The Staying Power of Benedict in Parliament Square
Rowan Williams

Thank you very much indeed John; it is a great honour and a great delight to be back at the Abbey and have the chance to deliver, once again, the Gore lecture.

The Community of the Resurrection, which was founded by Charles Gore was not, and is not, primarily a Benedictine foundation. Many other elements of monastic traditions played their part in defining the ethos of the Mirfield community. But one element in its life is held in common with all monastic traditions, and it's that element which is perhaps most central a part of Benedictine identity. And that is stability. The rule of Benedict is, in one sense, all about stability. That is to say it's all about staying in the same place, with the same people. The height of self denial, the extreme of asceticism, is not hair shirts and all night vigils, it's standing next to the same person quietly for years on end. So when St Benedict attempts to spell out famously in one of the early chapters, chapter four of the Rule, what he calls 'The Tools of Good Works', all of these 72 'Tools' have to be understood in the context of this summons to stability. Stability is the condition for learning about the human, the background against which we develop who we are as human agents. Because at its basis lies the recognition that others won't go away. A great deal of our politics, our ecclesiastical life, often our personal life as well, is dominated by the assumption that everything would be all right if only some people would go away. We're seeing this in our national life in our attitudes both to Europe and to migrants – and there's a great deal more to be said about that in other contexts. But the point is that, for the writer of the Rule of Benedict, other people are *not* going to go away; and therefore the heart of the spiritual challenge is how we live with that otherness – honestly, constructively, hopefully and not blindly.

The recognition that others won't go away is of spiritual importance because it is also a recognition that I am always going to be faced with what isn't me and not under my control. My spiritual quest is how I live with that without resentment or lying, without despair, with clarity and without 'abjection' before the other, being enslaved by the other. How do I develop an adequate strategy of living with that strangeness around me? Others are no more there on sufferance than I am here on sufferance. And so the Tools of Good Works in chapter four of the Holy Rule could be interpreted as a whole raft of ways of creating and maintaining an environment that nourishes us in the growth of the skills we need in living with the stranger.

The Tools of Good Works as spelled out by Benedict include a great many of what you might call routine community virtues - the corporal works of mercy, the golden rule and quite a few of the Ten Commandments. In other words, the Tools of Good Works are, like so much written by Benedict, very prosaic affairs. But you can read the Tools of Good Works chapter as spelling out what it's like to live in a way that creates an environment that is dependable; an environment that has continuity about it, such that it's possible for people to grow; an environment such that you're not constantly seeking to make up a definition of yourself out of whole cloth. Benedict is asking what it takes to develop people who can live safely, consistently and positively together. So he doesn't write the Rule beginning with a recommendation of stability as an abstract idea; he tries to outline an environment where

the long term sameness of my company won't breed bitterness, cynicism or fear of openness among them. Because of course if you do have to spend a lifetime with the same people, you can very easily create a set of strategies to manage that fairly successfully but they will create the exact opposite of the sort of openness which Benedict is working towards.

When we list the content of the Tools we can very broadly list his recommendations under three headings. He wants his community to be an environment of honesty; he wants his community to be an environment of peace; and he wants it to be an environment of accountability. Honesty, peace and accountability; these are the conditions in which stability flourishes. Honesty, because you can depend on the other to tell you the truth systematically; peace because you need to know that the basis of your shared life is not a matter of constant and insecure negotiation with others; accountability because you need to know who's responsible for what and how that responsibility works. Now, as you many have noticed, not everybody joins Benedictine monasteries; they are voluntary associations, as are all religious communities. So there is always the challenge of working out exactly how to recommend it to the society around, how to persuade people voluntarily to share its vision. Monastic life, like Christian life overall, is a form of life which depends on people having chosen it. It makes an offer, a proposal, to its society. What if this kind of life were possible after all? That's what the church, the monastery and many other kinds of intentional community are trying to say. What if stability, honesty and so on were indeed for all of us the basis of human life together? And it's the testimony represented so powerfully by the presence of the Abbey in Parliament Square that embodies the proposal, an offer, a presence that speaks not just of the royal and national traditions so richly in evidence all around us, but of a tradition rather more deep and more critical that has to do with the fundamental possibilities of stability and its spiritual fruits: of how to work with stability in honesty, in peacefulness and in accountability. And - not to labour the point too much - that's why the believing community, whether the monastery in particular or the Church in general, is so deeply self-wounded when it fails in honesty, in peacefulness and accountability. All of us, I dare say, have stories about those failures, how very public and conspicuous they can be, how very lethal they can be for Church and society.

