



ABIDING

The Archbishop of Canterbury's
LENT BOOK 2013

BEN QUASH

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For my Godchildren,
with love and gratitude

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FOREWORD BY THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

This is a reflection on where we find our centre of gravity. Ben Quash diagnoses with great sensitivity the different ways in which we can misunderstand our need for continuity and security – by resorting to inflexible habits or expectations, by looking for unchanging landmarks in a world where things naturally change, and equally by locating what really matters in an all-powerful individual will that ought to be able to mould reality according to its agenda. Against all this, he sets the habits of patience, the willingness to learn and be changed, the readiness to be someone else's guest and dependent, the renouncing of heroic fantasies in favour of ordinary sense and sensitivity and readiness to respond generously. This is a book about learning to inhabit your body and your history without resentment; it is also about inhabiting, steadily and mindfully, the

daily disciplines of exposing yourself to the Bible and the rhythms of liturgical prayer. It celebrates the backgrounds and contexts we don't choose. It focuses our attention on attention itself, the kind of patient looking that Annie Dillard described, in the title of a famous book, as *Teaching a Stone to Talk*.

It is written with clarity and openness, introducing us to a good deal of painful personal experience without any jarring note of self-dramatising, and showing a wide range of interest in contemporary culture. Ben demonstrates very plainly the importance to Christian reflection of the riches found in modern fiction and film. At the same time, we are introduced to some of the major figures of the classical Christian tradition. St Benedict and his Rule feature prominently; but we also have a chance to become acquainted with a much less well-known figure from the fourth century, Macrina, sister of bishops and theologians who regarded her as their teacher and inspiration, the account of whose death is the subject of some of the most searching pages here.

Ben Quash has succeeded in holding together the uneasy and often bewildering plurality of the

Foreword by the Archbishop of Canterbury

modern heart or mind with the depths of the tradition he inherits, both the Anglican inheritance and the wider legacy of early and mediaeval Christian thought and prayer. In this way he himself models the ‘abiding’, the letting-yourself-be-centred, that he analyses with such vividness and humanity. This is a large meditation in a small space – appropriate for us who live immortally in the local space of a fragile body.

+Rowan Cantuar

NOTE TO READERS

There is no obligation to read the chapters in this book in any particular order, or even, of course, to read them all. Each of them ought to make sense read on its own, even though some chapters have passing references to points or examples from other chapters. However, in constructing the book I have also had in mind the needs of individuals, groups or congregations who might want to read it in a systematic way during the weeks of Lent 2013. If you do want to use the book in this way, the approach most in line with its structure would be to read chapter 1, 'Abiding in Body', in the days between Ash Wednesday and the First Sunday of Lent; to read chapter 2, 'Abiding in Mind', in the week following the First Sunday of Lent, and then to read one chapter per week. This should mean that chapter 7, 'The Peace that Abides', will be read in the week following Passion Sunday. The short epilogue, 'Who May Abide?', can either be read at the same time as chapter 7, as a sort of extension of it (for those who will be quite busy enough as it is during Holy Week), or it can be reserved for Holy Week itself.

INTRODUCTION

A *bid*ing is not a word we have much use for in ordinary conversation. You wouldn't say, for example, 'oh, just abide here for a minute while I pop into the newsagents', or, 'she abode with me until the train arrived'. It is a word more suited to Victorian hymnody, along with phrases like 'fast falls the eventide'.

But it is not a word we can easily find substitutes for either, because 'wait' or 'stick around' don't quite catch it. Abiding has more the sense of a full, personal commitment. It expresses a quality of solidarity which just waiting would never convey; something like the widowed Ruth's wonderful words to her mother-in-law:

Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you! (Ruth 1.16-17)

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It is often remarked, lamentingly, that there is a strong tendency in our world not to *persevere* very much any more, and perhaps that is one of the reasons why the word ‘abide’ is dropping out of use. Various aspects of modern life contribute to the difficulty. Employment contracts tend to be temporary (meaning we don’t feel deep personal loyalty to our employers or the institutions we belong to). The language of ‘flexibility’ has an unprecedentedly honoured place in the panoply of modern social virtues. And our deficiencies, our weaknesses, our wounds or our mistakes tend to be cover-uppable in a culture where we can select and present an image of ourselves and change it at will, denying that the self we *have been* has any real continuity with the self we are *now*.

The challenge of finding the right ways to be an abider in such a world is huge. It’s the challenge of finding the source from which our life flows, the spring of our own being, the grain with which we are meant to live, and which it damages us to go against. It means being part of communities for whom ‘abiding’ is a watchword – above all, for Christians, the Church.

This book is intended to help Christians think about those challenges, and how best to live lives that address – with boldness and imagination – the difficulties of abiding under the very particular pressures of today’s world.

But it is also a book that wants to complicate its main category a little. Because Christian abiding is not (i) the same as keeping things just as they always have been, nor is it always (ii) the same as sheer staying power.

Flexibility may be over-prized in contemporary capitalist culture, but a near cousin of the virtue of perseverance is *stubbornness*, and that would be no very welcome alternative to flexibility in a Christian perspective. In the language of the Bible, ‘wicked’ often also implies ‘stiff-necked’.¹

It may be tempting to lament a decline in modern people’s power of abiding, but under the surface most people are still, in the end, quite conservative. They like the things they know; they like their routines; they like their home environments. In such instincts we can see that an inclination to abide is perhaps as strong in people as ever. But this is not exactly the Christian abiding

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that Jesus modelled for his first followers, when he lived with nowhere to lay his head, and asked them to leave everything and follow him. There is something strange and unsettling for the more conservatively-minded person about Jesus's message of discontinuity and dispossession.

On the other hand, he wasn't recommending the spiritual equivalent of extreme 'wilderness survival' either. Those who feel claustrophobic when faced with the conservatism that just wants to maintain the status quo can be tempted to a radical rupture with the existing order of things which is – often – a sort of self-assertion. They carve out their own path; they do it their way, through thick and thin. *Their* form of abiding is their *staying power*. But this steely exercise of the individual will is not what Jesus taught any more than inertia is. He asked people to surrender their wills, to recognize their dependencies, and above all to exchange individual autonomy for 'eccentric existence'² – life in, with, and through others, in the community of the Church.

So there is a conundrum at the heart of this book, which I hope will generate some energy for Christian thinking and also for Christian living. It

is between the centrality to the Christian outlook of order, consistency and continuity, on the one hand, and the equal centrality of relinquishment, openness and change, on the other. There is no doubt that Christians are called to abide as Jesus abides, who in his abiding shows us how to relate well to God. But this abiding won't be the achievement of the solitary will, and it will take us off the edges of our familiar maps and into uncharted territories where we find that abiding (when it is *abiding-in-God*) will also mean transformation and relationships we cannot wholly control.

Each of the book's chapters begins by introducing a character to the reader. Some of these are fictional and some are historical. The hope in introducing them is that they will offer a vivid way into some of the themes that the chapter will go on to explore (usually by illustrating some form of abiding, though occasionally by being a negative image of it), and that they will be guardians against the tendency theology sometimes has to become too concept-driven and dry.

Literature, film and other forms of the arts are instructors in how to make ideas *thoroughly*

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incarnate, to echo an insight of the novelist George Eliot,³ and if Christian theology has failed to do the same in the way it presents *its* ideas, it has failed absolutely. (This is, incidentally, one of the reasons why theology's relationship with the arts needs to be nurtured and prized.) I hope these characters are not a source of irritation, and that (if you haven't already) you enjoy meeting them.

At the end of each chapter there is a 'Coda' that suggests a topic of reflection and relates it to a text from one of the readings set in the Common Worship lectionary for one of the weeks between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday.

Rowan Williams, who commissioned this book, is one of the best examples I know of what it means to abide; with profound patience he has dwelt with and in a Church that has been finding it hard to abide with itself, and in its concern with issues of unity, catholicity and apostolicity he has been a constant reminder to it of its call to holiness. I am enduringly grateful for him, for his example, and for his invitation to write this book.

