

## Abbatial Blessing Donal Murray

The Gospel expresses a Christian paradox. As Dom Ambrose is blessed for his role as leader of this community, he is reminded that leaders in the Church of Christ are to be like little children: they are to be the servants of everyone else. "Anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave" (Mt 20:27).

He is already, no doubt, apprehensive enough about his new role, which the prayer of blessing calls a demanding task and a heavy responsibility. He knows that it will require of him the kind of wisdom that is not expected of little children; it will impose on him the kind of responsibilities which would never have been entrusted to a servant in first century Palestine.

In spite of those responsibilities, Ambrose, the office of abbot is not one of lording it over your brothers. You are to act as if you were the youngest, as if you were the one who serves. The more you reflect on it the more you may feel that the only thing to which this new office entitles you is that undisputed right to take the blame when something goes wrong!

The paradox of the leader who has to be a servant is resolved when we remember that what we do here is done in the presence of God. As a Christian leader, you are meant to point not to yourself but to God and to God's word. As St. Paul tells us what we preach is not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord with ourselves as servants (2 Cor 4:5). In Christ we see that the weakness of God is stronger than human strength and the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.

To be a servant of God's truth is to be free; to submit to God's wisdom is to enter into a reality that is richer than we could invent or imagine. To serve God is to reign; it is to open ourselves to the merciful love by which and for which we exist.

Your role as abbot is a new call to you to apply your heart to truth, to tune your ear to wisdom, to search for it as for buried treasure. You are to depend not on your own strength and wisdom but on the weakness and foolishness of God. Then you will understand what the fear of the Lord is. The Confirmation liturgy calls "the fear of the lord" "wonder and awe in God's presence".

That is what should inspire you, Ambrose; that is what you are to look for as if it were silver. Anyone who has begun to understand the wonder of God's awesome presence sees the folly of worrying about who should be reckoned as the greatest.

The life which you live with your community here is one by which you try to devote yourselves to that search for the knowledge of God and his wisdom. It is a life which you live not just for yourselves but for the Church and for the world.

This community, if, as the reading says, it cries out for discernment, can be a sign in today's world - a world in which the still, small voice of God is easily muffled and often unheard. You, as the leader who is a servant, are called to lead your brothers in listening for that voice, for we have only one Master and we are all students (Mt 23:8 NRSV).

We pray with the whole community and its abbot-elect that it may be such a sign by the seriousness with which it pursues that calling - and even more so, perhaps, by the joy with which it lives what it has heard, proclaiming God's love in the morning and his truth in the watches of the night.

The truth brings freedom and peace. God's truth is always full of wonder. The message does not weaken or become dulled with time; it is always new. That is why we pray in the words of the psalm that God's people, and particularly the monastic community, will move into the new millennium like the flourishing palm trees, still bearing fruit, still full of sap, still green.

You are called to be a sign to the world in another way too.

Much of the modern life seems to be at the same time full of activity and empty of meaning. The reason for that is that people meet, for the most part, only in particular roles, not in the fullness of who they are: beings face to face with the mystery of the meaning of their existence and with the inevitability of death. Still less does their meeting take account of the most staggering truth about them - that the Son of God died for them and is drawing them into a life beyond death and suffering at the right hand of God. That is the greatest truth, the unchanging truth, the same today, and yesterday and forever.

The point about your community life is that you are seeking to live in the wonder and awe of God's presence, that is in the constant effort to be aware of the most profound truth about yourselves, about each other, about every member of the human family. The monastery is not an escape from real life. You are seeking in your relationships with one another and with those you meet to be as conscious as you can of what is most real.

That is why this community should be marked by a love for each other and a welcome for strangers. Being a servant of God leads inescapably to being a servant of others, and both kinds of service are paths to freedom, paths that lead to happiness.

Ambrose, as you take up your role of the leader who must be servant, may you and the community you serve draw always closer to the Lord who is among us as one who serves.

This homily was given at the blessing of Dom Ambrose Farrington, Abbot of Bolton Abbey, on 10th July 1994.

It was first published in Hallel, a review of monastic spirituality and liturgy. Hallel is published twice a year by the Cistercians of the Strict Observance and costs £7 for two issues. Available from Ciaran O Sabhaois, Mt. St. Joseph Abbey, Roscrea, Co. Tipperary, Ireland.

