1

Benedict and the Practice of the Christian Life

Around 1,500 years ago (circa 550), somewhere (probably in Italy), someone (we can't be sure who) wrote a very short work (no more than about forty pages in a standard modern paperback), which provides us with what can plausibly be seen as Christianity's paradigmatic framing and answering of the question of ethics.

To modern eyes, however, the *Rule of St Benedict* is a very curious document indeed, and its relevance to our subject not immediately obvious. Within its brief span it is concerned with a great variety of seemingly arcane questions: "at what seasons alleluia is to be said" is the issue settled in chapter 15; chapter 55 has as its theme "the clothes and shoes of the brethren"; "the appointment of the abbot" is addressed in chapter 64. Indeed, in the totality of its themes and subjects it bears little resemblance to any contemporary genre of literature with which we are likely to be familiar, and it certainly doesn't look much like a contribution to the subject of ethics as it is commonly construed. For ethics has come to be thought of as a subject which has to do especially with thinking about hard cases, so that mention of it is likely to bring to mind a set of vexed contemporary problems, probably including issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and the rights and wrongs of declaring and conducting war. On these matters the *Rule of St Benedict* is silent. Add to this the fact that the *Rule* is a rule for monks, and the relevance of this text to our subject seems far from obvious.

It would be a mistake, however, to allow a simple unfamiliarity to prevent our considering the possibility that what we have before us in the *Rule* is not outside our subject, but rather an

important contribution to that subject conceived in a way which is currently unfashionable. The *Rule of St Benedict* is not about what to do in hard cases, but it is plainly about what to do. It is, in fact, a rule for life, keeping company with the classical tradition in addressing and answering the broad question, "What is it to live well?" That is say, then, that it finds the ethical question to be general and fundamental, and not simply one which crops up in particularly trying and difficult circumstances. It is a question which is, on the contrary, basic and all-encompassing. Moreover, and to address the second concern about the *Rule*'s relevance, the *Rule*, as we shall see, although addressed specifically to monks, provides an account of what it is to live well which is more widely relevant. It may contain certain specifics and particularities relating to the monastic life, but in its central concerns it is, in effect, addressed to all.

The *Rule*, however, is concerned not only with a "what," but also with a "how" and a "why," and these further concerns may add to a contemporary sense of its oddity. It certainly has an account of *what* it is to live a properly human life, to which we shall turn in a moment. But in addition it addresses the question, which is by no means deemed compulsory for ethics in general, of *how* it is possible for us to live thus and so. That is, it does not simply posit, as it might, an account of what it is to live well, but is concerned with how we may achieve that at which we should aim in life. And furthermore, albeit implicitly, it provides an answer to another question: *why*, we might ask Benedict (conventionally deemed the author), "Why do you say what you say – that is, with what authority do you propose the content of, and the method for, the good life?"

What is it to live well? How can we do so? And why should we do so? To these three questions the *Rule* contains an answer, and one which, in its broad shape and substance, is a model answer for the mainline Christian tradition.

The *Rule*'s most general answer to the "What?" question is in the chapter "The Tools of Good Works" and is borrowed from the Bible: "to love the Lord God with all one's heart, all one's soul, and all one's strength. Then, one's neighbour as

oneself."[1] Thus to live well is to live in relationship, in a society with two dimensions: a vertical dimension which directs us towards God, and a horizontal dimension which directs us towards our neighbor. But not just to live in any sort of relationship to them, since we can be in relationship to others when we compete with them, or are hostile towards them, or simply use them for our own advantage as need arises. Rather we are to be ordered to God and neighbor in a relationship characterized by love.

Suppose for the moment that we remove God from the picture. It would then, perhaps, be quite easy to pass by this thought, so familiar is it, without noting something of its particularity. That the good life consists in living in loving community may seem unremarkable. When Aristotle asserted, famously, that man is a political animal, he was asserting what much of the subsequent classical tradition would take for granted, namely that a properly human life is one lived with and alongside others in a polis (city). The use of the evaluative "civilized," containing as it does a reference to the civitas or city, signals a wide acceptance of Aristotle's claim. But it is worth noting that even if Benedict's preference for social life, the life of a "city," is far from unique, it had a certain particularity in his own day and has not been universally accepted subsequently.

