

Saint Benedict Glastonbury 2015

From S. Matthew's Gospel Peter spoke to Jesus 'What about us?'

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Just over fifty years ago Blessed Paul VI declared Saint Benedict Patron of Europe.

Messenger of peace, molder of union, magister of civilization, and above all herald of the religion of Christ and founder of monastic life in the West: these are the proper titles of exaltation given to St. Benedict, Abbot. At the fall of the crumbling Roman Empire, while some regions of Europe seemed to have fallen into darkness and others remained as yet devoid of civilization and spiritual values, he it was who, by constant and assiduous effort, brought to birth the dawn of a new era... with the cross, the book and the plow....

It could not be more fortuitous that it is on Saint Benedict's Day 2015 that we meet together in this place, resonating with Benedictine story and spirituality, to sing the praises of God and share the divine food that is the eucharist. For today is our first pilgrimage to Glastonbury since the landscape of the Church of England radically changed.

Benedict lived in a time when the lights of civilization seemed to be going out and barbarism and paganism again holding sway in Europe. What could this patrician young man living in rural Umbria in Italy hope to do about it?

Yet the decisions he made, together with his faithfulness to the Gospel, not only helped keep the flame of the Christian message in all its fullness alive in his own time but for it to spread across Europe helping to save what we know as civilization and western culture.

It all began when Benedict decided to become a hermit and try to emulate the desert experience of Our Lord. And in those long years of solitude and spiritual struggle to discover and understand himself and in that understanding to discern deep truths about his fellow human beings. In so doing others began to join him and together they tried to make community where their own personal needs and the needs of each other were moulded and formed by Christ.

His was an attractive rule. Harsh to us but gentler than many of the time, stressing the need for balance in our lives and in our faith. Cross, book and plow. Facing the radical challenge of Christian living from the one who shed his blood on the Cross for love of us. Recognising the necessity to test everything against the word and spirit of Scripture within the balance and rhythm of worship, study and physical work.

And most of all 'stabilitas', stability.

(Rule 58 of St. Benedict When the new member is to be received, he comes before the whole community... and promises stability.)

Not just staying in one physical place but also resisting the temptation of being swayed by whatever might be the current fashion and fancy of the time. Staying put! And in that staying making particular witness and contribution to the truth of the Gospel.

Did not Saint Paul warn in his letter to the Colossians:

'See to it that none takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy which depends on human tradition and the basic principled of this world rather than on Christ.'

So what about us? Saint Peter asked Jesus.

Jesus was clear that faithfulness and fortitude will be rewarded. The important thing is to stay close to him in prayer, with constant reference to Scripture and in holy, sacramental living.

Even in his own time much of what Benedict did and said was misunderstood, ignored or ridiculed, as much within the Church as without it. For many people his fasts and mortifications seemed as over the top then as they appear now. The challenge God set before him was certainly not for the faint hearted.

But be assured that the fruits of his vocation are as sweet now as when they were first received.

Let us, this day and every day, stand with Benedict firm in the faith received and stable in the tradition lived out. Gracious in Godly living. Confident in the faith, undiminished, undiluted, uncompromised!

In Christ alone my hope is found,
He is my light, my strength, my song;
This Cornerstone, this solid Ground,
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm.