



Newsletter

December – January 2026

On Listening Attentively

“Obsculta … et inclina aurem cordis tui”.

Thus begins the Little Rule of St Benedict. It has rung true of my first two months at St Benedict's Centre. “Listen attentively”- I have certainly sat down and listened to many of the people who have contributed to the life of the Centre and those who continue to do so, including our dedicated team of volunteers. The identity of the Centre is, after all, built on partnerships and community: with the Abbey community, with the Diocese, and with St Augustine's College. It is indeed ‘A Place Apart’ for growth in prayer, discernment and discipleship; for Christian learning and equipping for ministry of all kinds, all permeated by the Benedictine ethos and aura of this place steeped in centuries of prayer.

“Listen attentively” to the other person, to what is said and not said, with the analytic mind and, as Benedict would lead us: “incline the ear of your heart”. It reminds me of what is articulated in the Eastern Christian tradition: “I will remind you of only one thing: one must descend with the mind into the heart, and there stand before the face of the Lord, ever present, all seeing within you.” (Theophan the Recluse). That inclining of the ear of the heart speaks of the attentiveness of

spiritual listening, which Christians call 'discernment'. One inclines the ear of the heart so as to listen attentively to God's will, not the latest fad or fashion, not personal or group agendas. The inclining of the ear of the heart has made me attentive to the wonderful things that are already flourishing on this site: the witness of the Abbey community, living out sacrificially a life dedicated to God in prayer and community; the Quiet Days; the formation and training. The ear of the heart also inspires me to believe that in God's abundance there is much more unrealised potential for the Centre and the site as a whole – Abbey, Centre, College and the Pilsden Community, working together, flourishing together. It is impossible not to be infused with the spiritual excitement of Benedict, when he writes in the Prologue to the Rule:

"Let us open our eyes to the deifying light,
let us hear with attentive ears
the warning which the divine voice cries daily to us...
'Run while you have the light of life,
lest the darkness of death overtake you'" (John 12:35).

Ultimately, this running, this urgency is not fuelled by fear, but delight in God's love, light and creativity.

We look forward to our programme of the months ahead that includes Advent, Christmas and Epiphany. Our Advent Quiet Day on 4th December will be led by Canon Dr Neville Emslie, who is the Director of Mission and Ministry in the Diocese of Canterbury, and Tutor of Mission and Evangelism at St Augustine's College. He will be exploring the concept of emotional intelligence, shaped by Scripture and Christian practice. The Season of Waiting, Advent, is also a time when God is creatively at work. And so experienced Spiritual Director and Art Therapist, Mary Chamberlin will lead one of our Creative Days on 13th December, during which participants are invited to channel their creative response to God who has come, is coming and will come.

In the new year we start the programme on the 10th January with a Study Day on 14th century English mystic and anchorite, Julian of Norwich, led by Canon Dr Emma Pennington. Emma is Canon Missioner at Canterbury Cathedral and Tutor in Contemporary Spirituality at St Augustine's College. Dr Susanne Carlsson, Diocese of Rochester's Spirituality Adviser, will be leading a Prayer Pack training day on 26th January, for those wishing to nurture the growth of prayer in their communities. Finally, Mark Oakley, Dean of Southwark Cathedral and author of 'The Collage of God' and 'The Splash of Words' will lead our Epiphany Quiet Day on 31st January.

We look forward to welcoming you to one or more of these events, or at another meeting or individual study/rest/reflection day.

With thanks to staff, our team of volunteers, to Bishop Adrian and the Trustees, at the end of 2025 for keeping St Benedict's Centre a place of encounter with God and learning His way with the ear of the heart.

Wishing you a Blessed Christmas and fruitful New Year,

Fr Richard Fermer

The Rev'd Dr. Richard Fermer
Director of the St Benedict's Centre
West Malling



Events coming up

Advent Quiet Day

Thursday 4th Dec, 9.30 for 10am-3pm



Led by Canon Dr Neville Emslie, drawing on his research and the characters of the Infancy Narrative in the Gospel of Matthew, we will be invited to explore emotional intelligence as a spiritual and theological resource for ministry and discipleship.

Cost: £25

Creative Reflection Day

Saturday 13th December 9.30 for 10am-3pm

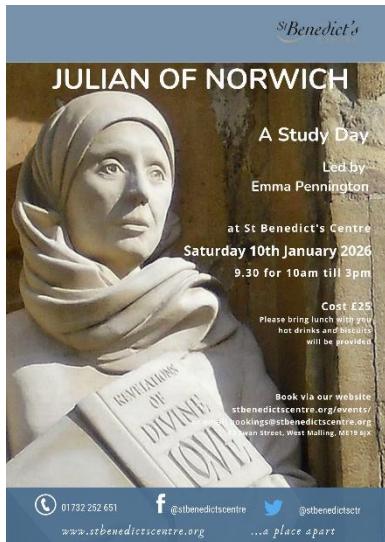


Led by experienced Spiritual Director and Art Therapist Mary Chamberlin, 'Unwrapping Advent' seeks to enable the expectant promise of Advent to be reclaimed, framed by Ignatian ways of praying.

