

*Listen carefully, my child, to the master's instructions... attend to them with the ear of your heart. ... the advice from a father who loves you; welcome it, and faithfully put it into practice.* First words of the Rule of our holy father St Benedict, instructions given out of love for us.

St Gregory was a descendant of St Benedict, a spiritual son who lived by his holy father's rule. Many of us possess a copy of the Rule of St Benedict. It's purpose? To show us how to live as a Christian community, so that in all things God may be glorified, and so that the entire community lives peacefully.

If you think St Gregory was Great, think again. I can explain. I mean to say that for St Gregory there were others whom he considered far greater than himself. Others, such as St Benedict. Everything we know about the life of today's saint was written down by you know who. St Gregory was a follower of St Benedict, not the other way around. When St Benedict died at a grand old age in the year 547 on the 21<sup>st</sup> March, Gregory was only 7 years old. In his young life, our patron came to learn about Benedict, the father of western monasticism. It changed his life, as he committed himself to St Benedict's way of living and loving the Lord. We often talk of service at this School – more than we speak of prayer – but the service of both saints was rooted in prayer, that blessed their service, and made sure the service was done for Jesus ultimately. First Benedict, then Gregory, they placed their trust in God on a daily basis, and sat or stood with him in prayer several times a day. That's how the Benedictine community prayed here at Downside until their move two years ago. They were never too busy for God. They were never too busy to serve the community. It's about priorities. If you wish to honour St Benedict, pray, work, serve your community and offer it up to the Lord. *Ora et labora*. Benedict's rule isn't for everyone, but in a Benedictine School, he guides our way.

In a Venn diagram of greatness, Gregory is a mere subset of St Benedict, a patron saint of Europe. You might think of Benedict as an old, wise man. Indeed he was old, about 60, when he wrote the rule. Indeed he was wise, having lived his whole adult life doing the work of God, and learning how to instruct others in the way of *ora et labora* – prayer and work. But Benedict was very young when he left his studies in Rome. He left behind the privilege he had been born into, and became a hermit in the mountains, living in a cave. Aged about 20, almost the same age as those in the upper

Sixth who have recently turned 19. Benedict was about your age when he began his journey first as a hermit, then as monk and gained a following that is alive and well 1500 years later.

Monks such as Ambrose Barlow or John Roberts, or indeed Philip Powell or Philip de Caverel, followed the rule of St Benedict. We honour these sons of St Benedict by mentioning them every day. But how many times do we mention St Benedict? That's why we have a second Mass together as a whole School in the space of 10 days. Without Benedict, Gregory would not be Great, and we would never have heard of Roberts or Barlow. Today we venerate St Benedict. We think about what he means to us on this day above all. And we offer thanksgiving at the Lord's table for all his spiritual legacy teaches us. Benedict's name means blessing. Belonging to Benedict, in our Benedictine bubble, is a blessing. In the first reading, The Lord says to Abraham: *I will bless those who bless you*. May we bless the name of Benedict today, and may we each be blessed.

In the second reading, St Paul says: *if there is anything you need, pray for it, asking God for it with prayer and thanksgiving, and that peace of God, which is so much greater than we can understand, will guard your hearts and your thoughts, in Christ Jesus*. St Benedict prayed for that peace that the world cannot give; the peace of God that surpasses all understanding. He brought order and peace to his spiritual sons and daughters, including St Gregory, who passed on the Benedictine genius to the whole Church. Benedict even helped bring peace in a world finding its feet following the fall of the Roman empire.

Often in Benedictine monasteries, the word *pax* is seen above the doorway. The Latin *pax*, meaning peace, is printed on some of the bosses adorning the vaulted ceiling junctions in the Old Chapel. Peace is what all of us long for; peace in the world; peace in our lives; peace in our hearts; the peace and quiet of the School holidays. Something for everyone, and St Benedict offers a recipe for peace. Does peace mean freedom for everyone? Freedom is a word we've heard a lot about recently in school, freedom of speech, freedom of choice. Freedom is good, right and just. But true freedom is also a discipline that imposes goodness and order upon us. For example we need rules in our world about when to move on from traffic lights to avoid traffic jams and collisions. Traffic lights make us free. We need rules about queuing up for lunch, so that everyone sits to eat. Yes, the long lunch line sets us free. We need rules to determine when and how to pray. A free-for-all is a free-for-no-one. Our own freedom may not be at the expense of another's freedom. Make this your

rule. St Benedict knew this. To be truly free does not mean doing entirely as we please. Sometimes we make choices in so-called freedom that create a prison for ourselves, St Benedict knew that and offered an order to daily life that makes God, the source of freedom and truth, the centre of all our activity. For St Benedict, love for Christ was in first place. That's why our school holds firm that Christ is at the Centre. Because St Benedict wrote: *prefer absolutely nothing to the love of Christ.*

So what does Jesus Christ have to say to us on St Benedict's feast day? The gospel can help us:

- *May they be one.* St Benedict promoted peaceful and prayerful community life. By living in unity we live out Jesus' hope for us. May we be a closeknit community modelled on the mutual and fruitful love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- And Jesus is emphatic about unity: *may they be so completely one that the world will realise that it was you who sent me and that I have loved them as much as you loved me.* Benedictine communities witness to the love of Jesus. They are bright lights around the world and provide havens of peace. They witness to the love of Christ with guests, who are generously welcomed.

Dear brothers and sisters, on this St Benedict's day, may we conclude as Jesus concludes our gospel: *I have made your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and so that I may be in them.* May each of us do honour to blessed Benedict through how we love one another. May we make known the love of Christ through prayer and service. May we continue, with the help of our prayers to bless Benedict. *Sancte Benedicte – ora pro nobis.*