

August 13, 2017

In the name of God, who knows each word in our hearts. Amen.

In the year 494 common era, when he was 14 years old, Saint Benedict, ventured into the wilds of Italy, went up a mountain and found...a cave. He stayed in this cave for three years contemplating Christ, the cross, the mysteries of God. A local monk, Saint Romano, would lower food down to Benedict as he prayed and contemplated these mysteries without distraction. St Benedict, now the patron saint of Europe, is the founder of the Benedictine monastic order and the rule he writes for monks after leaving the cave is the foundation for nearly every modern-day monastic community in the world.

This cave is near the town of Subiaco, just one hour east of Rome. Last week, I visited the Monastero di Benedetto and its Benedictine monks, dressed in black habits, who now live in the monastery built around Benedict's cave.

Like Benedict, the earliest monks and nuns originated when the city, the church in the city, became too corrupt, too distracted by that which is not Christ. These individuals would retreat into the desert to pray and focus on God. Often ascetics, they would work to fight temptation and corruption of the flesh their goal being constant prayer and pure living. They sought to depend solely on Christ. To only follow His way and not the worlds. As a way to remain focused on Christ many early monks would have a mantra of sorts they would repeat again and again, so as never to lose sight of God. Some would say the psalter, memorizing the 150 psalms and repeating them again and again, others simply the name, Jesus over and over, and one of these earliest of prayers was simply to repeat Lord, Save me.¹

Of course, times change and today, the Monastero di Benedetto, around Benedict's cave, is not filled with hermits living with in caves, rather, the monks live in relatively comfortable quarters with their own rooms. Small tour groups go around the church and the cave Saint Benedict first entered is lit by twelve large lanterns, gilded with gold, and bordered. (The gift shop also sells a lovely selection of liqueurs made at the monastery and honey from their bees.)

Yet, regardless of how things change, the lessons we learn from these monks and nuns, who go away from things, who walked away from the way of the world to better learn what living with Christ can look like are timeless. Amazingly, these simple prayers still provide foundation for some of the deepest spirituality in our Christian tradition. Repeating the name of Jesus, Lord Save me are still valuable today as expressions of our need for, our dependence on God.

But they weren't the first to say these prayers either. In both of our lessons today Joseph, from his pit and Peter from the sea, find themselves in need. Their need, who they ask first for help and assistance is God. Joseph, pushed down into a hole by his brothers out of spite of his being their Father's favorite. Peter, after taking the first step onto water, then

¹ Thomas Merton, *Monastic Prayer*

falters, doubts and finds himself sinking into the sea. Lord, Save me, are his words. These are two different scenarios of need but where they turn to, who they ask first is something worth remembering today.

We need God. We are not capable to save ourselves, as much as our culture and society today tries to tell us we can. There are times when we need the grace, the forgiveness, the love and comfort, presence and guidance of God and that has not changed. There are times when this need is obvious and times when we feel gladly self-sufficient. Perhaps a need is immediate, and, like Peter sinking into the sea, Jesus grabs Peter's hand, rescuing him in that moment. Perhaps the need requires a more complex response, it is a different kind of petition. Like Joseph, who will come out of the pit and, *over time*, proceed from being betrayed by his brothers to ruling his people, the land of his brothers. Regardless of our need, it never does us poorly to call upon God and prayers are always available to us. And, it can be as simple as a word, a phrase, Lord, Save me.

Peter takes a bold step onto the water and then falters. He shows us that When we doubt, when we question, when we are afraid—a good response is to first shout out, to proclaim, to whisper, Lord, Save me. It is a petition of trust in a time of doubt and difficulty. Lord, Save me. It is a prayer of hope in need, a prayer of dependence, a prayer of confidence in God. It is a prayer to help us grow in our faith.

And a prayer like this: Lord, Save me need not be painful. It need not be about our shortcomings, our sins, our faults. Rather it is a whisper, a desire for Christ to reach into us, to see into those parts of us that need more than we alone can provide—that need light beyond what we can seek out on our own, that need forgiveness that we cannot pretend to give ourselves. Lord, Save me is not a prayer of weakness only, it is a prayer of hope, a prayer of recognition, a prayer of love. And it is a prayer that, when we pray it, will change us. Like repeating the name of Jesus. It may seem to begin as just a word, but it will change us. We are inviting God into our lives with this prayer in just a few simple words. And it will change us and it will change how we are with one another.

This prayer, Lord, Save me, is not one of selfishness, it is not intended for the recipient alone. These early monks, who prayed, Jesus, the psalms, Lord, Save me or just thank you. Although they lived alone, they were not completely solitary. People would come to them seeking wisdom, seeking help, seeking guidance and they could provide it from the closeness of relationship, recognition of needing God for each and everything in their life—they could often see more clearly where it was people, engrossed in affairs of the world, were trying too much to go their own way, to follow their own path—but the path of life these monks retained, held in focus, showed it is Christ who knows the true way. Saint Benedict stayed in his cave for three years *and then* founded monasteries—communities of people-- all over Italy, wrote a rule about how to live in love with one another. It was not about him, alone. This model for community has shaped the church all over the world--including our Episcopal Book of Common Prayer.

We follow Jesus because we believe in the way he shows us, the way he guides us on and leads us in. There is a need for more followers of Jesus today and not because the church

needs more people but because the world needs more people committed to love, truth, peace, justice and faith/recognition of the kingdom of heaven.

Following Jesus, prayer, looks different for each of us but for all of us, it is not just something we do for an hour or two and get our fill of it. It is something that influences all of us, all that we do, all the places we go, all the encounters with people we have. It shapes, it is the shape, of who we are. Perhaps this week you can try your own mantra of sorts—remembering these words are bringing you, showing you that Christ is with you, God is near. In some of the in between moments of your week just repeat Jesus. When you feel yourself reacting in a way you don't want to repeat, Lord Save me. And see what happens. See how things shift. In a cave, in the desert, in Italy or in Texas, our home, workplace or walking from one place from the next...it doesn't matter where we are. See what happens when you invite God into your life more, even in the smallest way, with a word with a phrase, with a recognition that God is the one we call upon, who rescues us, who unlocks for us all the kingdom of heaven—one thought, one moment, one word at a time.