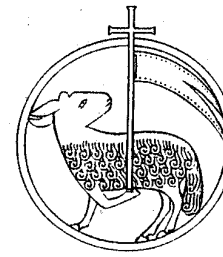


ing. Instead we shall acclaim with Paul, and after the manner of St. Benedict: *All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness (2 Timothy 3:16)*. We shall not set ourselves over the revealed word but beneath its authority as we make this prayer our own:

*O Lord, you have given us the Holy Scriptures for our instruction;
grant us also the help of your Holy Spirit,
that we may hear your Word in the depths of our hearts;
and growing thereby in repentance and faith,
may serve your eternal purpose for your creation,
and praise you in the Light of the Appearing of our Lord Jesus
Christ:
for the Kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and for ever and ever.
Amen*

(Office of Vespers CSWG)



FAITH praying and believing ON THE EARTH

THE ELEMENTAL SPIRITS - interpreting Scripture

To understand the word of God we must stand under and not over it. How easy it is to pick out the parts of scripture we feel at home with and by-pass the rest. St. Benedict in his sixth century Rule for monks and nuns says startlingly in the concluding chapter: *what page or what word is there in the divinely-inspired books of the Old and New Testaments that is not an unerring rule for human life?* We would certainly have to juggle a lot with the text to make *everything* in the bible fit in with what we like to term a decent way of life, so what could he have meant?

Actually St. Benedict is challenging us to look below the surface, at our own motivations and sometimes even our own hypocrisy. We are to stand under God's judgement, but also under his mercy. The word of God is sharper than a two-edged sword and pierces between joints and marrow (*Hebrews 4: 12-13*). It opens us up to ourselves if we let it, so that we can see who and what we are.

It is rare for us to approach scripture with humility these days. We pick and choose, dissect and analyse, arrogantly asserting that our modern critical methods far outstrip the older allegorical interpretations our forebears revelled in. But the wise steward must bring out from the treasure-store what is old as well as what is new. Sometimes like wine, *the old is better*. If our excessive rationalising is closing our inner ear to the still, small voice of the Spirit revealing the hidden depths of the word to us, then it is small wonder that St. Benedict's dictum seems outrageous.

Deafness to the Spirit can in fact mean unwitting openness to all the wrong kinds of spirit vividly manifested to us in the pages of Scripture. Ironically, it

is the self-styled post-modernist Christians, protesting their liberation from the superstitious taboos of the past, who can fall the easiest prey. Since our battle is not against flesh and blood but against the principalities and powers (*Ephesians 6: 10-17*), if we no longer believe that the enemy actually exists then we don't stand much chance of overcoming him. Meanwhile he creeps in at the backdoor unawares.

Maybe some of the pages of Holy Writ to which St. Benedict would draw our attention are concerned with just these things, so vital for us now. What, in our prideful superiority, we like to think we have outgrown is still clearly delineated in Scripture and remains as true now as ever. And that means in every part of the world as well. We can no longer think in terms of the civilised West - Christendom versus the benighted savages elsewhere (if that was ever a valid assessment anyway). Our global village belies this. We share the good and the bad worldwide, and the forces that make for either can no more be tied down and compartmentalised than we can ignore the telephone, the fax machine or the internet.

Knowing we have an enemy is half the battle, then. Knowing we have an unconquerable Leader to enlist with, is victory assured. That is our glory. The map of our campaign, the details of the battle, are all there in Scripture. We have the code and the Interpreter so we can be fearless. Since *nothing is hidden that shall not be revealed*, we take heart.

Look at *Colossians 2: 14-15*. Jesus, needless to say, is our Leader and he has already won the war: *He has cancelled the bond that stood against us, setting it aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them . . . when and how? - in that very cross.*

Before the time of the Incarnation things were not so good. St. Paul talks about men and women, even the believing Jews, being like minors, heirs to a great inheritance (salvation, eternal life) but not yet able to enter into that inheritance, *Galations 4: 1-2*. There was a lot of intrigue going on, opposition from those out to deprive us of what was rightly to be ours. We were all *slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe (ibid. v.3)* ie embroiled in negative worldly influences, the spiritual wickedness in high places playing its part. Escape was not humanly achievable. But: *when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons (vv.*

4-5). The Warrior entered the arena, the Son sent by the Father. Our condition of slavery was changed to that of sonship, to brother and sisterhood with Christ (granted our willing acceptance of the offer).

Now, we are much more securely on the way to salvation, but the battle isn't over. Jesus died and rose again, eternally triumphant over death, that death we fear so much and which our enemy relentlessly exploits (*Hebrews 2: 14-15*). We are still fearful but in Christ we are not overcome by that fear. *Do not be afraid, it is I*, Jesus says. We are given a glimpse of our Risen Lord so that, like the apostles on the Mount of Transfiguration, we might be strengthened to endure our own share in the cross.

Having a courageous, unconquerable Leader never exempted any soldier from taking up arms himself. We have our function too in the overall operation. The battle down here is still on (*cf. Revelation 12: 7-17*) but the *one who endures to the end will be saved*. It is a wonderful privilege to be a co-combatant with Christ, to have, like Paul, a share in his sufferings for the sake of our fellow-believers and for the upbuilding of Christ's church (*Colossians 1:24*).

How futile to try to discountenance all this, calling it simply a myth. And having done that we are asked to *demythologise*, to extract all the so-called myths from Scripture anyway and live by the bare down-to-earth bones that are said to remain. Then there would be no real Son of God, no Incarnation, no Cross, nothing to be saved from or for, no meaning, no purpose, no resurrection joy - nothing to fight either for or against - in short no Christianity. What a cunning way the evil one has of ensuring we forget all about him while he wreaks full havoc in the world around!

It is for us to beware of being his accomplices unawares. Even the learned and wise among us can be fooled and can be leading others astray. Those old elemental spirits are still at work and we must be on our guard: *See to it that no one makes a prey of you by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe and not according to Christ (Colossians 2: 8)*. Then later in the same chapter St. Paul rebukes his readers yet again: *If with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the universe, why do you live as if you still belong to the world? (v. 20)*.

But, being really and truly IN CHRIST and raised with him (*Colossians 3: 1-4*) we shall not be deflected from the truth by any smooth talk or erroneous teach-