

+ In the name of the F, S, HS Amen.

Good evening, it is wonderful to be here, and thank you for the kind invitation to at speak to you on the work of the Spirit, from the perspective of the ministry I'm involved in, as prior of the Community of St Anselm.

SO, allow me briefly to introduce myself and my context: You may have heard about a recent initiative by the Archbishop of Canterbury, who is establishing a Community for Prayer, Shared life, Studies and Service to the Poor at Lambeth Palace. Membership is open to any Christian, from around the world, aged 20-35 and is for one year, and the first ever members will be received in September. It is my privilege to be leading that community in the Archbishop's name. Spaces, as you may imagine, are extremely limited, but in the microcosm that is this nascent community, we will not just talk about, but live an example and an experiment of the life of love that we heard about in our reading from 1 John. I say that as if it were a fact even though it is yet in the future. But it is a sort of edgy fact, as in: We'll either learn to love – that is we'll learn to choose to relate to one another in love as a conscious act – or the Community of St Anselm will not last until Christmas.

You see, we are gathering Christians from across all the folds that are the Body of Christ; men and women from any nation, and from any branch of the Christian family tree. It is for anyone who wants to be shaped in thought, word and deed, into the likeness of Christ, by the Holy Spirit to the glory of the Father; and go on to shape the world in turn. It's a big vision and an enormous spread of cultures, expressions of faith and opinions. 16 members will live in, and spend just about all their

time with, the Community; mostly at Lambeth Palace. And 40 members will live and work in and around London, and live out this expression of radical discipleship in the context of their working life; joining the resident community on an evening and weekend-basis – as well as three resident weeks.

Now the ultimate purpose with the Community is becoming like Jesus, and then changing the face of the earth forever. So, it's just the kind of God-sized vision that has always been the remit of the followers of Jesus, and we are just embodying the one vision of discipleship in a particularly intentional and focussed way, as we share a common Community Rule, which articulates both the vision and the details of how we go about being shaped into the likeness of Jesus.

Our Old Testament text today reminds me of St Benedict in the Prologue to *his* Rule of Life, which is one of the most influential church leadership texts in the last 1500 years, and one that has influenced the Community of St Anselm a lot also. It begins: "Listen, my son, to the Master's instruction and attend to them with the ear of your heart". As disciples, as followers, as people who learn from our Master, Jesus Christ the risen Son of God; listening is at once a key skill and a key activity.

A couple of recent articles on 'the developments in the Church in the west', have suggested that a growing trend is to abandon words in favour of silence, and communicate truth with symbol instead of dogma – and the articles I read suggested that this is the way of the future. In fact, I read another such article from the Washington Post only last night, and it has prompted me to take this sermon down a slightly

different path than I originally had in mind.

On some level it seems reasonable that in a society that is oversaturated with – often one-way – communication we in the Church might do well to reduce - or even abandon - our dependence as a church on wordy communication. Instead, these articles have argued, as we turn our attention inward or upward, words are not that important. It seems that even the ancient monastics are in complete agreement – they demand silence almost aggressively! Are we re-discovering an ancient treasure by abandoning words?

Now, I suggest to you that these articles do describe a truth, but not the whole picture. Sure, we are drowning in a sea of words, and to publish or broadcast our words is easier than ever - and if I could un-read 90% the stuff I read online, I would be no poorer for it. But it is an old truth that the proper correction of misuse is not rejection and disuse, but right use. This principle of correction holds true for words and silence as well; we risk going from one ditch to another. The risk with endless noise is, as we all experience, that it drowns out meaningful content. The risk with isolating ourselves from words, on the other hand, is that there be *no* meaningful content.

The answer is one that Samuel is learning in our reading today. The answer to the correct use of words and silence lies in listening.

Silence in the context of listening is giving value and worth to the voice of the Other.

Silence in the context of listening is saying with Samuel:

Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.

Silence in the context of listening is acknowledging that we have a limited capacity to sift and find the voice of God in an incessant stream of noise, tailored to stimulate and hold our attention long enough to get a 'click' of the mouse.

Silence in the context of listening is reducing quantity of words so we have less sifting to do in order to find the gold that is the Word of God being spoken in and into our lives.