In Benedict's day there were other monks, following patterns of life other than the one he commends. Now though in the very first chapter of the *Rule*, Benedict speaks scornfully of some of these ("their law is their own good pleasure"), he mentions with great honor others, the "Anchorites or Hermits," who engage in "the solitary combat of the desert." But although he mentions them with honor, in practice Benedict treats the tradition – which had had as its great heroes Anthony of Egypt and Simon Stylites, famed for their spiritually daring "solitary combat," the latter spending many years atop a pillar in the desert – as an exception and not as a norm. As commentators

[1] *The Rule of St Benedict*, trans. J. McCann (London, 1976), ch. 4; references throughout are to chapter number.

have noted, the outward and visible sign of this turn away from spiritual isolation is in Benedict's preference for the dormitory over the cell. And this is a token of what Benedict is about: devising a rule for life together, in which life, not the solitary life, the individual finds his or her good – so much so, that the dormitory takes the place of the single study bedroom of the earlier tradition.

If Benedict's choice of social life as constitutive of the human good represented a particular decision in his day against competing conceptions of monasticism, it has had a certain particularity subsequently against other conceptions of the good life. Certainly in practice, and sometimes in theory too, there have been numerous conceptions of what it is to live the good life which have either failed, or found it difficult, or denied the need, to conceive of the good of that life as essentially a life with others. That is not to say, of course, that these conceptions have, so to speak, imagined or willed away other beings – although solipsism, either theoretical or practical, is far from unprecedented; Nietzsche, for example, with a certain determination, and likewise with a certain romantic and epic grandeur, sought to dwell in "azure isolation" on his real and metaphoric mountain tops, and so to conceive human life as, in its essence, life alone. But even for those who have not followed that particular path, and have reckoned with a need for the other in conceptualizing the good of life, it has not always been clear what place or role this other has, and thus whether (as Benedict supposes), the very good of life consists in this encounter. There may be various roles, uses, and places for the other, but it may not be as objects of love, with whom and through whom we find a common and shared good. Bentham, with none of the romance and epic of Nietzsche, insisted that there is no such thing as the common good; on the contrary, he contended that the good of society is just the sum of the good of individuals. Thomas Paine had made the same claim. Less romantic and epic than Nietzsche they may be, but Bentham's creed has had far more followers than Nietzsche's ever had – so much so, that in our day it can seem that the very notion of the common good is a matter chiefly of incomprehension or suspicion, or both.

According to Benedict however, our good lies in a life lived in relationship with God and neighbor and, moreover, in a relationship of love. But what is it to love someone? The word "love" is so bandied about that we may forget that it has a cognitive element – that is, it is not a matter of feeling alone, but of feelings and beliefs. To love something requires that we have a belief about the sort of thing it is, and more specifically what its good consists in. Were I to give you a box with the instruction to love its contents you wouldn't know how to go on without taking a look: a pot plant, a Ming vase, a rabbit, would, after all, each require something different.

Benedict is not vague on this subject, but specific. The love which is to be offered to God and neighbor is characterized as service in both cases, but the service of each is, naturally enough, rather different. The service we owe to God is praise, and the *Rule* enjoins a round of worship so full as to astonish all but the most avidly devout. Benedict cites the words of the Psalmist – "Seven times a day have I given praise to thee" – and decrees that "we shall observe this sacred number of seven, if we fulfil the duties of our service in the Hours of Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline."[2] But the same Psalmist also reports, "At midnight I rose to give praise to thee." So, in addition, "let us rise in the night to praise him."[3]

This service of God, as we shall presently see, is thought to be that which enables the service of neighbor, but for the moment we should put that to one side and simply note what that latter service consists in. The service we owe our neighbor is found in a care and regard for the good of the community and for the individuals within and without it. But this care and regard, we should further note, is in various ways subversive of practices, expectations, and patterns of behavior likely as common then as now. The good of the community requires, thinks Benedict, a repudiation of private property ("a most wicked vice"[4]), and

[2] *Rule*, 16, referring to Psalm 128.
[3] Ibid.
[4] *Rule*, 33.

likewise of certain patterns of precedence, hierarchy, and governance.

