

“Of Nuns, Radiators and Drains – the Story of a Vocation” (For Vocations Day, Rochester Diocese, April 2016)

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“Are you a radiator or a drain?” asked our retreat director shortly after I entered Malling Abbey. “Are you a person who radiates wellbeing and are a joy to be with, or are you someone who drains all the energy out of others?” It struck me that this question captured something important about why I was drawn to Malling Abbey and have become a nun.

Before coming to Malling I was working as a software engineer, pursuing a successful career working with internet technologies. It caused a certain amount of shock and incomprehension when I announced to my colleagues that I was resigning and giving up my independent life in a house of my own for this apparently very restricted life. What led me to do that?

I have always been someone who was not content with superficial answers and I wanted to feel for myself the truth of things. My career with computers provided a very good way to make a living but it didn’t satisfy that part of me that was looking for deeper meaning.

When I was in my 30's my marriage broke up and I was thrown into a long period of painful struggle which sent me in all sorts of directions in a search for inner peace and meaning. I had been a life-long church goer and that more-or-less continued but I was still looking for a deeper felt sense of the truth. I dipped into various things on offer in the New Age supermarket and although some of these things were a bit way out they did begin to open me up to a much wider and richer experience of life.

On retreat with a Buddhist community I realised that I was longing for Jesus and the Christian sacraments and I found myself drawn back to wholehearted commitment to my Christian faith. I joined a Christian meditation group and threw myself back into the life of the Church - but bringing with me many rich things that my explorations had opened up.

Through this time of searching I felt drawn to some kind of healing work and started training as a massage therapist. The most significant thing that I learnt was that much of the healing benefit of massage comes from how the masseur is in herself and what she transmits through her hands, not simply through correct technique. We learnt how to be mindful of our own emotions and the atmosphere we were creating in the room where we worked. In the words of that retreat director, was I able to radiate well-being in a way that enabled the person I was working with to access that well-being within herself? By now you may be wondering what all this has to do with being a nun!

But for me, the mindfulness became a form of prayer, allowing the healing power of God to be present. I did not even have to touch someone for them to experience God’s healing presence. Prayer was moving to the centre of what I was doing. As I came to the end of my training and was asked to envisage how I saw my massage practice developing what kept surfacing was an image of myself as a nun.

Never having met a nun I realised I needed to find out more. I spoke to my vicar and

others and ended up with a list of communities I might visit. The first two elicited a “hmm - maybe..” but the third was Malling Abbey.

As soon as I walked in the gate I could feel the place radiating an atmosphere of peace and love formed from centuries of prayer... and I wanted to be part of that ongoing prayer. Here was a place I felt I could dive into the depths of God’s love.

Being a healing presence through prayer was a natural development from being a healing presence through massage. To me they somehow seemed to be the same thing and I now knew what it was that God was calling me to do.

I paid a number of brief visits to get to know the community, then I was fortunate enough to be able to take two month's leave from work so that I could spend an extended time there. This finally confirmed for me that I had no choice but to quit my job and try to live the life of a nun. Scary, because in the fast-moving field I was in there would be no way back. But I also knew that I couldn’t ignore this call.

So in September 2009 I entered as a postulant, the first stage in religious life.

I now found myself learning to live life according to the rule of St. Benedict, a rule he wrote in the chaotic times of the 6th century for people drawn to a deeper relationship with God through life in community. There is much wisdom in his rule that can still inspire us today in our Christian lives, whether or not we live in religious communities. Monastic life is so pared down to essentials that it throws into relief things that are part of any Christian’s journey.

Benedictine life is designed to enable us to open to God and to listen to his word. There is an emphasis on silence and withdrawal from the distractions and busy-ness of everyday life, all the things that fill our minds and crowd God out. We've no TV and make very little use of the internet. One writer on monastic life titled one of his books “An Unexciting Life” - which is a good description.

When I first entered I found this very bare and undistracting life caused my senses to come alive. I was much more aware of natural rhythms. I found myself noticing the changing light, the moon, the gentle natural colours - when Advent came I was startled by the powerful purple of the vestments! I realised how much bright colour and distraction there is in the world outside that makes our senses numb.

I could feel myself opening to God’s presence too. Of course this lack of distraction also confronts us with ourselves, with no opportunity to run away. This growing in self-knowledge is an important part of the Benedictine journey.