When we create relationships with each other where we intentionally say, both with our attitudes and explicitly, "I value your thoughts" or "I want to show you the real 'me' when we talk" or "I can learn from you". When we create relationships like that, then we open up whole new possibilities in life. We open up the possible of relational intimacy.

Actually, listening deeply to another person is one of the most powerful ways to show the worth we give that person. It is a form of love. There are other forms; touch, gifts, acts of services – but the sharing between friends of true and honest words is deeply important expression of love, and an indispensable tool in building authenticity, transparency and trust in relationships.

"Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit." – That was our NT reading today.

Now a part of me is tempted at this point to launch now into an exposé of the Holy Spirit's work within us, enabling us to speak to God, hear from God, and speak God's words to others – and that would be perfectly true and valid, but I shall settle for mentioning that work of the Spirit as the backdrop for Christian relationships. Christian relationships in general, and in Christian intentional communities, such as the Community of St Anselm, in particular.

*I don't know if you've heard the story of the African man who carved elephants out of stone, and sold to tourists – the story tells of one tourist who stops and looks at the beautiful little stone carvings that seem so completely to capture the Elephant's expression, the texture of the skin, the sensitive curvature of the trunk – and he asks the man: "How do you make these beautiful carvings?" And the villager thinks it's a strange question and just answers "I just take a stone and then remove all of the stone that is not an elephant." Maybe there are some artists among you who can relate to that – I don't have that kind of artistic vision myself.*

But allow me to pick up on the analogy: we are like stones, and we carry in us the image of Jesus. Now the Holy Spirit is the artist who will bring out that image in us, like the villager brought out the elephant according to his vision. To the Holy Spirit, the vision of what our true identity looks like, the way that you, that I, are given uniquely to reflect Jesus in our lives, that image is very clear. But what tools does the Holy Spirit use, to bring out that likeness of Christ in us? To chip away the bits that don't look like Jesus?

I suggest to you that *the people with whom we choose to*

*share our lives*, are some of the most important tools we put, so to speak, in the hands the Holy Spirit, to bring out that image of Jesus in us.

You see, when we share life with people and learn transparency in relationships, we find out each other's faults. They become evident. They get in your face. They irritate you and rub you up the wrong way. And so will you to them. You will irritate each other, you will rub each other up the wrong way, you will offend and insult one another – both with intention and without. When this happens, what is happening is that the bits – in you – that are not like Jesus, are rubbing against the bits – in the other person – which are not like Jesus.

The one central and overarching purpose of the Community of St Anselm *is* to become *more* like Jesus; in thought and word and deed. That is not particular to our Community, that is just being a disciple, but a central component in *our* way of life is welcoming this kind of relational grating.

You see, God brings good out of bad – and here is the great secret of a shared life: when the parts of you that are not like Jesus rub against the parts of someone else that are not like Jesus – or in church language; when your sin and your fallen nature rubs against the sin and fallen nature of another person; then those bits wear away and the likeness of Jesus remains.

Not automatically, certainly not automatically, but the challenge becomes to see the likeness of Jesus in your brother and sister and honour that image, even when our

actions and feelings hide that image quite well. When we do that, then the bits that are not like Jesus rub off against each other, and the hidden bits that you choose to see in each other, the likeness and character of the person of Jesus Christ, which is the Spirit's vision of Christ in you, those bits come closer to the surface, become easier to spot, and the image of God in you, your deepest and truest identity, becomes more visible, even polished, it shines and reflects the glory of the Father in your life – and it is exceedingly beautiful.

As I said, we have two modes of membership in the Community of St Anselm, resident and non-resident. In both cases, a central component is learning the skills and disciplines involved in becoming transparent, authentic with other Christians with whom we build a mutual trust. It requires the kind of reflective skills that allows us to be authentic with ourselves about where we are at, but that's a sermon for another day.

To end: Love is a gift from God. This gift is worked out by learning skills, by being intentional, by choices we make. Sharing our lives with others, with the express intention to be shaped after the likeness of Christ, is a powerful way to accelerate that journey. It's hard, it takes sacrifice, and it is richly rewarding.