So: a few words about how Benedict actually treats these specifics, in his discussion of Tools of Good Works. Honesty, it transpires, is a priority something which Benedict inherits from the earlier monastic tradition of the Egyptian desert. To be a good monk is to be able to open your heart to your spiritual elder, it's to expose your thoughts to the elder and to 'dash those thoughts against the rock of Christ' before they grow to unhelpful maturity. 'Thoughts' here is more or less a technical term in monastic literature, referring to chains of fantasy, systems of self-imagining, self-understanding which are primarily self-serving. And because the point of monastic life is to wean us away from self-serving fictions, it becomes crucial to expose those fantasies as something destructive and less than properly human. So the monk is exhorted by Benedict 'not to entertain deceit in their heart', to acknowledge accountability, to be mindful of death, apart from many other things. 'Not to entertain deceit': not to be enthralled to satisfying fictions about yourself and how you're doing; to accept your share of responsibility in the way things are and the way things go wrong. Because honesty is not just about telling the truth to one another, in or out of love, it's about understanding the truth of what *kind* of being you are, which is a mortal being, a

fallible being. And part of the offer made by a monastery or church to the public world around is the offer of a certain level of truthfulness about *mortality*. John Maynard Keynes famously said that "in the long run we are all dead" but I think Benedict had something slightly more serious in mind than that. It's not just that we cannot avoid death, it's more that no one of us has infinite scope or time to realise our aims and our objectives; no one of us has endless time at our disposal, and no one of us is exempt from risk, internal or external.

So these are some of the components of the honesty that is required as a Tool of Good Works. And there's one other interesting phrase which St Benedict uses in this chapter: one of the aspects of the monastic virtue of transparency is 'not to give false peace'. I think this has something to do with the way in which we can protect ourselves as a community or a society by failing to face conflict, failing to admit the brokenness of our togetherness by making little of it, ignoring it, denying it. It is damaging if we refuse to admit the reality of conflict, or to seek a resolution that leaves *me* feeling secure without healing the breach or the offence that others feel. So if we are transparent, honest as part of our growth into communal stability, we have to confront the uncomfortable fact that we're not actually and instinctively at peace with everyone. I certainly don't think that Benedict is recommending a kind of litigious habit of standing by our rights; I don't believe that he's suggesting that we can't be at peace until justice has been fully done in every way. What he does is to connect the risks of false peace with warnings about anger and resentment, recognising the fact that anger and resentment can coexist with and reinforce a refusal to name conflict. So being wary of facile reconciliation is not just being suspicious of whether someone else has adequately done justice to me. I need fully to acknowledge and deal with my own bewilderment, my own resentment, so that there is a degree of hesitation in me - not about the acceptability of the peace offered by an other, but about the honesty and depth and integrity of my own desire for peace and willingness to work for it.

So that's part of what Benedict has to say about honesty or transparency as an element of the community's life and work. And when he speaks of peace therefore as part of the community, he's thinking of how the 'circulation' in the body of the community needs to be a circulation of active and imaginative engagement, of clarity about our intentions, rooted in our willingness not to let rivalry and resentment have the last word. Many religious communities will have stories of varying kinds about the visitors who come to them, and say 'this is so peaceful'. These stories are told by monks and nuns with a wry smile, because monks and nuns know that within religious communities the last thing you'll find, most of the time, is a bland peacefulness. But what presumably communicates to visitors in this sense of a peaceable presence is not that everybody is getting on fine, but that this is a community which works within the parameters of a daily renewed *intention towards* active and honest engagement, a community which assumes there is a stable context within and around relations. It's possible to go beyond rivalry, because the 'currency' exchanged, the flow of life within the community, is about something else, something deeper, about peace.

So in the community, the question is what are we putting into circulation? The great Roman Catholic writer Donald Nicholl, reflecting on his time as head of a College in Jerusalem, touches on this question of 'currency' with his story of an English priest visiting his community who related his experience as a visiting scholar at University (I speak this as a

warning to myself too, you understand!). The priest in question was naturally interested in what the currency of the university was, so he spent time trying to uncover what people routinely talked about when they met. At last it dawned on him that the answer to the question of what people were putting into circulation, what people exchanged with one another, was *grievances*. The currency of the university was grievance. For quite a lot of our communities, political, religious and others, putting grievance into circulation, treating grudge as the fundamental factor which holds them all together, is one of our ways of saving face and protecting ourselves.   How then do we put something else into the system? How do we do this without dishonesty, without evasion? We all know in our age that it is bad for us to repress our feelings and that it is poisonous to be passive under injustice. We must acknowledge the risks here; but at the same time, we must recognise that it is so often simpler to put more grudge into the circulation than to break through to something different.

