

MONASTIC LIFE AND THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

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A small stir was recently caused by the new Brownie promise, which replaces love of God with "...I will do my best to be true to myself and develop my beliefs...". One can sympathise with those concerned about making young children mouth things they may not believe, but the wording is revealing – referring to the self without reference to anyone else, something emblematic of our contemporary world.

Our Contemporary World

It is difficult to make general statements about modern society – it embraces such variety. However, certain trends are obvious.

There is a type of person who is typical of our 21st-century world. This person is an individualist, with a weak sense of community and of mutual obligations. Life is about asserting yourself, determining your own life and shaping it as you please; for this your starting-point is your own internal resources. There is a primacy of the self. Although this typical modern person is centred on the self, paradoxically this isolated self can't carry it: there is a hole in the middle. Increasing numbers of people today are not sure who we are or where we belong. There is deep uncertainty about the meaning of life – what meaning does it have?

Traditional societies work within cultural climbing-frames: common ways of behaving, ideals, ways of doing and saying. Frameworks today, however, are minimal. Teachers in many schools will know all about that. But then there is a paradox: people who live with minimal frameworks and courtesies tend to end up falling back on law and rules. An example would be the superintendent of sheltered accommodation who refused to help a resident in distress outside her working hours. We all know about the increasingly heavy reliance on health-and-safety restrictions, targets in the workplace, contracts and other formal requirements – often beneficial, but not always. This over-reliance on rules points to an increasing uncertainty within, a lack of sure reference-points. There is much less readiness to assume certain things within the person, and that leads to imposition from outside, and increasing prescription. The modern self is at the centre, and because of that other selves can't easily be relied upon.

Of course not everyone is like this. But it looks as though this kind of person is the person of the future. Other older ways are survivals from the past: old ways of community, of mutuality, of a sense of public moral responsibility, and so on. And people who continue to live in these old ways are using up a bank-account of moral and human formation which is not being replenished.

It's not all bad – together with the selfishness of our society there goes a very high level of social responsibility. We should never fail to acknowledge how lucky we are to live in such a caring society. We practice a higher level of social consciousness than has been true of former ages. Great care is taken to ensure that people undergoing medical treatment, or people who are in any way handicapped, are treated justly and given all the assistance they need to live normal lives and be treated as human beings.

But much of this quest to eliminate injustice is like a sausage balloon – squashed at one end, it then inflates at the other. Doing away with injustice in one area can produce new injustice in its trail. So there are ways in which we are humanly worse off than our forebears – loss of community, disintegration of the family, frequent failure to enable the young to find a solid orientation in life. The rich are getting richer, the poor poorer.

Despite all the good aspects of our contemporary world, one has to ask how durable they are in the face of the serious losses that we are allowing to happen, particularly in the matter of cultural frameworks and ways of behaving. In the modern Western world what we are seeing is a cutting-loose from moorings. Post-modern philosophers speak for instance of the abandonment of “grand narratives”. Where there is a grand narrative we understand our common life as part of a corporate story that spans the ages: this story gives meaning and orientation. There is as well the loss of a sense of a *telos* – Greek for a *goal* or end to the journey. Now we are not going anywhere; we each try to make the most of life while we are here – then we are snuffed out.

We have yet to see the end-results of young people's increasing dependence on mobile phones, the internet, and social media, living and relating in a virtual world that is not real, and which thrives on providing huge volumes of superficial information without enabling the deep formation that comes from human intercourse in community. We face the possibility of a generation where too many people have not learnt what it is to be full human beings.

I say “we face the possibility” because it is impossible to say where our present situation will lead. Society is such a hugely complex mix of so many things that the sociologists have recognised that no one has an overview: politicians, academics, sociologists – none of them have an overview because contemporary life and culture are so complex.

There is a positive side to the mobile phone and social networking that I want to come back to in a minute. The fact is that the way in which our society contains forces for good and for bad is bewildering. We live in a world which is very good – it is a good time to be alive for large numbers of people. But it isn't good for all, and we have to wonder – is our society a mountain beneath which an underground stream is gradually eating away the foundations?

The Monastic World

In comparison with such a world, monastic life could hardly be more different. I want to suggest half-a-dozen characteristics of monastic life that stand out.

