

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor — 26 February 2012

Perseverance: an introduction to Lent

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In place of the usual sermon today our Rector, the Revd Rebecca Newland, read to us this essay from *The Benedictine Handbook* (Liturgical Press, 2003) pp. 119-121.

Perseverance

by Sister Kym Harris OSB.

Choices cause consequences. As one leaves the centre of Sydney the road forks. Going to the left up King's Street can lead eventually to Melbourne; continuing straight ahead one may find oneself in Perth: two very different cities separated by over 3,000 km. People beginning a journey need to be clear about their goal or they may find themselves in a very different place from what they had hoped. In the Rule of St Benedict, Chapter 72, Benedict contrasts the bitter zeal that makes a barrier to God's grace and the good zeal that opens us to divine and human love. Zeal, or perseverance, can be a two-edged sword. Constantly on our journey we need to ask ourselves how our spiritual disciplines and practices are furthering our journey to the Kingdom of God.

Consider the contrast between two monastics I have known. Sister A and Brother B have both been exemplary in their monastic observance, both contributed greatly to the physical well-being of their communities—yet the contrast in spirit is stark. Sr A suffered greatly towards the end of her life changes in religious practice undermined her belief in God, her rigid personality kept her emotionally distant from her community. Did anyone grieve at her passing?—who knows, nothing showed but relief. In contrast, Br B is not only at the heart of his community, but also the bearer of God's life far beyond. His funeral will be a celebration of life in the midst of many tears.

What made the difference? The disciplines they chose to feed the life of faith. The only personal practice of Sr A that I know of is significant: each day she made her bed the same way as an expression of her Vow of Stability. No, don't laugh. There is a good lesson here. An ordered woman, she wanted to offer all to God, even the small things. So far so good. But she focused on what came easily, baptized her own preferences, and did not leave herself open to God's love and the demands of others.

Br B's actions seem to point to a decision made early in his monastic life to never let pass an act of charity he could possibly do. Thus open to God's providence and to serving others, he radiates equanimity and joy. Significantly he is also a most astute, if most kind, judge of character.

We all need practices to feed the life of faith and Benedictine spirituality provides a rich variety of resources: the work of God, *lectio divina*, prayer, work, hospitality, etc. At differing stages of life these resources will sustain our faith in differing ways. Discerning what is appropriate at any point in time is a challenge,

but necessary if we are to run the way of God's commandments with joyful hearts.

In the midst of our first enthusiasm, we need to take stern stock of ourselves and embrace a disciplined spirituality. Chesterton has said that we inveigh against the sins we are least likely to commit. Unless we can recognize our genuine weakness we become sadly lost like Sr A. In this the comments of others on our personalities can be so helpful. If talkative, we could develop our listening skills, if naturally withdrawn, become sociable, if moody, emotional self-discipline works wonders, if reserved, play may be the challenge we need. Rarely will we overturn who God has made us to be but rather with balance we can flourish to God's glory.

Such early challenges are relatively easy to discern. The real difficulty comes further on the journey when we are called to negotiate the times and seasons that are the natural part of growth. Dramatic conversion is rarely the stuff of the journey and often it takes time before we realize we are on the wrong road. How can we recognize such? First, a sense of drudgery pervades our life. Notice this is not difficulty or suffering—both means by which God can foster growth—but rather a sense that we are not getting anywhere. Our prayer seems routine and we feel disengaged from others. This malaise can be good. It is as though God is letting us run out of petrol in the hope that we must stop and ask direction. Again at this time, the comments of others can be enlightening. Once I had a call to change from a passing remark of a shopkeeper—nothing said unkindly but an observation that brought me up and made me reconsider the balance of my life.

At such times we need to reassess our lives in the light of the two great Commandments of Jesus, using the resources of our Benedictine spirituality. We who have prayed much may be called to shift the balance to service, we who have been hospitable may be called to withdraw in silent prayer, w² who have been still may be called to study. The purpose of this testing is to make us sensitive to the Spirit at work in our hearts and so be schooled to love God and others more creatively. Over time, the decisions we make and the practices we embrace form us, hopefully into Christ. Shaped by his Gospel and supported by others we may persevere to the fullness of everlasting life in the Kingdom of God.

Sister Kym Harris OSB is a nun of the Monastery of Transfiguration at Yeppoon in Central Queensland, Australia. She has worked in various areas in her monastic life, primarily in crafts like pottery, Leather work and candle decoration. She was editor of *Tiurunga: The Australasian Benedictine Review* for five years. In 1996 she received a Master's Degree from the Melbourne College of Divinity for a thesis on the spirituality of the medieval monastic women. She is a keen gardener.