The peace that Benedict was interested in in his monastic community has to be tightly connected with a further point, touched on in this chapter and elaborated elsewhere, a point to do with the level of close attention that is to be given to the specific needs of each member of the community. I'll say a word more about this later on, but for now we should note that part of the way he sees authority being exercised in the community has to do with the difficult discernment of what is *most* specific, what is *most* unique about every member. The Abbot in the community does not simply issue general instructions, but spends the time necessary with each person to see the way that they will function against the background of the stability of the presence of other people: not to encourage them to develop their individuality at everyone's expense, but very particularly how they are to be who they uniquely are *with* these others. That's why abbots lead a very difficult life – for which Benedict makes no apology for that; that is what they are there for as brokers and agents of the active peacefulness that allows each to be utterly distinct.

And that, of course, moves us on to the third element which I have called accountability. The rule of the Abbot in Benedict's monastery is not thought of in terms of command. The Abbot has first of all, got to be aware that he is responsible for the monks' wellbeing before God. He himself has to be the 'image of Christ' in the monastery, the image of one who takes responsibility for human beings before God. There is a foreshadowing here of Bonhoeffer's extraordinary meditation in his notes on ethics and lectures on Christology, where he speaks of Christ as the one who takes responsibility, who is answerable for human beings as such and requires of his disciples that they share his answerability. Those in authority must, to use Benedict's phrase, 'leaven' the minds of those under their care; they have to allow the doughy natural texture of the spirit to rise into something more nourishing and bread-like. Benedict is, among other things, challenging the ready-made notions of status in his society. The only 'status' that really matters in the monastery is seniority, that's to say, how long you've been in the community; and we could translate this as a way of asking, 'How good are you at stability?' 'Staying the course' is not just a neutral thing for Benedict: those who have been longest in the community know what it's like to live with the others who are not going away; and that is an essential resource for understanding and managing and keeping alive the community around them. But at the same time the abbot has the charge of drawing out of anyone and everyone in the community what they are able to contribute. In a way that is very counter-cultural indeed in

the 5th or 6th century, Benedict insists that there are times when the most junior member of the community will actually have something to say which everyone needs to hear. Seniority is not the only ground for insight. So the abbot's exercise of authority in this community involves the key discernment both of how to draw on the depth of experience that is there in the senior members, and how to avoid that depth of experience just becoming self-confirming and self-perpetuating as the years roll on. The abbot exercises authority with discrimination and distinction not on the basis of visible differences – whether someone is rich or poor, slave or free in their background, but on the basis of the discernment of their gifts. He is accountable to God; we could also say he is accountable to the distinct and diverse spiritual qualities of those he is dealing with; which is why he can speak not just of obedience to the abbot but of a kind of *mutual* obedience in the community. Novice and senior monk are 'obeying' one another if they are attending with discernment to one another and the habits that shape their lives are habits of listening, attention and the willingness to take seriously the perspective of the other, the stranger.

The Benedictine monk is someone struggling to live without deceit, their inner life manifest to those to whom they have promised fidelity; he is a person who makes peace by addressing the roots of conflict in himself and the community; a person who attempts to contribute distinctive gifts in such a way as to sustain the circulation of hope and positive expectation in the community, the circulation of gifts and insights. But within, behind and through all this there stands the one great theme of stability: staying with the opportunity community creates to live differently, so that we can change and grow as we accompany one another, and understand more fully what our humanity is and how it works together.

And the Benedictine community makes its proposal to the society around in confidence that, while this society may not have chosen to identify with any religious institution, it nonetheless faces all the challenges that Benedict's monks face. As we think about the location of this building in Parliament Square, its triangulation with law and politics, there are a few comparisons which may help us to think this through further. If we're asking about the ethical framework and foundation against which law and politics are set, we would do well to ask some questions about the Benedictine stress on stability. I've already mentioned the way in which we seem always programmed to think that the solution lies in the absence of the other; but Benedict reminds us that our health and wellbeing lie in recognition of the fact that none of us can possess infinite resource or time and so will always need the unexpected stranger to supplement who and what we are. How do we inculcate in law and politics something of that recognition that otherness is not a matter for panic or despair, that the challenge or difficulty of the stranger, the cultural other, the sexual other, the vaguely threatening foreigner at our doors in popular mythology, is potentially gift? How do we inculcate a political morality which recognises that these people are not going away, and that therefore our task is not to pretend that they can be made to but to work at how we actually engage in transforming our relations with them. That doesn't of course immediately produce a magical solution, but it flags up the danger of yielding to the temptation of thinking that we can somehow will the stranger into oblivion.