In religious communities there is:

- **community** – a community of a closeness that can be found in few places today;
- **mutuality** – a fundamental sense of being responsible for one another and to one another;
- **limitation** of the self – through which we find ourselves,
- **a corporate grammar** for living together – a patterned and structured way of life;
- **simplicity** rather than consumerism;
- a life lived within a **grand narrative** – all the participants see themselves as living within the framework of a story that gives meaning, and a sense of who you are; that story is firstly the gospel, but is also by derivation the story of monastic life;
- in monastic life there is a sense of **meaning** – a sense that there is an end towards which we are travelling, an end is vast and deep, and spiritual – the God of love.

Lessons For Society

Religious communities today are places that attract people. They seem to be eloquent for many. There are two phases to this: the hidden Christ and the revealed Christ.

First of all, the *hidden Christ*: there are Christ-like qualities in society which aren't of themselves specifically Christian, such as love of neighbour. Christ is present there but hidden, not named. Here monastic life has things to teach society at what you might call a purely secular level. For instance:

The modern world needs to learn about **self-limitation** in a context of self-giving to others, within a yet higher context of a corporate vision (society used to have this).

It needs to learn about **reconciliation** instead of conflict. There is a constant process of reconciliation in any religious community day by day (again something human communities used to have). The constant work of clearing the air, setting relationships right.

The world needs to learn about the freedom that comes from **simplicity** rather than reliance on acquisition and pleasure. Since the industrial and commercial revolutions, a large proportion of society have been able to have all they need. When you have all you think you need, then you don't desperately need anybody else. That then leads to the troubles I have been describing. You can't indulge in all that is available to you and at the same time be a people. The truth about ourselves, and therefore our own freedom, can only be found where there is community, and that requires self-restraint. Simplicity is a building-block of community, while indulging our desires without constraint is corrosive of it.

The modern world needs to learn about **community** – many aspects of community are primordial and not a monopoly of religious communities, but religious communities are among the last places where it is lived in a strong form, as when a river dries up, leaving a small trickle down the middle.

There are many practical things like this to be learnt from religious communities that are not religious in themselves, and the list could go further. But ultimately, notions like simplicity or community are not enough. They are the *hidden* phase of the gospel, and we are bound to move on to the revealed phase, where Christ is named. In order to realise any of these things properly, we need to be able to address ourselves to Christ in person, to name him. To seek the simplicity that Christ gives. To seek the community that Christ gives. Even if a society learns all these ways of being a healthy society, that is still not enough until it has consciously embraced the gospel, so that it no longer relies simply on human resources, but on God. That is the only way to become full human beings.

But there is still more to be said. I have said that the gospel can give society a whole range of virtues it needs, and then I said that you only find those virtues in their full strength when you embrace the gospel and recognise Christ at work in those virtues. At this point those virtues become different – larger. Once we embrace the gospel, we have a narrative that provides a framework within which our life begins to make sense and begins to have meaning: we can see it is progressing towards a goal. But this story of the gospel, our grand narrative, at this point becomes more than just a story – it becomes a living mystery which is beyond our capacity fully to grasp. I can illustrate this from the daily prayers of the church. Every day, monks and nuns pray the Psalms in church. Every day parish priests are required to pray the Psalms, if possible publicly in church. We call this the daily office. When you are familiar with it, it can generate a very strong motivation to do it. But that commitment doesn't come simply from a story about Christians who pray every day. This strong commitment doesn't simply come from Christ's call in the gospel to pray without ceasing. The commitment to daily prayer in many Christians is strengthened by the mystery that is gradually revealed in the doing of it. That mystery is the saving story of Christ incarnate, crucified and risen and ascended, but it is alive – it sings – and it is something to which we can give our trust. It is personal, and it is a guiding hand to our own story. This story is a presence – a presence firstly of all the other Christians who are praying. This is often called a sense of the church, a sense of the mysterious corporate reality that is building us up and uniting us with everyone.

I have taken the grand narrative as my example, but the same can be said about simplicity or community, or any of the other things which our society needs from the gospel life. They are more than ideals and principles – all of them become alive with a life that is greater than them.