Art materials are provided to aid a visual response, but previous experience of art making is not necessary. Cost: £25

Study Day: Julian of Norwich

Saturday 10th January 9.30 for 10am-3pm

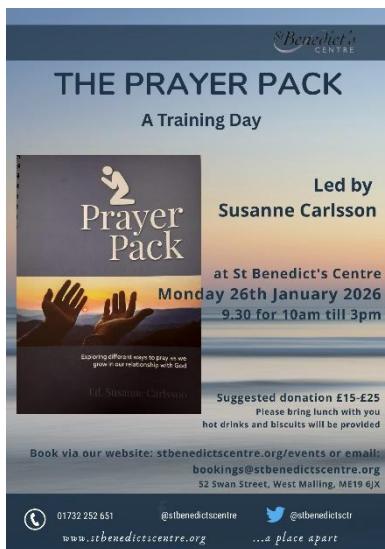


This study day led by Canon Dr Emma Pennington will introduce us to the content of chapter 51, the longest in her *Revelations of Divine Love*, exploring the many layers of meaning that lie within it. We will ponder the question whether Julian was able to reconcile her revelation with the teaching of holy church on sin and blame.

Cost: £25

Prayer Pack Training Day

Monday 26th January 9.30 for 10am-3pm



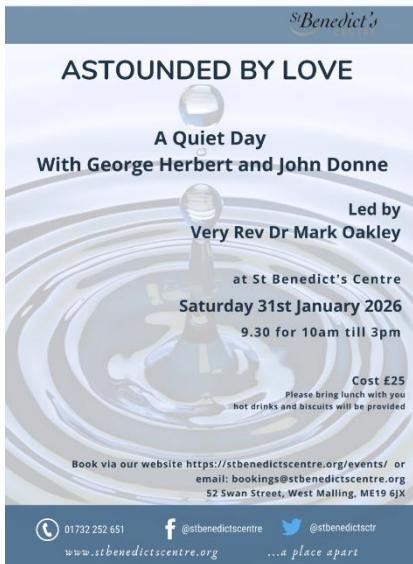
Dr Susanne Carlsson will provide training on how to use the Prayer Pack, which explores twelve different ways of praying.

Come and learn how to use it in your specific setting and develop skills in helping others pray, using these different ways of praying.

Cost: Donation £15-£25

Quiet Day: Astounded by Love

Saturday 31st January 9.30 for 10am-3pm



Very Rev'd Dr Mark Oakley, Dean of Southwark, will guide us through the poetry of Donne, Herbert and a few others, reminding us in the words and silence of the day that poetry is indeed the native language of faith.

Mark is author of several books on theology and poetry, including the 'Splash of Words', and a popular speaker. He is a regular columnist for the Church Times and The Tablet and frequently broadcasts on BBC Radio 4.

Cost: £25

Costs/Donations include drinks and biscuits, but please bring your own lunch.

Please book your place and/or one of our quiet study rooms via our website: <https://stbenedictscentre.org/> where you can also check all event information and updates. Alternatively contact us via email: bookings@stbenedictscentre.org



Season's greetings and blessings
and a happy New Year from all at St Benedict's!



Reflection for the Season: The Feast of Humility by the Rev'd Dr. Richard Fermer, Director of St Benedict's

“[T]hough he [Christ Jesus] as in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself.” (Philippians 2.6 -8a)

This poetic hymn of Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles roots the Incarnation that we are to celebrate at Christmas in the ‘descent’ of the self-emptying and humility of Christ. About three hundred years later Athanasius of Alexandria in his treatise ‘On the Incarnation’, was to write of the salvific purpose of that descent: “God became man so that man might become god [share in God’s life]” (54:3), descending so that we may ascend. Then, around another one hundred fifty years later, Benedict, once a hermit in Subiaco, in central Italy, had found himself called into community life, and in Chapter 7 of his ‘Little Rule’ guiding that community, writes of our spiritual journey:

“By that descent and ascent
we must surely understand nothing else than this,
that we descend by self-exaltation and ascend by humility.
And the ladder thus set up is our life in the world,
which the Lord raises up to heaven if our heart is humbled.”
Benedict would have us climb Jacob’s Ladder (Gen.28.12), but the paradox is that we climb through the descent of humility: surrendering the ego, surrendering to God, being open to God’s grace.

In the West, Christmas can be so associated with excess and gratification - whether it be eating and drinking, the gaudy, flashing

lights or the pressures of shopping for the right presents - that we forget that it is first and foremost a Feast of Humility. Did not Mary sing of that as she received confirmation that she was the favoured one to bear God's Son: "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly." (Luke 1.52) There is the Christ-Child in all lowliness: "[she] wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2.7) – an icon of humility in this Feast of Humility.

How may our balance be restored? By practicing humility, as Benedict says. It begins with returning our focus to God and not on ourselves, the presence of God, who permeates all things, who looks at the littleness of His creatures with love, who descends that we might ascend. Aware of God's presence and His love, we are also aware of our littleness and selfishness and so are drawn deeper into His call to conversion of life. It is the humility of Paul's discovery that there is something greater than my own will, my own life even: "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." (Galatians 2.20). Jesus modelled that for us by His obedience to the Father - "not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22.42) – and the glorious mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son (John 14.11). Throughout this chapter of the Rule, it is the humility of putting the other first.

Benedict ends by saying that these little acts of self-renunciation, which require patience and perseverance, that lead us in the way of humility, ends in "the perfect love of God 'which casts out fear'" (1 Jn 4:18)". It is a purification of our motivation, inspired by God's love, that through grace and the growing habit of humility, flows through us, so that, as a carol sings: "What can I give him// Poor as I am?// ... Give my heart." The way of humility leads us to adoration before the Christ-Child of the manger, the altar of the Feast of Humility.

