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

January 21, May 22, September 21

*Listen readily to holy reading, and devote yourself often to prayer. Every day with tears and sighs confess your past sins to God in prayer and change from these evil ways in the future. “Do not gratify the promptings of the flesh” (Gal 5:6); hate the urgings of self-will. Obey the orders of the abbot unreservedly, even if their own conduct – which God forbid – be at odds with what they say. Remember the teachings of the Lord: “Do what they say, not what they do” (Matt 23:3).*

*Do not aspire to be called holy before you really are, but first be holy that you may more truly be called so. Live by God’s commandments everyday; treasure chastity, harbour neither hatred nor jealousy of anyone; and do nothing out of envy. Do not love quarrelling; shun arrogance. Respect the elders and love the young. Pray for your enemies out of love for Christ. If you have a dispute with someone, make peace with them before the sun goes down.*

*And finally, never lose hope in God’s mercy.*

*These, then, are the tools of the spiritual craft. When we have used them without ceasing day and night and have returned them on judgement day, our wages will be the reward the Lord has promised: “What the eye has not seen nor the ear heard, God has prepared for those who love him” (1Cor 2:9).*

*The workshop where we are to toil faithfully at all these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community.*

To practice a craft is not to live an ideal. A craft is a practice. Practicing a craft is to grow in it. This growth is lifelong. Artists of every kind show us that a craft is never perfected. We are always learning, always developing.

In community we come to understand through experience that everything done to grow in love is part of the spiritual craft. Everything. This includes all the times we fail. Failure is a part of growth, perhaps the most important part. Falling short never fails to elicit divine compassion. In community we have the chance to become this compassion, both for ourselves and each other. To be the compassion of Jesus on earth for the world is the flowering of our craft. As we grow in this, we are humbled and amazed to know that God’s mercy is always there. Always.

The tools, then, are tools of grace. However, we need to be watchful because the practice can easily become an activity of egoic will. It can become forced; become an anxious performance. Rather than a grace-full letting go, a learning to co-operate, we can be fooled into believing that we are not intrinsically good enough.

Having a practice of silence at the heart of our community’s spiritual craft is vital if we are not to be unduly influenced by performance anxiety. In meditation, energy that might otherwise be devoted to the evaluation of performance has a chance to be shaped and influenced by the God-life. Here there is a graced movement into ego-less-ness. Our centre of gravity shifts from self-consciousness to simple being. This counters the tendency of ego to possess and influence the tools of the craft. In this way, meditation is a practice that informs the spirit of the craft.

Practising the spiritual craft is the slow transformation of all our selfish promptings and urgings. These can have their roots in the trauma of life. As we practice the craft together this trauma rises. In a loving, committed, and mature community this trauma has a chance to be experienced, loved, and released. As we accept the care of others, we realise anew that self-care need not be self-centred.

It can be good, then, that a loving and committed community be enclosed. To be enclosed is not about being self-centred – this is inconsistent with the life of maturing human love. Enclosure in this sense is about the maintenance and protection of community as a safe harbour with healthy boundaries. Any community needs this safety and stability if trauma is to be loved and released. Whatever our community might be – the enclosure of marriage and committed relationship, of family, formal religious life, the enclosure of friendship, of intentional community – all can help healing. A healthy boundary has with it a sense of safety that is faithful to the ways we can uniquely love each other. Enclosure of this kind shapes a community in which it is safe to practice the spiritual craft.

But if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall live with him too, knowing that Christ once raised from the dead will never die again. Death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died, he died to sin, and the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, you must reckon yourselves dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 6:8-11, RNJB)