

A Well of the Water of Life: Cistercian Spirituality

A Retreat on Saturday 16th May 2015

Led by Canon Tim Schofield

Prayers to start the day.

1. Most Holy Spirit of God, possess us by your peace, illuminate us by your truth, fire us by your flame, enable us by your power, be made visible in us by your fruits and lift us by your grace from glory to glory for your name's sake, Amen.
2. The Lord's Prayer.

The day was then kept in silence, as the Cistercians are a silent order.

The programme:

10:30 A Well of Living Water.

Silence

12:00 The Spirituality of the Office, followed by the mid-day office (Sext).

Silence

1:00 Lunch.

2:00 The Spirituality of the Psalms.

Silence

3:30 Discussion and final prayers.

A Well of Living Water.

One of the people who have influenced me the most is the American monk Thomas Merton. His book called the Sign of Jonas describes his life as a 20th century Cistercian monk and it is suffused with a love of God and a love of prayer. He helped me to say yes to ordination and gave me a thirst and a love for prayer. Through Merton, I also came to love Cistercian spirituality. I found a very small Anglican Cistercian community in Kent. I went on retreat there, fell in love with the place, and eventually became a Cistercian oblate – a lay member of the order. That community has not survived, but Cistercian spirituality is still very important to me and I think it has a huge amount to teach us. That is why I've chosen to talk about it today.

The Cistercian story began about 1098, with the founding of the famous monastery at Citeaux in Burgundy. The founders were a small group of Benedictine monks who had vowed to follow the rule of Saint Benedict but who found it impossible to do in the Benedictine monastery where they were living. Every day they heard a chapter read from the rule of Saint Benedict and there seemed to be a gap between what they heard and the way they were living. They set about forming a new monastery to live out the rule of Saint Benedict in a more simple and austere way. Over the next 100 years, 500 Cistercian monasteries were founded across Europe, and it became an extraordinary spiritual force in the mediaeval world. Cistercian communities still followed the rule of Saint Benedict but there were very marked differences between Benedictine communities and Cistercian monasteries.

The first was in their **geographical position**. Benedictine monasteries tended to be at the top of hills. Cistercians looked for hidden valleys usually with rivers running through them - for example, Tintern or Rievaulx in this Country, and Senanque Abbey in France. They went into these hidden valleys for a particular reason. The Cistercians wanted to be away from the distractions of the world and visitors. They wanted to live a life focused on and devoted to *God alone*, loving God for himself, for who He is. It was one of the great Cistercian saints who taught that we have to grow to love God not for what he gives us or for the blessings he bestows upon us, but for who He is – simply for himself.

This ideal of living life for God alone without unnecessary distractions touched every aspect of Cistercian life including their **distinctive architecture**, which is famous for its simplicity – for example Fontenay Abbey, with a very plain and austere nave. The windows are plain and have no stained glass. There is very little ornamentation. The whole accent is on simple clear lines. All Cistercian buildings are designed so that those who enter them find peace and restfulness which disposes them for prayer and contemplation.

While their architecture is simple, it is also beautiful. There was a mediaeval doctrine that when one looks at an image, it imprints itself on the soul. Seeing something beautiful enriches and nourishes the soul; conversely something jarring or ugly damages the soul. The same is also true when it comes to what we hear. Saint Augustine believed that the created beauty of this world can lead us closer to God because God himself is uncreated beauty: the beautiful images of this world are a foretaste or shadow of God Himself.

Thus in the Cistercian ideal there is no division between the spiritual and the material. Monastic buildings provide the framework for daily life both materially and spiritually. At the heart of this daily life is the quadrangular cloister.

Cloisters were universal among Cistercian monasteries, with a garden at the centre. The cloisters were placed against the nave of the church, which served the spiritual needs of the community. Running off the cloisters were:

- the dormitory and refectory, which served the physical needs;
- the chapter house, which formed the communal meeting place where the monks heard the rule of St Benedict read each day, and where the administrative needs of the community were handled;
- the scriptorium and the library, which served the intellectual needs of the monks;
- the lavatorium, for washing hands and faces, and so on.

The monks therefore used the cloisters a lot, always coming and going - but in *silence*.

The rule of St Benedict recommended a love of silence. For St Benedict, silence had moral significance. He said that silence – being unable to speak one’s mind – frees humility. And it also fosters charity – the love of other people – because we are unable to fall into sin through careless words when we are criticising or judging others. ‘The tongue has the power of life and death’ says Benedict, quoting the Book of Proverbs (Ch 18 vs 21). The Cistercian ideal involved creating a school of love or charity, and being in silence was a critical contribution to achieving this ideal.

