

# Murmuring

*Sermon preached by Nicholas Buxton on 12<sup>th</sup> February 2006, at Evensong in Trinity Hall, Cambridge, and featured in BBC2's The Monastery Revisited.*

About 1500 hundred years ago, shortly after the fall of the western empire a young student in Rome, appalled by the debaucheries of college drinking societies, and thoroughly depressed about the state of the world, dropped out of university, turned his back on what might have been a promising career in the civil service and became a monk. His name was Benedict, and he gave his name to a monastic tradition that survives to this day.

Although we may tend to think of monks and nuns as a special class of religious professional, in the early sixth century when St Benedict wrote his rule for monasteries, monks and nuns were essentially ordinary lay people who, withdrawing from everyday life in a world gone mad, sought to live out the teachings of the gospels. Indeed, it is precisely because monasticism is profoundly biblical by inspiration that I could take almost any set of readings as a starting point for a sermon on the Benedictine values of stability, conversion, and obedience. For example, in Philippians, Paul speaks of radical transformation involving a turning away from the world - which he characterises in terms of slavery to earthly things, the god of the belly - towards Christ. He forgets the worldly past, in order to strive towards a future in God. This is the sort of thing implied by the Benedictine principle of conversion. Meanwhile, in the book of Numbers we hear about the struggles of the Israelites in the wilderness, their lack of confidence in their leaders, in short their disobedience: they complain against God, not trusting in His providence.

So, what about obedience then? Bit of a bad word these days. On the whole, we tend to think that personal freedom, generally understood as the freedom to indulge every whim and fancy, is the highest good, and we can be very intolerant of anything that appears to limit it. If it feels good, do it. Never mind anyone else. Freedom, thus understood, is equated with being able to have and to do whatever we want, especially with our bodies.

And yet, what would a totally permissive society look like, a world with no limits at all? It shouldn't take us too long to realise that such a world might not be a very pleasant place in which to live. If everyone could literally do whatever they wanted, chaos and suffering would inevitably ensue because that freedom would include the freedom to do to others things that they might not want to have done to them. Strange as it may initially seem, freedom is actually defined by what limits it, and this limitation is often something to do with having respect for others, as if they were ourselves. Paradoxically, then, it is limitation that allows for the possibility of freedom.

We are all, no doubt, sufficiently acquainted with the stereotypes of monastic austerity to find it unsurprising that Benedict is keen on obedience: "In the monastery," he says, "no one is to follow his own heart's desire" (RB 3.8). At first glance, this sounds like exactly the sort of repressive authoritarianism that we might ordinarily take to be the exact opposite of freedom. All the more surprising, then, that when we look at what Benedict actually understands obedience to mean, we discover that he claims obedience is the way to true freedom because it is ultimately equated with love.

Freedom, according to Benedict, is not the kind of freedom we might associate with gratifying our personal wants: it is a freedom that results from giving, not taking. It is like the freedom we experience when we lose ourselves in something – playing a musical instrument for example – a freedom that results from being totally absorbed in, or given to, something other and perhaps, greater, than ourselves.

Therefore, obedience is not the opposite of freedom, but the beginning of freedom; not constraint or restriction, but an awareness of others and their needs. Obedience means listening attentively and responding appropriately. Ultimately, obedience means giving up all that comes between ourselves and God. In short, it is to give up the superficial in order to reach the deep, to open ourselves to the possibility of loving and of being loved. Which is precisely where the Israelites, as they wandered in the wilderness, were going wrong. They did not trust God because they were too busy grumbling, complaining, quarrelling, murmuring...

Benedict sees murmuring as the greatest obstacle to the obedience/love that is necessary to successful community living, for it prevents an attentive attitude to life and to one another. Apparently he actually gets this notion from the book of Numbers in which we hear quite a lot about the Israelites grumbling - against God and against their leaders Moses and Aaron. The episode in which they complain about being led into the desert where there is no water, thus implicitly declaring a vote of no confidence in God, is but one of numerous examples. Indeed, God is forever having to say things like: 'How long will this wicked generation grumble/complain/murmur against me?'

Although in English translations we usually see the word 'grumbling,' the Latin that Benedict would have been familiar with used the word 'murmuratio.' I think 'murmuring,' with its sense of being only semi-audible, conveys better the insidious and poisonous habit that Benedict is picking up on here. In the monastic tradition, murmuring practically becomes a technical term, referring to the kind of complaining and bickering, the all-pervasive negativity, that completely blocks genuine and effective two-way communication. At several points in the rule, Benedict explicitly condemns murmuring, for example where he says: "If a disciple obeys grudgingly and murmurs, not only aloud but also in his heart, then even though he carries out the order, his action will not be accepted with favour by God, who sees that he is murmuring in his heart. He will have no reward for service of this kind; on the contrary, he will incur punishment for murmuring, unless he changes for the better and makes amends" (RB 5.17-18).

According to Benedict, obedience is nothing to do with slavish adherence to rules and regulations, or being compelled to do things we don't want to do – that's the whole point – obedience is an act of will, freely chosen, not grudgingly given. Obedience freely given is love; and love, under obedience, is freedom. Obedience is listening, and what prevents listening is murmuring.

Just to be clear, murmuring is not the same as making a legitimate complaint, for which there are (hopefully) proper channels. It is rather the corrosive and underhand bitter and negative whispering that prevents listening and destroys all good feeling. It is gossiping, backstabbing, and snide remarks. And I'm afraid we're all at it, often without even realising, both when we are explicitly grumbling about things, blaming the world and each other for what are often enough our own faults, and when we subconsciously engage in the more subtle murmuring that is an almost constant internal commentary. It needn't always, therefore, take the form of a

direct disagreement; it may be a more simple matter of comparing others unfavourably with oneself (RB 4.39-40), or mentally noting how things would be so much better if only they were done my way. ‘Why did he do it like that? It’s all wrong.’ Or, ‘She was so out of order for saying such-and-such to me this morning.’ The implicit assumption, of course, being that *we* would never behave like *that!*

Indeed, some of you may even be mentally murmuring right now about tonight’s preacher. You may object to the sound of my voice, my hairstyle (or lack of it), or the way I dress. You may be speculating about all sorts of things, or maybe you just think that what I’m saying is a bit boring. I know, because I’ve been guilty of doing the same myself often enough. But actually, what we need to remember is that murmuring says more about the murmurer than what is murmured. It’s just projection.

The problem is, however, that this kind of internal murmuring can become our default background state of mind such that we don’t even notice we’re doing it, or how potentially damaging it is. If we are so wrapped up in our own concerns, caught up in our internal commentary – in short, murmuring - we cannot be present to the reality of the present, of the now, of the person standing before us, whoever that may be. We cannot possibly be listening if there is a voice in our heads that is already speaking, diverting our energy and attention away from the present, preventing us from being present – to ourselves, to each other, and ultimately to the reality of God.

If spirituality is about anything, it is surely about awareness, being present: and this is what Benedict really means by obedience. The disciple, he says, is ‘to be silent and listen’ (RB 6.6). Listen is the first word of the rule – ‘Listen with the ear of your heart’ – says Benedict: this is the beginning and end of his teaching.