

ST. BENEDICT

If after this homily you decide it was “for the birds,” at least in one sense you’d be right, for I am going to focus on birds, specifically on one particular species. In our festal Vespers binder, the sheet with a tab for today’s feast has the image of a dark bird with something round in its beak. Why this? Well, as many of you already know, this image was chosen because of an incident in the life of St. Benedict as recounted by St. Gregory the Great. As regrettably happened several times in Benedict’s life, others became envious of his holiness, in one instance a priest named Florentius who, under the guise of friendship, gave the saint a loaf of poisoned bread, hoping thereby to get rid of him once and for all. Even though aware of the poison, Benedict thanked the priest for the gift but afterwards told a raven that regularly came out of the nearby woods to receive food from the saint to fly away with the loaf and drop it where no one would ever find it. At first the bird was reluctant even to touch the poisoned loaf, but eventually it obeyed, afterwards returning to receive its usual meal. This story may not be the best-known of all those in Gregory’s life of the saint, but it was striking enough to lead many artists to draw or paint Benedict with a raven standing at his feet.

Why I bring this up will become clear by looking at some things said about ravens in the Bible. The first time the bird is mentioned there is in the Book of Genesis, in the account of Noah and the ark. When the deluge had ended and the waters had so diminished that the ark had come to rest on a mountaintop, we read that Noah opened the hatch and released a raven, which flew around until the waters had dried up. He later released a dove, which returned once because it could find no place to rest and then returned a second time with an olive branch in its bill, letting Noah know that it was now about time to safely leave the ark. In the ancient Jewish document known as the Babylonian Talmud, the rabbis commented on this passage about the raven in an interesting way. They have the raven complaining bitterly to Noah about being the first to be sent out from the safety of the ark. It says, “Of all the birds that you have here, you are

sending none but me!” to which Noah petulantly replies that the world has no need of a raven anyway, for it is among the animals proscribed as unclean and therefore fit for neither food nor sacrifice. But the account proceeds to show that God was more compassionate toward the raven than was Noah. The key lines go like this:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Noah: “Take the raven back, because the world will need it in the future.” “When?” asked Noah. The Holy One replied: ... “A righteous man will arise and dry up the world, and I will cause him to have need of the ravens, as it is written, ‘And the ravens brought him bread and flesh.’”

That reference is to Elijah in the First Book of Kings, where the prophet, after accurately predicting a drought to King Ahab, is told by God to go to a wadi east of the Jordan River, where ravens would bring him bread and meat every morning and every evening, as indeed they did.

Now is there anything we can learn from these passages, strange though they be, complete with a talking bird and a crabby shipwright? I think there is, and it was nicely brought out in a recent article by a Benedictine sister I know, a convert from Judaism who is equally well-versed in Talmudic lore and in the wisdom of our monastic tradition. Sister Sarah Schwartzberg writes that despite Noah’s disgruntlement that the raven, unlike the dove, did not return to let him know when vegetation was again available on earth, with its later mission to feed the prophet Elijah

the raven was given a second chance. It succeeded where it had failed before and was destined to perform great deeds.

[So, too,] God gives us all a second chance. [As Psalm 86 insists, God is] “good and forgiving, most merciful to all who call on you.” Jesus forgives the woman caught in adultery and tells her: “Go, and from now on do not sin any more” (Jn 8:11). Following the Gospel, Benedict gives those who sin a second chance. In chapter 23 of his Rule, a disobedient monk is to be warned privately the first time. If necessary, he is warned a second time. If he still fails to change his behavior, he is given a public rebuke. He is disciplined [by excommunication or stripes] only if he fails to amend after three warnings....

[Thus,] the ravens that fed Elijah and that came to Benedict’s aid teach us the importance of giving ourselves and others a second chance. We learn from them that, with God’s grace, we can get up again after we have fallen, that we can keep trying even after we have failed, that we can hope for success. We have only to trust in God’s love.¹

Through the example and intercession of our holy father Benedict and through the power of this morning’s Eucharist, may we take this teaching to heart and be persons marked by a forgiving spirit, whether toward ourselves or others.

1 Sr. Sarah Schwartzberg, O.S.B., "St. Benedict and the Raven," *Spirit and Life* 110, no. 2 (July-Aug. 2014), 15.