

First a quote from the Abbot General of the Cistercian order, Fr.Mauro-Guiseppa Lepori, musing on the Lenten character of the present pandemic, and a reminder of St.Benedict's words that for a monk every day should have something of this Lenten character (RB49).

'To stop oneself freely has become almost impossible in contemporary western culture... Only unpleasant setbacks manage to stop us in our breathless race to take ever greater advantage of life, of time, often also of other persons. Now, however, an unpleasant setback like an epidemic has stopped almost all of us. Our projects and plans have been annihilated, until we do not know when. We, too, though we live a monastic or even cloistered vocation, how much we are used to living like everyone else, running like everyone else.. and always throwing ourselves towards some future! To stop, on the other hand, means to rediscover the present, the instant to be lived out now, the true reality of time, and thus also the true reality of ourselves, of our life. (We) only live in the present, but we are always tempted to remain attached to the past that is no more and throw ourselves towards a future that is not yet and perhaps never will be...'

Now that's the sort of wisdom we see at play in today's readings from Proverbs and Colossians and Luke, and in the Rule of St.Benedict. Stop, wait, let's see what the Lord wants to do with us today, now, in this present minute. This calls for great humility, for being prepared to serve one another in the needs of the moment. To change plan in an instance as a new demand is made on us from one moment to the next. I'm hoping to get to the end of this before a fresh demand is made on me – but one never knows. Such flexibility is only possible within the constraint of love. That seems a contradiction but I'm thinking of a wonderful piece of sculpture within the constraints of an arch in the former Benedictine Abbey Church at Vezelay, south-east of Paris. The sculptor has had to work hard to contain all the figures within a curved, limited space, a tympanum above a doorway, and yet has succeeded in conveying great movement among all the various figures, with the risen Christ at the centre in a mandorla, himself constrained but seated sideways and with robes decorated with whirls and eddies so that he can appear alive and active, giving this life indeed to all the various figures below: firstly, the apostles 'all movement and inspiration' and then ever outwards to all of humanity, and every creature imaginable. The point being that, just as the artist has had to work within the constraints of structure and material to produce an image of freedom, of life that is in full flow, so in taking on the constraint of flesh, that is living in one time and place as one particular human being, Christ has achieved freedom for us all, and shown us how to live within the constraints of the present, whatever they might be, without fear. What the Abbot General of the Cistercian order has captured in words, and the sculptor at Vezelay has captured in stone, is captured for us, in several senses, by Christ, and in so far as we live the Rule of St.Benedict in the spirit of Christ, that is with the flexibility made possible by the constraint of love.

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