**Chapter 4: The Tools for Good Works**

January 20, May 21, September 20

*Place your hope in God alone. If you notice something good in yourself, give credit to God, not to yourself, but be certain that the evil you commit is always your own and yours to acknowledge.*

*Live in fear of judgement day and have a great horror of hell. Yearn for everlasting life with holy desire. Day by day remind yourself that you are going to die. Hour by hour keep careful watch over all you do, aware that God’s gaze is upon you, wherever you may be. As soon as wrongful thoughts come into your heart, dash them against Christ and disclose them to your spiritual father. Guard your lips from harmful or deceptive speech. Prefer moderation in speech and speak no foolish chatter, nothing just to provoke laughter; do not love immoderate or boisterous laughter.*

What are wrongful thoughts? Perhaps we could say that thinking that distorts the experience of goodness is wrong. This thinking is inconsistent with the good already in us. This distorted energy is in all of us: insecurity, personal doubt, gloom, unhealthy self-preoccupation, the want for immediate gratification (among others). Such as these can influence what we say and how we speak. Laughter and excitability that somehow doesn’t fit the circumstance can express this energy.

Is there a way out? Benedict says: we are good with a goodness that has its life in God, a goodness that cannot be distorted. He says: practice placing hope only in God. Benedict says: Christ can break the hold that distorted thinking has upon us. As this happens God’s gaze becomes what it has always been, one of mercy and compassion. Thinking is purified, we grow in how God sees, we grow in God’s goodness.

What then is the practice of this? How do we, in thought, word, and action, grow in this uncreated goodness and hope? We practice the tools together. This is how the hold is broken. Through practical acts of kindness and love our sight is ordered, the heart cleansed. This is the commitment of community.

As we do this we risk exposure to the wisdom of others. Mature communities have mature guides, guides that value our flourishing. They know that, ultimately, the flourishing of members is the flourishing of community. And they know that, while community values aloneness, aloneness is not isolation. Problems and challenges seem bigger in isolation. Isolation is not community.

The Desert Father Isaac, a mature community member, recommended a phrase (or formula) for us to use whenever distorted energy threatens to overwhelm us and leave us isolated. It is: ‘O God, come to my aid; O Lord, make hast to help me.’ (Ps69:2). John Cassian’s 10th Conference (10) is a thorough guide on the use of this phrase. With this phrase, Christ can break the hold of disorder[[1]](#footnote-1). Benedict recommends Cassian as a guide (once we are experienced enough in our own ongoing beginning).

In the word maranatha (1Cor16:22b) we have for us a recommended mantra that is consistent in spirit and function to Isaacs’ recommended phrase. The Aramaic ‘maranatha’ means ‘Oh Lord, come!’ or ‘Our Lord comes!’. It too can be used throughout the day in the same way Isaac recommends. It is one more tool of goodness and hope that we can practice with.

All who are guided by the Spirit of God are children of God; for you did not receive a spirit of slavery to bring you back into fear; you received the Spirit of adoption. Whenever we cry out, 'Abba, Father!' that very Spirit is joining with our spirit to bear witness that we are children of God. And if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, provided that we share his suffering, so as to share his glory. (Romans 8:14-17, RNJB)

1. I am distressed by the pangs of anger, covetousness and sadness and compelled to interrupt the peaceful state that was established and dear to me – lest I be carried off into the bitterness of gall by a raging perturbation [distress], I must cry out with groans from my inner being: “O God, come to my aid; O Lord make hast to help me”. (Abba Isaac, Conferences 10(10)). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)