Lessons For The Church

Our Church is deeply influenced by the values of our society. Society has formed us as individuals – it is deep within us individually and in the Church's life. Some aspects of our Church life often aren't really in accord with the gospel. I can give three examples:

First of all, a PCC meeting. In a PCC, it can be thought that the main thing is to say what you want to say, and attempt to bring people round to your point of view. The model is parliamentary, the model of any other kind of secular committee. It is the way too often that the General Synod of the Church of England works. In monastic life, however, the overriding aim is something else: the **quest for the will of God**. This depends on the context – in the life of religious communities the context in which we seek the will of God is mutual obedience. Obedience in the monastic tradition is not the same as military obedience – it refers to mutual listening. In the monastic chapter meeting, highest priority has to go to listening – each person is to seek to hear before seeking to make themselves heard; each participant must expect to see the truth in the other person’s point of view, and speak always with courtesy and humility. And when in the end a decision is made, we all commit ourselves to abide by the decision, even if we are not happy with it. The overriding priority is the unity of all, in the common quest for the will of God.

For my second example I take recruitment: when people come to our monastic community enquiring about religious community life, their first interest isn’t in the building. They are interested in coming **to a group of people**. Often in the wider church, when we talk about bringing more people to church, we think of the building and the worship that goes on in it. We think about bringing people to that. We don’t think of bringing people to the **group**. But it is *us* that people are enquiring after. What does a parish congregation need to be in order to be a group that attracts people to *itself*? It needs to be a group that abides and rests in Christ’s love together. Like the group gathered around Jesus at the Last Supper and responding to his words: love one another as I have loved you. I am the vine, you are the branches. What I am talking about, in effect, is *commitment*. Where parishes are made up of committed people, others will be drawn to those people – to come and see, come and taste.

This leads to my third example: how do we abide in Christ’s love? By being a community **united in prayer**. Monastic communities gather for prayer together at least four times a day. That is the heart of their life, the heart of their mission. It’s not possible for most people to take part in that many services every day, but it is the calling of every parish, and it is an ancient calling, that ways are found for everyone to be praying every day in the knowledge they are praying together, even if dispersed. The prayer of a parish is the heart of its life, and a parish that prays as a community every day, even though not always able to be physically together, will be abiding in Christ’s love and will be a source of new life to itself and to others outside. You can find out more about the possibilities for that in my book *Company of Voices*. If we are to attract people to our community, we need to be a community that prays corporately. The Roman Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor thinks that society is evolving marvellous new ways of being community by means of the social media: “people are part of social webs with overlapping connections. To a great extent we have a social life with hundreds of overlapping circles.” The Church has hardly begun to explore the possibilities of social networking for building up its own community and finding new ways of enabling people to pray as one body, even when dispersed.

I used earlier the image of the dried-up riverbed about the church. In this dried-up riverbed, monasticism is a rivulet trickling down the parched middle. The examples I have given are not uniquely monastic – they belong to the whole Church, but on the whole monasticism and some other parts of the Church are the only places where you will find them in full flood today. Religious communities are holding things in trust which rightfully belong to all Christians.

New Monasticism

This leads me to another modern phenomenon, sometimes referred to as “new monasticism”. Groups of people are springing up all over the place, wanting to live in their lives some aspects of monastic life. There are many groups in London, and perhaps particularly well-known is Moot, based at the Church of St Mary Aldermary. The membership is mostly dispersed, but they come together as often as they can, and all members have a rule of life and make promises that are an adaptation of the monastic vows. These modern communities meet regularly together with the old-established religious communities such as mine, and there is a very interesting chemistry going on between them. It certainly seems clear to me that these new communities are answering to needs of numbers of ordinary Christians who cannot find in their local parish congregation the kind of commitment they are seeking.

Some of these communities, however, have sprung up outside the Church or on its margins, and have found themselves coming in. One example is the community called 24/7 prayer, which started as groups of non-churchy young people setting up prayer-rooms in fairly godforsaken places, and sustaining a round of prayer twenty-four hours, seven days a week. Fairly early on they began to discover the monastic tradition and learn from it. 24/7 Prayer started, I think, in Reading, and has grown phenomenally. It is now, amongst other things, doing amazing work amongst underprivileged people in South America and other parts of the world.

This phenomenon of new communities needs to be better known, and is a challenge to the parishes.

Commitment

Parish life in this country has in many places, though not everywhere, become anaemic, lacking in commitment that has ‘umf’. What do you do about it? You can’t simply ask people to screw themselves up to greater commitment – it doesn’t work like that. New life can’t be found from our own resources, but only in God. How might parish congregations be helped by monasticism to recover things they have lost?