Whilst the repudiation of private property is perhaps the most striking of these points, the conception of good order within the community is just as significant. Notice first that the community is to have its say in the appointment of the abbot.[5] More importantly, in directing the life of the community, the abbot is charged to listen to the advice of all – "as often as any important business has to be done in the monastery, let the abbot call together the whole community."[6] And in council, and elsewhere, he is instructed "not [to] make any distinction of persons."[7] Furthermore, and especially, "let him keep this present Rule"; i.e. himself.[8] In our day we are familiar with various ideas and ideals which these practices might be said to anticipate, such as the need for consent and consultation in ordering a community, and the rule of law, binding even on those who are responsible for its interpretation and application. But here in the *Rule* we find very early expression of such conceptions, which, in virtue of the *Rule*'s huge significance in the shaping of Europe in the so-called Dark Ages, would themselves have great influence in creating prevalent notions of what belongs to the well-being of communities.

Now if the *Rule*'s conception of the proper exercise of authority and power within and by the community represents a challenge to patterns of order, precedence, and hierarchy, which can seem quite natural and certainly are common, so too it represents a challenge to the individual. The monk is required to repudiate those informal, unspoken, patterns of precedence and hierarchy which commonly order not the social but the individual life, and which place his wants and needs before and above all others. Rather, the need of others is to take precedence, and within the monastery special care is to be taken of the young,

[5] *Rule*, 64.
[6] *Rule*, 3.
[7] *Rule*, 2.
[8] *Rule*, 64.

the aged, and the sick.[9] In the same way, "In the reception of poor men and pilgrims special attention should be shown, because in them is Christ more truly welcomed; for the fear which the rich inspire is enough of itself to secure them honour."[10]

If the *Rule* advances radical conceptions of what constitutes proper order within social and individual life, notice that it does this for the sake of the good of the community and those whom the community serves. And this good, quite clearly, recognizes that human needs are material – not *only* material, but material nonetheless. Time and again the *Rule* is concerned with "stuff," particularly with food. A monk's life "ought at all times to be lenten,"[11] says Benedict; but the monk's relationship to the world is not one of simple renunciation. The poor are to be clothed and the sick cared for and the hungry fed – these needs are to be met, not denied or overcome, even in the case of monks.

The community which results might be described somewhat awkwardly as a worldly otherworldly community – or, just as well (or just as awkwardly) as an otherworldly worldly community. The monk is not directed to sit in solitary, rigorous, and ascetic contemplation of another realm. Nor is the monk directed to the neighbor and his or her needs just insofar as the neighbor may be assisted in overcoming them and turning away from the world. Rather, while placing all activity in the framework provided by the daily service of God, the monk is to serve the neighbor in the material life of the community, which meets its needs and the needs of others through work and labor. The *Rule* is otherworldly, of course, in conceiving the final or true good of human life by reference to a good which lies outside the world, namely God; and the ordering of human life by reference to this end touches it here and now. But in a way which might have been and was indeed contested, both from within and from outside the Christian tradition, the *Rule* gives an extremely grounded, worldly account of the good life here and now.

[9] *Rule*, 31, 36, and 37.
[10] *Rule*, 53.
[11] *Rule*, 49.

What is it to live well? This is the core question which the *Rule* addresses, and we have seen that the answer is that to live well is to live in community with God and neighbor, finding our good in offering them our loving service: to the one worship, and to the other, aid and fellowship in the very stuff of life.

But if the first question is "*What* is it to live well?" we also noted that Benedict addresses the question of *how* we are to do that – and that might seem to contemporary eyes to be a distinctly optional question for ethics to address. It is enough for many codes of ethics to tell us what to do. But as well as telling us what the good life consists in, the *Rule* is concerned to guide us in how we might achieve this end.

The sense in which this "how" has been considered an optional question becomes clear if we reflect on the fact that when Benedict proposes that his monastery should be "a school of the Lord's service,"[12] this is a school with a quite distinct syllabus. It is concerned above all that we should learn not so much moral knowledge, but, far more importantly, moral obedience. Moral knowledge is far from being the first problem; Benedict has, after all, already told us what the good life consists in, and he indicates no lively sense that acquiring moral knowledge is a matter of great difficulty.

Contrast this with Plato's *Republic* – to mention a great book of the classical world from which Christianity distinguishes itself. In that book, the problem of knowledge seems to dominate, and the difficulty of the acquisition of moral knowledge is expressed in the powerful story of sun and cave. We are like those who dwell in a cave, who see only the flickering shadows cast by a fire, and mistake them for reality. These shadows are but appearances, and reality lies outside the cave and in the bright realm lit by the sun, where we will be first of all blinded by the dazzling light. The task of gaining moral knowledge resembles the task of these cave-dwellers in learning to look at the sun.[13]

[12] *Rule*, Prologue.
[13] Plato, *The Republic*, Book 6; in many translations.

