



BENEDICTINE SISTERS OF CHICAGO

Feast of Benedict – March 21, 2024
Reflection by Susan Quaintance, OSB

First Reading: Proverbs 2:1-9

Second Reading: Ephesians 6:10-13

Gospel: Matthew 19:27-29

Generally, when I hit a militaristic image in scripture or the Rule, I note it and then plunge ahead until I come across something that's a little more in line with my sensibilities. I imagine that some of you might do the same. So it's with no little surprise and trepidation that I embark on a reflection on our 2nd reading from Ephesians, with its talk of armor and the devil and battle. Why not Proverbs? Why not Matthew? Well, mostly because, of the 3 readings we're given for this feast, it's the only one referenced in the Rule. When I looked for all 3 of this evening's readings in the index of scriptures in the Rule, the passage from Ephesians is the only one that appeared. I was shocked! Ephesians 6:10-17, from which most of our 2nd reading is taken, is listed as a source for the 3rd verse of the Prologue: "This message of mine is for you, then, if you are ready to give up your own will, once and for all, and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord." It's the Feast of St. Benedict, and he put that verse at the very beginning of the Rule that we follow. I didn't feel like I had much choice. Let's dig in.

The author of Ephesians, in the first half of what Benita just proclaimed to us, warns his hearers against the "tactics of the devil," "principalities and powers, the rulers of this world of darkness, the evil spirits in regions above." I was caught by what the *Oxford Biblical Commentary* says of these verses: "What matters is the recognition that there are forces active through human fear and greed which can captivate whole groups and even societies and wreck all forms of evil, from the most subtle to the most inhuman." That brought me smack into the present: globally, nationally, civilly – and certainly personally.

As so often happens in the Rule, Benedict warns against the evil of self-will. Repeatedly in his writings, Terrence Kardong reminds us that the human will is a God-given gift, one that we shouldn't renounce – after all, it's what brought us to the monastery in the first place – but to be wary of self-will, that desire for what I want, what I think I need. Aquinata Bockman says that renouncing acts of self-will is liberating; instead of spending all that energy on ourselves, we can be freed up to serve God and one another.

As I stand on the brink of Holy Week, it might behoove me to think further about the dark forces that turn me inward and steal my joy. Even in a brief contemplation, it's not hard to start a list: fear, certainly, as noted earlier. But there's also hopelessness and apathy, cynicism, pride, all manner of unkindness. While the language of battle is not usually what I use, these are forces against which I want to resist with power and strength.

The courage and firmness that takes, both Paul and Benedict remind us, come not from myself but from God. Benedict recommends the “strong and noble weapons of obedience”; Aquinata translates that verse as “the very strong and splendid weapons of obedience.” What are these? For one, I think of our work together at chapters and Lenten afternoons. We may not think of ourselves as doing battle, but we are working hard together to discern the common good, to figure out the best way we can serve God together in the here and now.

Paul says that we “must put on the armor of God.” Think about that for a second. It’s not just armor that God gives us, but it is God’s own. Scholars point to Isaiah 59:17 and Wisdom 5:17 where this armor is described, and a word jumped out at me in both places. “God wraps God’s self in a mantle of zeal.” “God shall take zeal for armor.” Such a Benedictine word! It is zeal that protects from the negative forces coming at us from without and within. I shouldn’t have been surprised; it’s exactly what Benedict says at the beginning of Chapter 72: “Just as there is a wicked zeal of bitterness which separates from God and leads to hell, so there is a good zeal which separates from evil and leads to God and everlasting life.”

And a constitutive part of this zeal, this weapon that keeps the forces of darkness at bay, is concern for the other. The last line of our passage from Ephesians: “Pray constantly and attentively for all in the holy company.” Benedict firmly advocates “competing in obedience to one another” and pursuing what is best for the other.

So let us pray for good zeal, for ourselves and one another. It will protect us and strengthen us, individually and communally. In other words, “Let us prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life.” Amen.

Happy Feast Day.