But there were other important reasons why Cistercians lived in silence. Speaking is one way we can control our lives and our relationships, and silence can sometimes make us feel helpless – which is the point. In silence we are to let go of our need to impose our words and our thoughts on the world and on other people. And we are to let God take control – something that involves trust on our part. So when we have that burning desire to say something, actually we can’t, so we have to let God deal with our thoughts and feelings and all the things we want to say. Cistercians wanted to live in this atmosphere of continual silence because they wanted to live for God alone, entrusting themselves to him.

Silence also brings other particular gifts. It gives spiritual energy and kindles the fire of the Holy Spirit in us. One of the desert fathers said ‘when the door of the steam bath is continually open the heat inside rapidly escapes through it. Likewise, the soul in its desire to say many things dissipates its remembrance of God through the door of speech, even though everything it says may be good’.

Silence also breeds awareness. When Francis of Assisi spent time in silence, he became aware of the wind and the water as brother and sister, seeing the interconnectedness of all creation. The Quaker George Fox after spending time in silence found things had another smell: he suddenly became more aware of things around him.

And lastly, silence is creative. Things grow and develop out of a silent atmosphere.

For all of these reasons, silence was important for the Cistercians around the cloister. The cloister was not only a practical and functional space, it also served a symbolic purpose. The cloister walk usually enclosed a garden. More often than not it would have a fountain or well in the middle of it, such as the well in the Spanish monastery of Poblet.

The well is right in the centre of the cloister and at the heart of monastic life. Having a source of water in the cloister served practical purposes – not least to keep the cloister garden alive. But it was also a reminder of baptism at the heart of the communal life; and a reminder of the living water promised to us by Jesus. This was a theme that was very dear to Cistercians, and a lot of the names of Cistercian monasteries are linked to the idea of water: Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire; Trois-Fontaines in North East France; Belle Eau meaning beautiful water and Senanque meaning clean water, both further south in France. When Thomas Merton wrote a history of the Cistercian order, he entitled it 'The Waters of Siloe', referring to the biblical story of the Pool of Siloam where Jesus sent the man born blind to wash and receive sight, and reflecting the idea that the monastery is a place be washed clean and helped to see by the living waters of prayer and contemplation.

He ended his book with these words: 'There is an intoxication in the waters of contemplation whose mystery fascinated and delighted the first Cistercians, and whose image found its way into so many of those valley monasteries. These are waters that the world does not know, because it prefers the waters of bitterness and contradiction. These are waters of peace of which Jesus said "those who drink of the water that I shall give them will never be thirsty. The water that I shall give shall become in them a spring gushing up to eternal life" '.

That was why those early Cistercians loved to have a well or a fountain at the heart of their daily life. But how did the monks find these living waters of contemplation? One route was through the spiritual reading of scripture, known as *lectio divina* which means divine reading. *Lectio* differs profoundly from the way we normally read: it does not involve skimming the contents of the page, but actually digesting and assimilating a text through quiet repetition. The idea is that as we repeat these words slowly, we become more aware and attuned to Jesus speaking to us in words of scripture. The idea of *lectio divina* is that while we are reading, we are always listening for the voice of Jesus coming to us through the text. A very great English Cistercian, Saint Aelred, tried to explain this through the analogy of friendship. He said 'diligent reading is as far from perusal as friendship is distinct from acquaintance with a stranger, or as affection given to a companion differs from casual greeting'. And Aelred's use of that analogy is very significant. It is through deep reading of scripture that we deepen our friendship with Jesus.

Now the word *lectio* was originally used to designate reading aloud, since monks would hear the text read aloud or would read it aloud to themselves in a low voice in the cloister. This

essential characteristic of lectio divina is made clear in a lovely moment in some writings by Peter the Venerable who wrote how one day he was unable to do his lectio because he had been suffering from laryngitis. He couldn't just read the text silently, he had to read it aloud. It was a very important part of lectio. And reading in this way is designed to engage the whole person, through seeing the text, reading it, listening to it and internalising it in the heart; and it was as they whispered the words at the time of reading that monks digested them inwardly.

Two images explain what happens when we read a text again and again. The first is that of hammering a nail; repeatedly hammering a nail, drives it in deeper and deeper. The second is that of a cow chewing the cud; taking individual words or phrases from a text and chewing them extracts all of the flavour from them. It requires patience and a willingness to slow down, to savour the text rather than to skim-read as so many of us do in our culture, but that is how to get the nourishment from the words of scripture.

