Book 3, chapter 16). "The chain of Christ", an intimate bond of love with Christ, is the wisdom which Benedict insists will keep us faithful in our seeking of God, whatever our christian vocation.

Benedict's most famous words, "prefer nothing to the love of Christ", were not original. He inserted himself into a wisdom tradition. Like a flowing river, his wisdom was from personal experience, but fed by many tributaries. These particular words he borrowed from St. Cyprian. It is enriching to read Cyprian as Benedict did because in two separate documents he would have encountered "to place nothing at all before Christ" *with the additional telling words: "because he placed nothing before us"* (St. Cyprian: *On the Lord's Prayer*, 15; *To Fortunatus* 6). "Because he placed nothing before us": here is the well-spring of our empowerment in leaving all, giving all to follow Christ. In speaking of living through all kinds of difficulties, Benedict suggests that we will be able to do so "joyfully" with St. Paul's words on our lips: "**But in all this we overcome because of him who so greatly loved us**" (RB 7:35-41, especially v.39, Romans 8:37). Life can be tough, but "because of him who so greatly loved us", "because he (Christ) placed nothing before us", we can get our teeth into life's challenges with confidence.

Benedict teaches us that this empowerment comes from **intimacy with Christ**. Daily we need to "listen with the ear of our heart... listen to what the Spirit says to the churches" (RB Prol.1, 9-12). He quotes Jesus himself to this effect: "Whoever hears these words of mine and does them is like a wise man who built his house on rock; the floods came and the winds blew and beat against the house, but it did not fall: it was founded on rock" (Mt.7:24-25; RB Prol. 33-34). **Those who are wise put themselves daily in the way of hearing, in reading the scriptures and in prayer, that Christ has placed nothing before us**. If we neglect this constant and intimate contact with Christ and his word, we forget this absolutely essential truth and either fall in a heap or stray into a far country. The one thing necessary is the

remembrance that he has "so greatly loved us". This is "tuning our ear to wisdom".

One final point: Benedict is not urging his disciples to give priority to the love of a faraway Christ. He believed "that the divine presence is everywhere" (RB 19:1), in particular in our own heart and in each of our brothers and sisters. The deep truth of the parable of the separation of the sheep from the goats (Mt.25:31-47) is central to his spirituality. **"What you did for one of these least of my brethren you did for me"** (Mt.25:40; RB 4:15-16; 36; 53) is a theme song for him. "To put nothing before the love of Christ" means **loving the Christ at our elbow** or it means nothing. He cannot be loved in isolation from the least of his brethren.

On this solemnity of St. Benedict, let us re-dedicate our hearts to the getting of wisdom. He teaches us to know that we have been so greatly loved by Christ; that we in return should put nothing whatever ahead of loving Christ; and that the Christ we are to love is as close as every other human being. Let us take Christ's words to heart and tune our ear to wisdom. "If you are a servant of God, let no chain of iron hold you but the chain of Christ".