I should like to acknowledge the many people – family and friends and colleagues – whose love,

insight and forbearance provided the conditions without which this book could not have been produced. I should especially like to acknowledge some people with whom I have an abiding relationship in the communion of the Church. It is a precious relationship that I did not get by some contract or by any process of nature, but by grace:

Springing from the freedom
Of the daring, trusting spirit...⁴

They are Harry Carleton Paget, Eleanor Dowler, Daniel Ford, Lucy Heaton, Eleanor Kashouris, Miranda Musson, Isabel Shephard, Anna Wilson, and Martha Zemmrich. I thank God for them and the many things I receive from them.

I
ABIDING IN BODY

The character with whom I want to begin this chapter is a monk. He lived from around 480 to 547 AD in central and then in southern Italy. He was so hugely admired by Gregory I, who was Pope some 50 years after he died, that Gregory wrote a tribute to him, based on the recollections of other monks who had known him. It may not meet today's expectations of what a biography should be, but it is the earliest account of that monk's disciplined but humane life that we have to go on, and it permits us to conjure him up as a very young man of about 20, quitting his studies in Rome and setting off into mountainous country to embrace the vocation of a hermit.

He chose a cave at the head of a valley with a lake in it. We can picture him picking his way along the valley's steep sides, past the ruins of ancient Roman glories: a palace that had once been Nero's, a grand complex of baths, and a 25-arch bridge connecting them. Amidst the debris of a

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world order that had collapsed, he was willing to start building again. Some of the words set by the lectionary for reading on Ash Wednesday capture what might have been this monk's hope. They are God's words to the Jewish exiles returning to Jerusalem from Babylon: 'your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in' (Isaiah 58.12).

The monk was, of course, Benedict – later St Benedict – whose three years in that cave would prepare him for a life founding and living in small communities under a shared rule of life.

Benedict would also in time, and by a much later Pope, be named patron saint and protector of Europe. It could do with his patronage now. As I am writing this, the turmoil in the Eurozone threatens the stability of the world economy yet again. It seems likely that we are witnessing the beginning of a significant decline in the influence, economic status, and quality of life of Western European countries – if not of the West more widely. The sorts of political instability that may follow such a decline are hard to predict, but are

certain to be considerable. Meanwhile, big global flows of population (already a volatile feature of our world) look likely to continue, and these too create their own kinds of instability.

Forces and movements on this scale can sometimes seem very far removed from the local spaces in which human beings try to live meaningfully, yet their effects can rip devastatingly through people's lives. The circumstances that determine how much someone's pension will be worth in five years' time are as unpredictable and as out of our control as the strains of new virus that seem able to pop up in any corner of the world at any moment and find their way to any doorstep in a matter of weeks.

How can stable lives be lived in a world like this? This is where the figure of Benedict continues to be instructive, for it was a similar question that he faced 1500 years ago. As the ruins he looked down upon from his cave would have proclaimed daily, *his* Europe was in a state of collapse, as an old order (that of the Christian Roman Empire) gave way to a fragmented and dangerous new one. The flows of population tended to be violent ones, as warlike tribes swept southwards across

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Italy destroying much of what was in their path (including – after his death – the monastery that Benedict would eventually found at Monte Cassino). There was precipitous economic decline in Benedict's lifetime. Plague was a constant threat and poverty was a daily presence.

Benedict's *Rule* – modelled on some existing patterns of monastic life that already had a long pedigree in both the western and the eastern Church, but adding some special ingredients of his own – was his hopeful and constructive response to the uncertainties of his time. It was to become the most influential paradigm of monastic living there has ever been. Indeed, as one admirer remarks, it is 'surely the oldest written constitution under which twentieth-century men and women are still living'.¹

It's a familiar fact that the vows under which most monks and nuns live are the threefold ones of poverty, chastity and obedience – and Benedict's monks certainly lived lives in which all these three disciplines would have been very central. But the actual *vows* they made (and that Benedictines today still make) were obedience, conversion, and *stability*. The vow of stability requires professed