Michael Casey, a Cistercian monk who is one of the most famous contemporary writers on lectio divina says: 'We must be not only hearers but doers of the word. Unless we come to our lectio with a will to conversion, the exercise is in vain. When God seems silent it's either because there is a latent resistance, or too much noise coming from a multiplicity of concerns within us'. Sometimes the difficulties we experience with lectio divina serve as a summons to us to re-examine our lives and that's why he is talking about conversion. Secondly we have to renounce the search for novelties. Lectio needs to be regular – it's something we need to build into our spiritual lives if it's going to be really and truly effective.

Reading in a meditative way is not just a way of reading a meditative text. We can use this slow form of digesting a text with any book, with food, with the way we eat, with the way we look at a view in the country, with the way we look at a picture. It's actually just about taking time to see, hear and listen to God speaking to us in all sorts of contexts and many different media. That's what really lies at the heart of Cistercian life, whether it's in the natural surroundings of the monastery in the beautiful surroundings of valleys; whether it's in the beautiful architecture; whether it's in the liturgy; whether it's in the silence or in the communal life or through the scriptures, everything has the potential to be a fountain of water springing up to eternal life.

A **lectio divina exercise** then followed using John (Ch4 vs 5 – 15) in which Jesus is sitting by a well – for obvious reasons.

So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink.' (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a Samaritan woman?' (For Jews do not associate with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him 'Sir, you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?' Jesus answered, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.'

- The passage was read by one voice, followed by a period of silence;
- The passage was read by a second voice, followed by a period of silence;
- The passage was read dramatically, with a commentator and different voices reading the words of the protagonists, followed by a period of silence;
- Everyone in turn then said one word that had struck them from the passage, followed by a period of silence;
- The passage was read by one voice, followed by a period of silence;
- Everyone was invited to read the passage slowly and silently to themselves;
- After that everyone was invited to reflect further on the text - what feelings it aroused, what comforts, and what challenges – and to ask for help to live out the truths revealed in the passage, before once more reading the passage slowly and silently.

SILENCE

The Spirituality of the Office

The second session of the day looked at the spirituality of the Office. Everyone then said the Mid-day Office together.

For whose benefit is the worship of a church offered? With the growth of lay participation in worship, which is undoubtedly a positive thing, contemporary worship has become very people-centred. One disadvantage of this trend is that it seems to be mainly about satisfying the needs of us worshippers. We now have family services, we have messy church, we have café church etc. There has always been a danger that human desires and needs become the focus of prayer and worship - a very particular temptation in our own culture where we can very easily slip into becoming spiritual consumers.

The monastic understanding of prayer and worship is very different. It is centred around the Office which is not a place to go between nine and five, but a form of prayer. In the rule of St Benedict, praying the Office was called the Work of God, the *Opus Dei*, offering praise to God on behalf of the world. It came to be thought of as the primary task of the monastic community.

The Office has been described as the liturgy of time. The Eucharist and family services can be celebrated at any time of the day, but the Offices are related to particular times and points during the day. So a Cistercian begins the day at 2am (or there about) by getting up to say night office or Vigils. He or she may then go back to bed briefly, before getting up at dawn to say Lauds. Terce would then be said before the day's manual or practical work began; Sext would be at mid-day; None in the early afternoon; Vespers early in the evening; and then Compline would be said before the monks went to bed.

The hymns which begin each of those offices and to some extent the psalms that follow reflect the time of day. So for instance the lovely hymn at the beginning of Lauds, the dawn office, begins like this: 'As light of dawn makes darkness yield; so Christ has conquered death and sin; to Christ the risen saviour then; to Christ the day star let us come.' There are clear links between the risen Christ and the dawning of the sun at the beginning of the day.

In praying at these different times of the day, the Cistercian monk was simply reflecting the command of the Psalmist: 'Seven times a day do I praise you'. These seven offices said through the day provide a continual focus of prayer to God throughout the life of the monk.

But before we ourselves say the mid-day office, I want to mention a few other things about the spirituality of the Office.

Firstly, the Office takes our eyes off ourselves and fixes them on God. No matter how we are feeling, whether we want to pray or not, the Office is the work of God which the Cistercian has to say at the appointed hour. It is an uncompromising way of offering worship that is centred on God, not on our feelings or our own needs. When we are going through those inevitable times of spiritual darkness or dryness when personal prayer is so difficult, we can still say the Office of God, because everything is given to us.