Benedictine life could perhaps be seen as the original healthy “mind, body, spirit” lifestyle - his rule laid down a structure for a balanced life of prayer, study and manual work. We follow the traditional pattern of a timetable structured around regular prayer together in Church seven times a day - which with the Eucharist makes for 8 services per day. I find that my life is structured around these times of prayer rather than prayer inserted into a life patterned around my work and leisure activities.

We live our whole lives, as far as possible, within the enclosure of the monastery. All of our work is within the Abbey, the practical and spiritual work of keeping the place running. Because we are so seldom out all of us are able to gather for the services through

the day and we can eat all of our meals together. It makes for a very focussed community life, and provides us with the challenge of no escape from the annoying habits of others!

The timetable was a shock to my system. We are the earliest risers of the Anglican religious communities with our Vigils office of psalms and readings at 4.30. Getting used to greeting the world at 4am has been a challenge! But it gives us an extended time of corporate and personal prayer before engaging with the business of the day, which I find very precious.

Our services are simple and brief and based around praying the psalms, along with scripture readings. I have found it an extraordinary experience to be immersed in Biblical texts throughout the day. As someone who was drawn to silent, wordless prayer I was at first bemused to find myself confronted with all these words! And would all the repetition simply get boring? It's very unlike the emphasis on novelty and change to keep people engaged, that is so much the way in the world (and church) outside. But with the constant repetition I am finding these texts are becoming part of my mental furniture, and different bits of the scriptures collide off each other in creative ways as they surface at odd moments.

It's worth all of us thinking about what we let fill our minds through the day and what is forming our mental furniture.

Through the middle part of the day we have times for work, including all the administrative and manual work of running the Abbey. Being involved in the mundane things of life helps keep us grounded. This is no disembodied otherworldly life. I have developed wonderful monastic biceps from all the hefty gardening I've done since joining!

Apart from our worship in the Abbey Church, the other important focus of our common life is the Refectory where we eat together 3 times a day. Our shared meals reflect the shared meal of the Eucharist and St. Benedict intended that our eating together be treated with as much seriousness as the Eucharist. We keep silence at meals, with one of the sisters reading to us during the midday meal - food for our minds as well as our bodies.

Early on in my time in the Abbey I was told that I was rather noisy in the refectory - initially I was upset and thought "surely there's more heroic things I could be doing than simply trying to make less clatter with my cutlery!" But as I focussed on being quieter I found that I needed to be more mindful and gentle in everything I was doing. I began to see that this was a practice of love and non-violence - peace-making starts with me, in all the little things of life.

After 8 months I was clothed as a novice, taking the black Benedictine habit I now wear. I experience it as symbolic of my commitment to this way of life with its particular traditions but also as a very practical way to greater simplicity and lack of distraction. I no longer need to think about what I will wear or what is happening to my hair. As a timeless garment it enables me to look presentable however fashions change - as one sister said "better 600 years out of date than 6!" - which is important as we intend our garments to be worn for many years.

As a novice I was given time to get to know this life whilst remaining free to leave at any time but eventually, after 5 years, I had to decide whether I wished to take vows for life.

You probably think our vows are “Poverty, Chastity and Obedience”, but these are actually a later development. Our Benedictine vows are “Stability, Obedience and Conversion of life”. These vows commit us to our particular community, in obedience to the gospel as embodied in its way of life, and engage us in a life-long journey of growth into the likeness of Christ.

As the time of making a life commitment approached I realised that the decision was already made. All my questions about what I should do with my life had fallen away, so last May I made my life vows.

And so what does all this mean for the rest of you? Each of us, whatever our calling, needs to put down deep roots and find ways to tap into that living water that Jesus offers us.

Many people have found that staying as a guest for a few days and experiencing something of the rhythm of our life brings them into a slower and deeper way of being. They find it easier to pray in a place where prayer is the main focus of life.

Some people go on to develop their own rule of life, inspired by monastic life, to give them a structure to sustain them in their everyday life.

We also have women who want to spend a longer time in this environment come and live within our enclosure, sharing our life as an alonsider. Those who have done this have found it a very valuable experience for deepening their prayer life and for stepping aside from their normal life for a time.

My hope for each one of us is that we may allow the Gospel to permeate every aspect of our lives, in whatever God calls us to do, and through our prayer and God-seeking be radiators indeed!