Contemporary thought sometimes seems to doubt the very existence of moral knowledge, although is generally insistent that the existence of certain rights is indubitable. However that may be, it is commonly supposed that finding moral answers to certain questions is very difficult indeed, and that it is the problem of "hard cases" which is *the* problem for ethics. This is not Benedict's view. For Benedict the chief problem is not the problem of knowing what to do, but actually of doing it – it is a problem not of knowledge, but of will. So Benedict does not simply posit a rule for life and then leave it at that, for according to everything he says, the way of life to which we are summoned is not easily and simply within our grasp. It is a "labour" and a "fight" and it requires "strictness of discipline" (all that in the Prologue). The monastery is to be a "school of the Lord's service" and a reading of the *Rule* gives every indication that our study in the way of obedience will be lifelong, for the very reason that we are seeking not to gain knowledge, but to school our ever-ready-to-be-unruly wills.

The Prologue is addressed "to … whosoever thou mayest be that renouncing thine own will to fight for the true King, Christ, dost take up the strong and glorious weapons of obedience." We need to learn obedience, and Benedict thinks in turn that we will only learn that if we gain a very unclassical virtue – Hume would rightfully identify it as "monkish."[14] Benedict treats of it in the longest chapter in the *Rule*, chapter 7: "Of Humility."

That chapter exhaustively, and somewhat exhaustingly, categorizes the steps and stages on the road to humility; indeed, there being 12 such steps seems a pious rather than an analytic necessity. The details are not important; what is important is just that humility has the centrality it does. And it has this centrality just because it is humility which is the basis for our obedience, against which our pride rebels.

This contention only pushes one of Benedict's questions further back. If we need to learn obedience if we are to live the good life in community with God and neighbor, and if we need

[14] D. Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, section 9, in *Enquiries*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd edn. (Oxford, 1975).

humility if we are to practice obedience, how are we to learn humility? There are, in turn, two answers to this. First of all, worship, which determines and marks out the monastic day, is *the* practice which expresses and thus teaches the truths which humility presupposes: that we stand under God as our creator, and alongside each other as his creatures. As the monk participates in worship he learns humility just as he listens to the word of God in the Scriptures, and learns from that to ascribe honor to God and to God's creation. But the second answer is the more fundamental: to learn humility we need grace. Benedict's general injunction applies here: "let us ask God that he be pleased, where our nature is powerless, to give us the help of his grace."[15] Our natures fail us, and our wills, in particular, are feeble things or quite powerless. Knowing what we should do is not enough; we need also to learn to do it, and this involves a reordering of the will. Even attendance in the school of obedience, however, is not enough; in addition we stand in need of assistance from outside ourselves.

We have outlined Benedict's answer to the question *what* it is to live well, and we have seen that he addresses the question which many ethical systems seem to treat as optional, namely the question as to *how* we are to do what we should do. But in addition to the *what* and the *how*, there remains the *why*. Why is this account of what the good life is, and the characterization of what may stand between us and achieving it, to be regarded as authoritative?

Well, although it will come as no surprise, we should complete our account of the elements of this paradigmatic conception of the ethical life, by underlining what may have been obvious, namely that Benedict does not assert all this on his own authority. Nor does he assert it as eminently sensible or reasonable. Explicitly and implicitly, Benedict's authority is the Bible. Of course, the summation of the tools of good works – "To love the Lord God with all one's heart, with all one's soul, and all one's strength. Then, one's neighbour as oneself" – is a quotation

[15] *Rule*, Prologue.

of Jesus's own words from the Gospels. And the further elaboration of these tools makes reference to other such words in the Gospels, as well as in the Epistles and the Old Testament. As any annotated edition will reveal, the text of the *Rule* is saturated with biblical quotations, just as the monks' lives are to be saturated with the Bible: they are to read and hear it day by day, especially the Psalms, and with special solemnity the Gospel, and also the *Rule* itself with all its biblical references. Whatever influences there may be on Benedict's *Rule*, and there are many, the Bible is his chief and ruling authority.

