

Keeping watch on behalf of a sleeping world

Esther de Waal reflects on a monastic tradition that speaks to today

ST BENEDICT (480-547) comes to write his Rule in order to guide his early community. He wants us to listen to him and to God with the ear of the heart.

The aim of the Rule is to help his followers to love each other against all the odds. It helps them to find time for the balanced life of body and mind and spirit, of manual labour, of intellectual work, and above all of prayer. It is about balance and harmony in all aspects of life.

It is very short, about 900 words, and yet it is a Rule of wisdom such as can only come out of lived experience. There is nothing abstract or theoretical in this Rule: it is a practical handbook. It has such flexibility about it and shows such insights into the human psyche that, although written for men in rural Italy in the sixth century, it has remained a living document, able to guide, support, and change lives, throughout the Middle Ages and into our time.

There are great numbers of lay people,



Keeping alert: St Benedict, from a fresco in the Abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore, near Sienna, in Italy

oblates, who are attached to some community, but there are also many who are finding that, as their loyalty to the Church is sometimes pushed almost to its limit, it is the monastic tradition that speaks to them.

The monastic day begins with matins or vigils, when it is hardly yet dawn. It is a wonderful start: it means to be vigilant, to be attentive, alive, awake. Here the Benedictine monastic tradition shares much with other monastic traditions, Christian and non-Christian, in its emphasis on attentiveness and mindfulness.

Keeping watch for the dawn is keeping watch for the coming of Christ — keeping watch on behalf of a sleeping world that doesn't know how to perform that office of keeping watch for itself. Ensure that, like the wise virgins in the Gospel, you are alert and awake. Benedict wants all of us to be that fully alive and awake, not wasting life by being half-hearted, but enjoying the fullness of life.

Early on, Benedict gives us the image

of Christ standing in the market place, asking us: "Do you want life? Do you want fullness of days? If you do, stop, pay attention to me, because this is what is on offer."

In the end, there is no difference between what Christ is offering in the Gospel and what Benedict is offering. Christ is always saying to people that what is on offer is life. You don't want to drift, and you don't want to go through life half asleep.

Benedict was in his own day the same sort of man, drawing people to him by the sheer energy of his own Christ-filled life. The Rule that he devised was simply that they should live the life of the gospel, making the radical values of this gospel immediate and real in their daily lives.

Benedict wants us to experience what he himself experienced: the reality of Christ at every turn of the road, at every moment of the day.

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