In the same way, to take another major issue, we currently live in a world of almost unimaginable *financial* instability. We have created a seemingly unmanageable engine of chaotic change, governed by a small elite who will determine the patterns of international

institutions; a situation in which the vulnerability of national economies to short term international financial movement is unprecedented. This is one of the most enormous moral challenges before us, as a globe not simply as a society. How do we effectively challenge the currently unchallenged myths about the naturalness or inevitability of this level of financial instability? Is it natural that our societies should be at the mercy of international financial transactions of one kind or another? I have no very neat answers to this; but to shape our questions against the background of the Benedictine question of stability seems a possible way of starting again.

Moving to the three ways in which Benedict thinks through the practical implications of stability, we might think about how we begin discussion with the other sides of the Square about these matters. *Honesty* is not simply the matter of being transparent about your expenses (although that helps) It has something to do with whether or not society expects in its political class a degree of self-criticism and self-questioning, or whether it continues (we continue) to project unreal expectations, the expectations of problem solving omnipotence onto its leadership. An honest society ought to be able to guarantee the possibility for those in public life to acknowledge fallibility or uncertainty. It's an ideal that doesn't seem very close just now. But there is some real urgency about our need to begin inculcating an ethical climate that allows those in public life, those we think of as leaders in our society, to escape from the constraints of our increasingly merciless and unrealistic projections. We also need a far greater clarity about some of the unrealities that are recycled relentlessly in public debate on certain issues: it is astonishing that we are discussing the renewal of Trident in this country – a vastly expensive enterprise in a time of public financial restraint – in a way that seems to allow no mention of the actual risks of nuclear conflict; as if this weaponry's concrete effect were of no interest. Whatever decision might be made about this complex question, it would be reassuring to hear some honest recognition that we are not discussing the choice between a low-risk or risk free option (retention and improvement of a nuclear weapon) and a reckless bit of idealism, but genuinely weighing competing risks Is it too much to hope that we could have a transparent debate on this?

Peacefulness is rather an obvious extension to this discussion. It does not, as I said, mean a bland denial or evasion of conflict. What it does mean is a resolution to address conflict without despair, in the confidence that not everything must be dictated by rivalry and violence. So the question is here how we inculcate a political culture of willingness to go on arguing civilly, staging and negotiating real difference without premature panic or resort to the familiar urge to cancel the other. Civil disagreement is part of the health of a working society, a natural next step when we have been talking about honesty in debate. And if we're afraid of, nervous about, honesty because we're afraid of some kind of exposure of weakness, we need to be reminded of the strength that comes from solidarity and mutual trust as opposed to the constant struggle of isolation. Perhaps we can yet learn how to conduct arguments well, how to live as what I've sometimes called in the past an argumentative democracy – that is, not simply a formal democracy with voting and representative protocols, but one where civil society is articulate and brave enough to have arguments about fundamental issues in public without fear of this descending into recrimination, abuse, and ultimately violence. As is often observed, this is more to do with culture than law; but the institutions around us in this Square will not work as they should

unless this corner of the Square is doing what it can to shape a culture of positive disagreement, of argumentative civil speech. For the Church and the monastic community to model an active plurality of gift and vision working together is part of this particular institution's calling in such a context.

And the *accountability* of society's institutions has to do, quite simply, with the question of how far a political class (and of course its equivalent in the church) is visibly and publicly answerable to the good of those they lead. That's the fundamental question: not whether such and such a political group or agency is the purveyor of a persuasive or even an effective policy in terms that make sense to me and people like me, but whether that group is thinking clearly and honestly about its accountability for the wellbeing of the society it serves. To use a shorthand familiar from Catholic Social Teaching, it is an accountability to the common good. If government, parties, activist groups, devolved authorities are willing to discuss and demonstrate that sort of accountability, then I would say that functionally for all practical purposes, they are demonstrating their accountability to *God* to the extent that they are putting aside private and partial agendas for the honour and wellbeing of all made in the divine image.