This answer to the question of authority may be misunderstood, however. For there is a way of using the Bible in our day which is not the use which Benedict makes of it, nor the use of those amongst his predecessors from whom he has learnt. For the *Rule* is not, so to say, deduced from the Bible and its instructions are not "proofed" by texts. It is better to say that the *Rule* tries to conceive what it might be to live human life in the light of the story of salvation as the Bible witnesses to it. And this is not a matter of shuffling and rearranging a few key quotations. It is, in fact, a matter of wide-ranging theological reflection and thought, grounded in the Bible to be sure, but not in any simple way read off from it. (It is for this very reason that this book has avoided the temptation of beginning with a chapter on the Bible, since such a chapter might very well encourage misconceptions involved in many "uses" of the Bible. Another way to make the underlying point would be to say that *A Brief History of Physics* would not begin with a chapter on reality; not because reality is not what governs physics, but rather because *that* it does, and *how* it does, are respectively assumed by, and yet problematic for, every subsequent contribution to the subject.)

One thing is clear, and that is that Benedict shows little sympathy for the distinctly modern thought that the Bible is to be treated as a book of rules. The curious thing about that notion is that, for all its self-proclaimed intention of taking the Bible seriously, it ends up doing no such thing. The point that is worth stressing is this. Rule books, no matter how important, have limited significance in the very sense that we can generally learn to do without them. Take, for example, the rule book

(or instruction manual), for using a washing machine. When we first get a washing machine, we may find ourselves referring to the manual all the time. But normally, and usually quite quickly, we do without it. We may keep it in a drawer, just in case – but to all intents and purposes it is done with. Of course, with something much more complicated than a washing machine (such as a nuclear reactor, say), the manual will have a longer shelf life. And we may find it easier, in practice, to rely on it very often, just to save ourselves the trouble of learning it so thoroughly that we can leave it to one side. But in principle we could dispense with it, supposing we worked hard enough.

Now the Bible certainly has some rules – the Ten Commandments most obviously. But significantly Benedict does not treat it as a rule book. Instead, he treats it as if it is, unlike a rule book, utterly indispensable. There is no possibility that one day we could have learnt to do without it. It is to be the monks' daily fare – and not because it contains very many rules and they are slow learners, but rather because it is to provide orientation by which they must direct their lives. It is from the Bible that they must learn to order reality, and they must constantly return to this text to understand themselves and others. They are to allow the Bible, with its confusing mix of chronicles, laws, poems, letters, and stories, to form their imaginations, affections, hopes, and desires. It is to shape their very selves. "Faith," says a modern writer, "is about being apprenticed, trained, exercised, disciplined and formed into a life of faith whose fount and source is the Word of God."[16] Benedict would agree.

Just because Benedict commends this way of using the Bible, Jesus is not placed in that dubious role which much modern Christianity gives to him, as a pre-eminent teacher and source of moral dicta. Christ taught; so much is certain, and Benedict refers to his words, as we have said. But for Benedict, as in the

[16] J. Fodor, "Reading the Scriptures: Rehearsing Identity, Practicing Character," in S. Hauerwas and S. Wells, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Oxford, 2004), 147–8.

Gospels themselves, the description of Jesus as "teacher" (that is, "rabbi"), would indicate a failure to grasp his true significance. Jesus is not only a teacher, and the Bible is not properly understood as a book of teachings. Over the use of the Bible and the significance of Jesus in Christian ethics, differences of emphasis and opinion, rather unsurprisingly, are found in the one and half millennia since Benedict wrote. But Benedict's central concern to make the reading of Scripture, and within that, the telling of the story of Christ, the formative and shaping power in Christian life, has been a dominant theme in the subsequent tradition.

Benedict's guide in reading and interpreting the Bible is Augustine. And so it is to Augustine we must now turn back. For if Benedict has provided us with what we may regard as the paradigmatic form of Christian ethics (with its *what*, *how*, and *why*), it is Augustine who worked out the basic anthropology (or view of what it is to be human), on which Benedict relies. To put it another way: the *Rule of St Benedict* is the practice of which Augustine's theology is the theory. Thus if we have an answer to the question of the form and character of Christian ethics in the *Rule of St Benedict*, we have nonetheless to step back and see how this paradigmatic answer is itself based in Augustine's deep and wide-ranging reflections on human life under God, and how these reflections themselves were forged in Augustine's lifelong engagement with problems of religious thought and practice.