

## Tony Burke

### Address to Worth School at Thursday Worship

17 November 2005

**I emailed** Father Peter this week and I asked him what I should talk about. And in true monastic tradition, he didn't give me a straight answer.

**But he** did suggest honesty. So that's what you're getting.

**Now**, I arrived at Worth for the first time on August 8<sup>th</sup> 2004, and it was at this point that my life was going to take a very unexpected turn.

**But before** I take you through that, I'm going to give you some background.

**I'm an Alcoholic.** And I have been ever since I can remember. And in the years preceding my arrival in this very church, I had fearlessly and enthusiastically indulged my addiction.

**I'm thirty now**, which probably sounds ancient to you, but in my early-twenties I started a career in advertising which was going to give me access to everything I'd ever dreamt of.

**Money**, freedom, women, drugs and loads of booze.

**Working in Soho**, in Central London, I saw it all. And did it all. And tried to drink it all. And sometimes it was fun. But most of the time it wasn't.

**But drinking** did make me aware of my spirituality, because there was always a voice telling me not to do it. And I knew that one day I would have to obey that voice. And that I would stop drinking soon, either through death or abstinence.

**But as I got** older and my career progressed and I earned more money and commanded more respect professionally, I began to drink more. And do more.

**I never went** home or ate vegetables. And in Soho, there's always a party to go to.

**And that's when** I started taking cocaine. And that's when I started to lose my battle.

**Booze and drugs** stopped being a want, and started becoming a very definite need. To the point where I was drinking and taking cocaine before I left the house in the morning. I kept Jack Daniels and vodka under my desk at work. And on a number of occasions, I was caught taking drugs at work.

**But they** didn't seem to mind too much.

I was fired six months later.

**But by then** I had lost everything. My job, my life, my friends, my self respect and my sanity.

**Not long after that** I was admitted into a rehab unit where I was treated for addiction and depression.

**When I left rehab**, I had to rebuild my life. Start from scratch. And this time without the drugs and booze which I had depended upon so intensely for as long as I could remember.

**Within two months** of leaving Rehab, I received an email from Tiger Aspect Television, looking for people to go and live in a monastery for six weeks.

**And I** replied without even thinking about it.

**I personally believe** I was singled out for it. And I believe I was brought here by God.

**However, there** is a twist to this tale. I was then offered a job producing soft-porn for small cable TV channel. And that's what I was doing when I left London and arrived at Worth.

**So, I think** we can safely assume there was some work to be done.

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**When Benedict** wrote his rule, 1500 years ago, I doubt very much he expected me to read it.

**He had** no idea how the world was going to take shape, as he sat on his little hillside in Italy. How technology would advance, and how humanity would evolve. Or how the world would find itself in the mess it's in.

**But 1500 hundred** years later – last August – I found myself in this strange and wonderful place – with four strangers and 22 monks, with a copy of this little red book in my hand. And this is where I started living. Because I realised that up to that point, by giving in to greed, addiction, consumerism, arrogance, ego, and by being completely irresponsible with people's feelings and emotions – I'd had no life at all.

**So I started** a crash course in living. Living a different way. According to different rules.

**Abbot Christopher** said on the programme, that the reason he came to Worth, was not necessarily the reason he stayed. And I think the same can be said of me.

**Even though** my stay was only six weeks.

**I thought I was** coming to take a voyeuristic look at a bunch of men and a way of life that had no part to play in my contemporary life.

**But within a week**, I had put that grossly miscalculated preconception to one side, and I realised that I hadn't brought myself here. I had been brought here.

**To go camping with God.** Or as Benedict put it, to '**Dwell in God's tent**' for a while and see if me and God had anything to discuss. To see if I could abide by a few of his rules and stay a bit longer in this tent of his.

**But, as I said** on the programme, I needed to be convinced, and if they couldn't convince me, I'd go away unconvinced.

**But they** did convince me. Or rather, I convinced myself through experience.

**On arrival at Worth**, something felt right, and unforced. And soon I realised that I wasn't here to make a TV programme. I was here to find out how to live the rest of my life.

**TV programmes** are gone in the blink of an eye and long after the Abbot has autographed his last hymn-sheet and done his last chat show, my experience of Worth – and particularly The Rule of St. Benedict – will live on with me, in me and through me.

**And this very** important fact validates St. Benedict's rule.

The fact that a previously maniacal, booze-guzzling, coke-snorting, piss-taking, non-believing, Media-whore pornographer can stand here talking in very human terms about the affect that some old monk's little book has had on his life – validates the wisdom and proves the relevance of his Rule to the world today.

**Now, I'm not some** irritating, pious, self-righteous, born again Christian. I haven't come down here today to bang on about how great it all is and do a cheap PR job on Benedict's Rule.

**I hate all that.** And I feel there's a lot of hypocrisy in religion. I feel a lot of people use religion selfishly and vainly. For the appearance of looking good and respectable and upright and presentable.

**When they** know deep-down that how they portray themselves, is not how they perceive themselves.

**And that's** not what I'm about at all.

**I've been** struggling recently.

**Not struggling with faith** and my faith in God and my own sense of spirituality, but struggling to accept it and acknowledge it and express it.

**I kept** telling myself I'm too busy.

**And I'd stopped** feeling the spirit in me and I'd seen some remnants of my old character begin to creep in.

**Arrogance, ego,** temptation. Self-satisfaction. And it was like something had left me.

**The last time I was here I had a** conversation with Fr Christopher and he asked me what I was doing with my faith and my gift from God.

**And in a round** about way, I replied 'not a lot'.

**Because I wasn't** attending mass and I wasn't working within a community.

**And Fr Christopher said** 'Ignore God, and he'll ignore you'.

**And** sometimes I wish the same could be said of Father Christopher.

**But last Sunday I lay** in bed reading The Rule. And I was listening to my iPod, and I set it to 'Shuffle', which (for the benefit of the Monks here gathered) means it plays songs at random.

**And the song it played** first at random was a track called 'The Sinner in Me' from an album called 'Playing the Angel'.

**And I stopped reading** and I thought about 'The Sinner in Me'. And realised that I had been 'Playing the Angel'. Like so many people do. And that I wasn't being true to myself. And that I couldn't pretend any longer to be anything other than myself, and that I had to acknowledge 'The Sinner in me' and accept 'The Sinner in Me'.

**Let's not forget**, if I hadn't sinned I wouldn't have been given this great gift of Faith and Life.

**And then this week**, I received a phone call from a fellow human being who was desperately in need of my help.

**Because she's where** I was when I walked down the drive towards the church on August 8<sup>th</sup>, 2004.

**And as I spoke to** her on Tuesday I started to feel the Spirit again.

**And I realised that** by living by the Rule of St. Benedict I can live out his ideals and help others who are where I was.

**And for me, that** is Benedictinism. And my expression of it. Stripped bare of it's uniform or it's ceremony, or it's familiar surroundings, a sinner like me can act as an agent and a plain-clothed representative of his 1500 year old vision, living out his ideals and helping people who have gone through what I went through.

**God working through** people, for people.

**Through Monks** and addicts and on email and iPods.

**And with that** in mind at all times, I can make my own small contribution, in what has become an ugly and brutal society, in an ugly and brutal world.

**And as your lives take on** a structure in that world, and as you embark upon your careers and vocations and relationships and marriages, and have your kids, and encounter whatever life throws at you – both happy and sad, good and bad – you can carry this little red book with you in heart and mind, and make that difference.

**And pass on a wisdom** which is timeless and timeproof and relevant to the human condition regardless of where, when or who.

**Just be careful** where it says in the Rule you should drink ½ a litre of wine a day.