It is all about love, and it is all about humility.

Whether we are talking about rounding off this great millennium celebration of the founding of our Benedictine Abbey – after an extraordinary year of engagement and celebration, and no less a celebration for being delayed, as the remarkable Edmund lecture and spectacular light show last night testified;

or whether we are celebrating the Feast of St Edmund, king of East Anglia who died at the hand of the Viking invaders on this day, November 20th, 869 and was patron of the Abbey and so of our cathedral by virtue of this being the location of his shrine;

or whether we are celebrating the Feast of Christ the King, a feast instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925 in response to the rising fascism, national socialism, and communism and the associated rise of secularism after the Great War, and which feast day moved to this Sunday, the last before Advent, in 1969 by Paul VI

– all of these we are doing today and whether we are focussed on one or on all three, they are about love and about humility.

One of the gifts of this past year of celebration of the Abbey’s millennium, a gift behind the splendour of services and conferences, speeches and lightshows, has been the rediscovery – I will put it as strongly as that – the rediscovery of the Rule of St Benedict that shaped the abbey we commemorate. A Rule that has in subtle and more tangible ways, shaped western society since Benedict set it down in the early sixth century. You may have participated in that rediscovery by joining in the “Run with Joy” course which I hope those of you who haven’t will have a chance to do next year.

The cathedral will perpetuate that engagement by now offering a daily reading of a portion of the Rule, at every evensong, as any Benedictine house would do, and the Chapter have engaged with looking at how their life and the life of the cathedral can be more shaped by the Rule.

And when you read and study the Rule, which is really one form of the Gospel in practice, you see it is about love and humility. How to live lovingly and humbly in every moment and with everyone.
Love for St Benedict is connected to obedience, not a slavish following of imposed direction but, as the word “obedience” really means, a loving attention to others, to their needs and wants, to who they are.

In our highly self-centred society that is hard to hear, but it is the truth that God calls each of us to, to love one another as he loves us, to love our neighbour as ourselves. And we do so because we see God in one another.

So in our work, our home, our daily lives, we put aside our concerns, we attend to the concerns, the ideas, the hopes of others, and as our default setting, have our attention directed outside of ourselves.

So love, exercised in our attention to each other, becomes our guide, our way, our manner, our style. And that, Benedict declares, is the first step to humility, which, he says, “comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all” (RB 5.2).

Benedict wrote his Rule when the Roman Empire was in decline, with a deteriorating economy, pervading social injustice and the rich getting richer and the poor poorer. We may hear echoes in our own age.

And in that context, humility is not a demeaned sense of ourselves, but a proper sense of ourselves, of our place in the universe, our place in relationship with one another, neither asserting, nor withdrawing, but being ourselves as ones who pay attention to others.

And this way of love and humility is not a way just for our Sunday best, or just in our families or parts of our families, or in certain corners of our life where it feels safe to take the risk. Benedict after all wrote a Rule to be lived in communities for every moment of the day and night.

I had the privilege to participate recently to participate in an extraordinary two day gathering of about 20 people – the others all senior figures in business, sport, the military, government, public services, charities – a remarkable mix of the chairs of this enterprise or the chief executive of that.
You may well ask, as I did, what on earth was I doing there? But I learned a huge amount about them and about myself. We quickly established levels of trust and honesty, and we were there to share our own challenges in our roles, and to learn from the insights of others from quite different perspectives.

And what emerged as the consistent themes of those leaders wrestling with huge challenges across a range of sectors? Love and humility, and that was the language they used.

None of them could do what they were doing if they did not love the purpose with which they had been entrusted, and the people with whom they served. And none of them could do what they were doing without the humility of knowing they are not doing it alone and need to listen, to pay attention to, others. There was nothing if you like soft about this either – it was about being real, really real. Love and humility in practice, and Benedict would have recognised it.

It is about love and humility.

We don’t know what, if anything, Edmund knew of Benedict’s Rule, but he would have known of small monastic communities in East Anglia. And he knew the Gospel that shaped both him and those communities and Benedict. The tradition that we have of Edmund, of his martyrdom at the hands of the Vikings for refusing to renounce his people and his faith in Christ, that tradition was given us by a Benedictine monk, Abbo of Fleury, a century after Edmund’s death.

And whatever the actual events of Edmund’s demise, it is the tradition that captured hearts and devotion as it still does today, as we see in the fabulous light show. And it captures hearts and devotion because - it is about love and humility.

For Edmund it was his love of Christ and his love of his people. His humility comes in his sacrifice – humility is always marked by sacrifice – the willingness to let go of everything for the sake of others, even to let go of life itself.

Abbo of Fleury describes Edmund in this way. “To all he was affable and winning in speech, and distinguished by a captivating modesty; and he dwelt among his contemporaries with admirable kindness, though he was their lord, and without any touch of haughtiness or pride.” (Abbo, Passio, III). Echoes of our first reading from Proverbs.

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That description, using the words affable, modesty, without pride, paints a picture of a king very different from what Abbo’s contemporaries might have conjured up when they thought of kings. And that was of course intentional, for he was simply underlining that truth again, that what really matters, what really makes a difference are love and humility.

Which is why we continue to celebrate Edmund today – an exemplar of Christian love and humility in service of his Lord and his people. It is why indeed those very qualities have been singled out over and over again of Her Late Majesty in her seventy years and more of devoted service to her Lord and her people.

So whether our focus is the Abbey celebrations, or St Edmund, the orientation and intent is the same, pointing us to Christ who is not only the exemplar of love and humility but reveals that this is the character of God. The way of God with creation and with God’s creatures is love and humility. Imagine – a God who does not impose, but cares, attends to, makes space for us.

And here in our Gospel reading we see this character, this manner of kingship, revealed on the cross, where love and humility are the only reasons for him being there and it is love and humility that agonisingly hold him there. The religious leaders, the soldiers, the impenitent thief scoff at him, mock him and deride him to come down, to save himself, and them. They do not realise – do not yet realise – that he is saving them, by not saving himself. That is the way of love and humility.

In my clearer moments I realise this, and in other moments I forget. Perhaps we all do. But this way is the only way, even though it seems the hardest way. This is the journey we are all on, to follow the way of love and humility. That is the way of truthfulness, of honesty, of self-forgetting, of straightforwardly living for others. It is the only way we growing closer to God.

Benedict and Edmund lived this way. And when we gather here for the eucharist we are reminded that it is God’s way to be with us and for us through Christ – who with love and humility allows himself literally to be given into our hands.

And this is a journey we begin all over again next week in earnest as we approach the mystery of the word becoming flesh, and the infant in the manger, who became so because he is only about love and humility. Thanks be to God.