A saying by the fourth-century Desert Father, John the Dwarf:

*'You don't build a house by starting with the roof and working down.
You start with the foundation.'
They said, 'What does that mean?'
He said, 'The foundation is our neighbour whom we must win.
Our neighbour is where we start.
Every commandment of Christ depends on this.'*

You would have thought he would say: start with God. But he starts with our neighbour – for how can we love God whom we do not see, if we can’t love our neighbour whom we do see? The first place to look for God is in other people. Love of our neighbour is the foundation of Christian discipleship.

On this question of commitment, what we need to do is simply look at our world. The need is enormous. Society as a whole is going down false pathways, and is losing its way on essential aspects of what it is to be full human beings. We should look at society – look at the need, and recognise the fact that only the gospel can meet this need, only Christ can provide that abiding in one another in love which is what the world needs. As churchgoers we need to keep our eyes trained on our world. That should drive us to be a committed people.

But there is something else to train our eyes on as well. One of monasticism's key practices is hospitality. In religious communities there is always an invitation to people to be our guests. More and more people are visiting communities. My own at Mirfield nowadays receives a flood of visitors that is growing all the time. People can come and share, and this has an effect. People need to experience it, because it can give them many things to take back into their daily lives. More than any amount of lectures about monastic life, the most effective thing is for people to have some experience of it, however small. It can give people a sense of new possibilities. So: visit a monastery – develop a connection.

Dialogue

There is one final suggestion: that our society could learn from a dialogue with monasticism. Who would engage in the dialogue? You might have thought politicians, but politicians on the whole are forced to follow society, or large parts of it, if they are to get elected. A better bet may be political thinkers, sociologists and others who reflect on the nature of society. There are things to be discussed in the area of what I have called the hidden Christ – positive attributes of human life that can be found in any healthy society. It's not so easy to have a dialogue about the revealed Christ – that is, the gospel itself – because to get under the skin of the gospel you need faith. With the revealed Christ we need demonstrations – experiments which prove that certain things result. We have this in monastic life, which is a 2,000-year-old experiment that produces verifiable results – not always: there are bad monasteries – but the largest part of the time. What are the verifiable results? You simply find them when you visit a religious community. If society can be put in touch, it will see things in a monastic community, or in one of our new monastic communities, or in a parish, which makes them feel, "these people have something that society needs – there is something here that touches something deep down in people". You couldn't expect that in every parish or indeed every monastery, but it's there in places; and the more it spreads, the more we shall have a chance to call society and its thinkers and politicians to a dialogue about what makes for human flourishing.

We need to be sure we move on from symptoms to root causes. Every society has a basic paradigm. In any age there is a root-notion that stands as the basis of everything. In our own society, this root-notion could be this: "me and my desires and my rights". It's time to move back to an older paradigm which could be called "me in us". This isn't a call to return to the past. We have changed too much. The modern valuation of the individual is an advance, one of the greatest in human history. The problem at the moment is that we have gone over the top with it – we have enthroned the individual, and there is a need to come back down a step. So any return to "me in us" will look different from the way it worked out in the 17th century or the 19th or even the 1950s. The "me" has changed for ever. It will be a return to something old, while at the same time being something new. All of this is at present being lived out in the laboratory of modern religious communities, for we too have found that the old ways no longer work. We have to discover ways of taking into the traditional monastic

life the new high evaluation of the individual. Many communities are now using professional facilitators to help them do this. The benefits for my own community have been immense. We have been learning how to live the traditional sacrifices of monastic life, with all the self-giving it requires, while at the same time incorporating the higher standards of relating that modern life requires. Authentic communication, transparency rather than avoidance, good listening, honesty and openness, the valuing of each person as they are.

It is a time for an exchange of gifts. This high evaluation of the individual and of interpersonal relating is nothing new for Jesus or the gospel: it's all there in all he says – it has simply taken us so long to get there.

If, in the words of the new Brownie promise, I seek to be myself and develop my own beliefs, the gospel needs to come and open all the windows and doors of the self and call us out – towards a quest to live honestly and truly and sacrificially *with others*, in a shared story and shared vocabulary, in the power that only God can provide. Religious communities are seeking to learn from modern society, but they do have one or two things to say to it that might help save it from itself before it is too late.