

Feast of Benedict Celebration

Held by Zoom - 10 July, 2021

Reflection on Chapter 50 of the Rule of St Benedict

By Natalie Acton

Good evening, I offer this reflection from the land of the Darkinjung people. I pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge their wise, careful stewardship and ongoing deep connection to land and water.

Well it seems like Chapter 50 of the Rule, a chapter written to address the circumstances when the whole community could not gather for prayer, has particular resonance for us as we gather virtually from places far and wide to celebrate this feast day.

Of course, the chapter was not written with a global pandemic in mind, however when I reflect on its words, there have been many times over the past year where I, and perhaps many of you, have felt like the monk out in the field distant from family and community. Separated from the shared activities that mark our communal identity and nourish our sense of belonging. As I have sat at home watching streamed funerals, or face timing into birthdays or significant events - I am aware that it has evoked in me a sense of loss and sadness and yet at the same time deep grace.

Over the past year I have admired the many creative ways that people have sought to overcome these separations despite border closures, lockdowns and times of enforced isolation. Who can forget the images of people standing on their balconies playing instruments, or singing, or standing outside their homes applauding frontline workers? The images of children gathering at the windows of their grandparents holding up signs and pictures.

It seems more than ever, despite being held apart, we have been inspired and energized by the creativity of our Triune God. A God whose deepest longing and very nature is that of relationship. I continue to marvel at the capacity of the Spirit to engender in us a desire so deep for communion that we continue to find ways to come together, despite the feeling that the structures we rely on are falling away, and certainty is gone.

It seems that Benedict must have known how important it was for those who are separated to maintain a sense of connection as vital to nourishing their relationships with both God and each other.

This chapter reminds us that the work of community is a personal responsibility. It is the responsibility of the monk out at work, or on the road, to stop and pray the psalms he would have memorized by heart, at the allotted times. So too, it is up to each of us to bring our hearts and minds to this project of shared life, wherever we may be.

As usual, Benedict offers some respite from this imperative, exhorting the traveller to observe their communal commitment in “the best way they can”. As we have come to know life in pandemic as more a marathon than a sprint, Benedict’s encouragement perhaps also reminds us that we too can only do what we can.

An image that stays with me from this passage is the monk, most likely in the field, stopping his work to offer the Opus Dei. In a year where we have literally been locked out of our churches and usual places of worship we have increasingly been praying in place, in the midst of our homes, gardens and workplaces. The confinement to our homes, and restrictions on gathering indoors, seems to have awakened in us a desire to be outside, and to discover anew the healing properties of nature. Perhaps the rocks, the fields, the beaches and the trees have spoken to us of permanence, when so many other parts of our life have been constantly shifting. While the physical and psychological benefits of being connected to nature, even through a window, are well known, psychologist and author Hala Alyan warns - this too can be an extension of our anthropocentric view point.¹ Of thinking of nature in the service of the “I”. In addition to earth meeting all my material needs, I want her to meet my emotional needs as well.

Which is why I find Chapter 50 so inspiring. Benedict doesn’t just ask the monk to stop in the field to pray – he asks him to get down on his knees. While Benedict throughout the rule in Chapters 8-18 provides many instructions on where, and how and what to pray this is the only time he mentions kneeling².

And it’s an extraordinary posture. The monk in the field doesn’t stand over the earth like a surveyor or master, but connects with the earth, literally sinking down into it. In this action, the monk is not just connected in heart and mind with the praying community back in the oratory, but is also connected physically and reverentially with the community of all creation. Like the Psalmist, he raises his voice to God in tune with all created life (Psalm 148).

Perhaps for us this time of dislocation from our churches and worshipping communities may be a time to reset or renew our relationship with earth. We have perhaps been once again led home, as Michael McCarthy, naturalist and writer, beautifully states

“there is a legacy deep within us, a legacy of instinct, a legacy of inherited feelings, which may lie very deep in the tissues – it may lie underneath all the parts of civilization which we are familiar with - that we may have left the natural world, but the natural world has not left us”.³

¹ Hala Alyan, Turn Towards the Dark, Fear Courage and Surrender, *Emergence Magazine*, April 29, 2021

² Terrence G Kardong, *Benedict’s Rule, A Translation and a Commentary* (Liturgical Press: Collegeville Minnesota, 1996), 412

³ Michael McCarthy, Nature Joy and Human Becoming, *On Being* Podcast, August 27, 2020

I am invited perhaps then not to pray in, or for, or about creation, but to enter the natural world as listener, lover and learner, the world which Australian Aboriginal author Alexis Wright refers to as the “world’s oldest library... the home of stories and secrets and dreams”.⁴ We reawaken to our participation in the ancient dialogue of the unfolding of creation, a conversation of which we are already participants. A conversation which scientist and professor Robyn Wall Kimmerer, describes as a conversation that happens “between mosses and rocks, between light and shadow and in the drift of continents”.⁵

There’s no denying that amidst the invitations of the last twelve months, there has also been great loss. Over one million people have died in this pandemic, sadly many of them the world’s poorest and most vulnerable. Tonight, as we gather we might remember our connection to them and their grieving families and loved ones .

Chapter 50 of the Rule seems to beckon us back to ourselves – back to the place of our deepest longings for connection with the communion that is God, incarnate in all of God’s creation and manifest in our human gathering. Benedict offers his monks some practical suggestions to attend to, and foster that need for connection. So too, we are invited to consider the actions that we might take when we are feeling disconnected on the roads, or in the fields of our circumstances.

In this time of pandemic we have entered what ecological scholars are beginning to call the Anthro- pause⁶, the great hiatus in human activity resulting from lockdowns involving over 4 billion people, and bringing to a grinding halt, industry worth over 80 trillion dollars. In this anthro-pause the world has begun to breathe again, with smog lifting to reveal vistas hidden for decades, native species returning, and foliage regenerating. Like earth, our mother and sister, perhaps we too might breathe, and allow this pause to awaken a similar renewal in us, to enliven our commitment to deepening our relationships of connection and belonging.

⁴ Alexis Wright, *The Inward Migration in Apocalyptic Times*, *Emergence Magazine*, January 27, 2021.

⁵ Robyn Wall Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses*, 2003

⁶ <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-53113896>, Michael McCarthy, <https://lithub.com/covid-19s-anthropause-has-made-nature-visible-again-at-least-for-now/>, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/scientists-have-name-nature-time-covid-19-anthropause-180975224/>

Acknowledgements

Alyan, Hala, Turn Towards the Dark, Fear Courage and Surrender, *Emergence Magazine*, April 29, 2021

Kardong, Terrance C. Benedict's Rule, A Translation and a Commentary. Liturgical Press: Collegeville Minnesota, 1996.

McCarthy, Michael, Nature Joy and Human Becoming, *On Being* Podcast, August 27, 2020

Wall Kimmerer, Robyn, Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses, Oregon State University, 2003.

Wright, Alexis, The Inward Migration in Apocalyptic Times, *Emergence Magazine*, January 27, 2021.