Secondly the Office is almost uniquely about offering praise to God. All other forms of worship tend to have a me-centred bit in them. We might confess our sins, intercede for our needs or the needs of our world, or give thanks for our blessings. But the Office has none of that: it is simply about praising God. One of the spiritual blessings of this is that it enlarges our sense of God, our awareness of him, and our love for him, because praise is the language of love.

Thirdly, the Office is something that is said with the whole church. The communal aspect of saying the Office is obvious for those living in a monastic community. But even for those who are not, and who are saying the office physically alone, spiritually they are joining with the whole of the Church around the world. We don't live the Christian life in isolation, we are part of the body of Christ throughout the world, and that can be a great support and strength and encouragement to us.

A celebration of the mid-day office, **Sext**, then followed:

Hymn:

Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
To receive glory and honour and power,
For you created all things,
And by your will they existed and were created.

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain
To receive power and wealth and wisdom
Might and honour and glory and blessing.
To Him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb
Be blessing and honour and glory and might
For ever and ever.
Amen

Psalm 20

Psalm 23

Collect:

God our Father
Whose Son Jesus Christ gives the water of eternal life:
May we thirst for you,
The spring of life and source of goodness,
Through him who is alive and reigns, now and for ever.
Amen.

Reading: John 7: 37 – 39

Response:

Lead me in your truth and teach me:
For you are the God of my salvation
Lord have mercy,
Christ have mercy,
Lord have mercy.

The Lord's Prayer

Let us bless the Lord:
Thanks be to God.

Two things coming out of the Office for reflection: what is it that makes you loveable to God; and what does it mean for us to love God.

SILENCE

The Spirituality of the Psalms

The third session of the day looked at the psalms. The psalms are at the heart of Cistercian spirituality. Cistercian monks would learn all 150 psalms by heart. Each office contains one or two psalms, so in saying the offices through the day, Cistercians would get through a large number of psalms every day. But the psalms played a significant role in the prayer life of every monk, because that was the way they came to Jesus, who used the psalms, prayed them and quoted them, most notably on the cross.

The psalms contain every human experience and emotion, and are very helpful aids for prayer. We are going to use their approach to help with our own prayer. In a moment I shall ask you to write a psalm.

Many psalms are full of joy and praise; many are full of thanksgiving and wonder; but many also contain darker passages. With our modern sensibilities, we often gloss over these passages, preferring to ignore them; but they have their place. On a previous study day, one of the people attending had lost a child to leukaemia, and had had to endure watching the child suffer and die. When he wrote his psalm, it was full of rage against God for allowing this to happen – much as many of the psalms are full of anguish. This means that psalms can help us to pray no matter what our circumstances.

We can look at psalms, and break them down into key questions (illustrated by psalm 36:)

What is my concern?

1. Sin whispers to the wicked, in the depths of their heart; there is no fear of God before their eyes.
2. They flatter themselves in their own eyes that their abominable sin will not be found out.
3. The words of their mouth are unrighteous and full of deceit; they have ceased to act wisely and to do good.
4. They think out mischief upon their beds and have set themselves in no good way; nor do they abhor what is evil.

What do I say to God?

5. Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens and your faithfulness to the clouds.
6. Your righteousness stands like the strong mountains, your justice like the great deep: you, Lord, shall save both man and beast.

What would God have me do?

7. How precious is your loving mercy, O God! All mortal flesh shall take refuge under the shadow of your wings.

What does that mean for me?

8. They shall be satisfied with the abundance of your house; they shall drink from the river of your delights.

Why do I hope in God?

9. For with you is the well of life and in your light shall we see light.

What is my prayer?

10. O continue your loving kindness to those who know you and your righteousness to those who are true of heart.
11. Let not the foot of pride come against me, nor the hand of the ungodly thrust me away.

Using this framework, people were invited to write a personal psalm that addressed their own circumstances and situations.

SILENCE

Conclusion

Readings (NIV):

Isaiah Ch 12 vs 2 - 4

2. Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation.
3. With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation.
4. In that day you will say: Give thanks to the Lord, call on His name; make known among the nations what He has done, and proclaim that His name is exalted.

Revelation Ch 22 vs 1 - 2

1. Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb
2. down the middle of the great street of the city. On either side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

Prayers:

God the giver of life whose Holy Spirit wells up within your Church, may the spirit produce in us streams of living water, that we may share with the whole of creation the joys of eternal life. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer.

May God who gives us in Christ a well of water springing up to eternal life, perfect in us the image of His glory. And the blessing of God Almighty, the Son and the Holy Spirit be among us and remain with us, now and always. Amen.