

The Fall of the Roman Empire is usually dated to 476 when the Roman Emperor was deposed by Odoacer who was probably from one of the of East German peoples. Benedict was born just four years later in 480. Although we talk about the Fall of the Roman Empire it was not something that happened overnight – there was a prolonged period of unrest and uncertainty both before and after 476. It was a time of massive migrations in Europe; groups of 10 to 20,000 people from tribes such as the Goths, Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Huns and Vandals moved into parts of the declining empire.

So Benedict was born at a time of upheaval. The rule of Rome was waning, central government was losing power, the food supply was threatened and migrants were changing the way things had been. We can see parallels with the world today. Some commentators have suggested that about every 500 years the western church and the society in which it is embedded, goes through a major upheaval. The first is seen as the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the second the 11<sup>th</sup> century breakup between the Catholic church based in Rome and the orthodox church based in Constantinople, the third the Protestant Reformation and the fourth – well that's us. Each time there has been a reformation movement which has propelled the church into the new paradigm.

Benedict was part of the reformation and innovation of his time. He was not the only one, and it is important to remember that though he stands out, he was one of many who were experimenting with new ways of being the church. As a young man, Benedict, son of a Roman nobleman, went to Rome to study but the life of the city was not for him and he retreated to the mountains where he met a monk who persuaded him to become a hermit. For three years he lived alone in a cave. According to the story, he was then asked to become abbot of a nearby monastery but the monks came to dislike him so much that they tried to poison him and a local priest tried to compromise the monastery by sending in a bunch of prostitutes.

Whether that's true or not, who knows. But it does seem as though Benedict's first attempt at being an abbot was a failure. However it did not deter him because in subsequent years he founded 12 or 13 monasteries. Benedict's great contribution was to write a handbook for monastic living, called the Rule of St Benedict. In this, he lays out the way that a monastery should be run. It was not entirely original but it offered a balanced and structured way for people to live together in religious

community which became the foundation for hundreds of other monasteries throughout Europe and beyond.

Monasticism was an innovative form of Christianity developed in response to a difficult time when the Christianity of the Empire was disappearing. Today, the Christianity we have known is past. In this country, the number of people who identify as Christian has been steadily dropping since the 1970s. It is clear that church as we have known it is not meeting the needs of many people. But that doesn't mean that the church is dead, it means that the time has come for a new expression of Christianity.

We don't know what that looks like. But it will be different and part of our calling as the people of God in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century is to explore the possibilities, to allow ourselves to think completely out of the box. To be bold and innovative and not to lose sight of our mission to share God's reconciling presence with the world.

When we think about what it means to be named for Benedict, in addition to our ideas of hospitality, balance, prayer, stability, scholarship let us think about innovation. Here in this church, St. Benedict's in Los Osos, we have never been afraid to experiment and to play with new ideas, new ways of doing things. But it is easy when things are going well to get entrenched and think this is the way it should be. Jesus once reminded his followers that you can't put new wine in old wineskins. We need to be vigilant that we do not become like an old wineskin –so comfortable with the way we do things that we don't move with the flow of the Spirit in our midst.

Every five hundred years when the church has birthed a new expression, it has been grounded in the old. Every good reform movement builds on the best of the original impulse, letting go of the ossified structures and rediscovering the fire of the early church.

Our [baptismal covenant](#) provides us with a way to do this. Each clause encapsulates what we are about as the people of God. We are not here primarily to provide a beautiful meeting place, or to have wonderful liturgy and great music, or even sumptuous potlucks. Yes we are to maintain the tradition, the ways of the church as we “continue in the apostles teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers.” But how we do that can change.

Living into our calling as Christians in the lineage of St Benedict means being open to the moment. At a time of great global change and uncertainty, when institutions that have provided structure and stability are no longer serving, the baptismal covenant calls us to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.” The good news, the gospel, we are to proclaim in such a way that it meets the needs of the people we meet here in our community. The old words are no longer reaching into people’s hearts – they are no longer assuaging the thirst.

And let’s face it, we are not doing the very best job of this. When did you last talk with someone about your own experience of the divine, about how God touches you with grace? About the God moments that you have – the insights and the learning? How can we find the words that touch the heart when we are not asking the questions, not listening deeply and articulating our own experience, let alone that of those who have yet to find a native language for the words of their hearts?

In medieval times, people went to the monasteries for help. That was where they looked for medical assistance, for food, shelter and counsel, but today it is different. Today the world does not usually come to us, the church, – we have to seek and develop relationships especially across difference. Where will it take us when we seriously “seek and serve Christ in all persons” –not just the ones we like, or the ones who agree with us. I think the important word here is seek – we are seeking Christ not in the church or the bible but in the people we know and the people we don’t yet know.

In my mind, the promise to “persevere in resisting evil” and the promise to “strive for justice and peace” are intimately connected. Because it is the evil that pervades our society which leads to injustice and war. Although falling into sin and repenting seems very personal, it is the microcosm of which striving for peace, justice and dignity are the macrocosm. In the late 60s, the feminist movement coined the phrase “the personal is political” to describe this connection. The way we live our lives impacts the way society works and the way society works impacts our lives. How we live the gospel makes a difference. How we live into the promise of the Holy Spirit in the church of tomorrow makes a difference.

When Benedict wrote his rule he was very clear about the purpose of it. He was creating a school for the Lord’s service. Whatever form the church of the future

takes this will continue to be our mission – to form and teach each other in the service of God.

Jane is today declaring her faith in our presence and formally entered the school for the Lord's service which is here at St Benedict's and in the diocese of El Camino Real. And we together will renew our baptismal vows. Let us pray together for grace to live into them.

*Holy One, we thank you for the inspiration of St. Benedict. May we together continue to develop this school for your service, and discover how we are being called to create the church of the future. We ask these things in your many Names, **Amen.***