So our questions to our political culture, our questions about legislation and styles of government and so on, need to be about how political leadership might embody in its own way, its own style, what Benedict in the past defines as stable and nurturing habits. It will entail asking whether our leadership models can exhibit – for example – a deeply ingrained suspicion of any ready-made solutions that arise from uncritical veneration for a given social status; a deep commitment to examining the particularities of the needs of persons or groups and a reluctance to work with generalities, let alone cliches; a willingness to listen to those on the margin, as well as those who appear to have inbuilt authority. Those three elements that I've picked up from Benedict's Rule – honesty, peacefulness and accountability – converge in a new configuring of political ethics. The 'offer' that Benedictine tradition makes, and ultimately the offer that the Christian tradition itself makes, is of a kind of life that works differently from the patterns we assume to be obvious. It involves an attempt to model ways of living together, ways of exercising authority and ways of conducting a public debate or dispute within the basic recognition that we have no choice but to take time with one another - with the other who is not going away; and so to use the background of relations that don't depend on our choice or taste positively so as to learn new ways of deciding, and of honouring each other. In this context, we have to go on asking those difficult questions I have sketched about how public policy creates or fails to create stability, how it does or does not point us to ways in which our social environment could be regarded as trustworthy. One of the very worst the worst things that can happen to society is to come to a point where a critical mass of the population no longer has confidence that the social environment is dependable and so concludes that they have no stake in the matter. Just how close are we to this in Britain today?

As I said earlier on, the Benedictine monastery and the Church of God overall are intentional communities; not everybody joins them. We have no way of saying to the world around, 'You *have* to believe all this and act accordingly'; as a bare matter of fact, we can't make that happen. But what we can say is that here are the signs by which we measure social, communal health – and its absence. That's the heart of what the Christian community,

Benedictine or otherwise, says in the political sphere – in this Square. And finally, for the believing community, all of this depends on something much deeper and more fundamental: the stability that we see in God. For Benedict and for all Christian communities, their life is possible because of the underlying belief that God is to be trusted. God is stable: and it is against the background of that stability that our own probing and uncertainty, our own unevenly successful attempts to embody all this, generally make whatever sense they manage to. They have a meaning and a depth, a reference to that without which nothing else happens. Benedict's Rule is framed by his assumption that all of us struggling to master the Tools of Good Works are finally oriented towards something much more radical in terms of contemplative self-offering, in terms of solitude and intensity of communion; the Rule ends by referring us onwards to the example of the Desert Fathers. Only when we have discovered something about honesty, peace and accountability can we even think, in Benedict's world, of moving on to 'higher' levels of spiritual life. He is, you might say, reminding us that it's very problematic to try to be too spiritual too soon, to assume that you can find a spiritual life independently of these very prosaic values of transparency, peacemaking and responsibility, fleshed out in the 'political' life of the community, even the small community of the monastery. So when the Church makes its offer, and when Benedict makes his proposal to the political and legal world around, it's a proposal for laying the foundations of something which could lead to a great deal more than just the 'prose' of community; but the prose has to be written. The patience, the doggedness of endurance, the commitment to let yourself be challenged to be more honest, all this points to the depth of stability that ultimately allows prose to be transformed into something else, in imagination, in art, contemplation, the mystical, the creative, indeed, in science as much as art. Shape your basic humanity aright, and that humanity will become something extraordinary; pinch and reduce the prosaic habits of your daily humanity, and don't be too surprised if the world shrinks. Society at large doesn't seem to have very much to do with the Benedictine enterprise – not least because Benedict assumes his monks regularly worship and keep silence; acknowledging the roots of their calling and the possibilities it carries. Yet society, as we have seen, with or without those moments of recollection and rooting, has to manage those things which keep humanity moving and growing. The Rule of Benedict gives fundamental advice for how we grow as human beings.

So the Tools of Good Works in the Holy Rule are simply tools for becoming human. And the basic ethic of candour, respect and patience is what Benedict assumes we have to master before we can do anything else. That's why the resulting insights I have suggested this evening are by no means irrelevant to our neighbour institutions. And as we think about the role of those neighbour institutions, we are of course going to come back to the deeply uncomfortable matter of how far we exhibit any loyalty to Benedict and his vision within our diverse communities of faith. But that no doubt is a matter for another occasion.

Thank you for your patience.