

Some reflections on the Beatitudes

I was moved recently by a young man who comments on Japanese animation for a living when his conversation on a YouTube video turned to his experiences as an adolescent boy and as a young man, for a week and a month respectively, as a Buddhist monk. He spoke of what he had learned about life and how to live it. And I asked myself the question, do we in the Church take as seriously the quest for holiness, the quest for finding our true humanity in God? We remember at this time the saints who have gone before us. But do we remember that Christ has called us onto the same path which they trod in his steps. The Beatitudes of Matthew's Gospel, I believe, give us powerful teaching on which to reflect on how and where we are on that path, the way of Christ, the road which the saints have walked before us.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

Right at the beginning of what is the greatest extended piece of Jesus's teaching in any of the four gospels - Matthew's Sermon on the Mount - Jesus teaches where God's blessing will be found.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

What does it mean to be “poor in spirit”? I think it means to know that you are no better - though no worse than anyone else; that you're in no position to deem yourself 'good' or 'virtuous' or to look down on or sit in judgement on anyone else. More positively it means to know that, like everyone else, you are dependent upon God and God's grace for your creation, but also for your being loved, forgiven and held. That, perhaps counter-intuitively, is the beginning of the Christian path to sainthood.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

This teaching is rightly used at the beginning of the Funeral Service to speak of God's strong embrace of those who are grieving and of the hope of eternal life. But I believe it has a broader meaning. Blessed are those who look honestly at humanity in all its cruelty, violence and (often self-inflicted) pain, its sorrows, its injustices and inequalities - and weep. Blessed are those who mourn over what humanity does to itself and to the rest of life on the planet. But those tears are ones not of insoluble grief without hope: these are tears which speak of hope because we have faith in a God who has a better, kinder, more just and loving vision for his children.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

For many years I fought shy of the word 'meek'. It seemed somehow to indicate weakness. But I think to be 'meek' is actually to be very strong. I think it means to be so strong in your faith that goodness, compassion, kindness, mercy and love are enough - because they are of God - that you forego all assertion of worldly power, bullying, manipulation and control. To live solely by the power of love actually requires great strength of character - and great faith.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

In considering Christ's blessing upon those who mourn we spoke of a God who has a better, kinder, more just and loving vision for his children. Here we hear of his blessing on those who hunger and thirst - who really yearn - for that vision to be fulfilled, for the Kingdom to come. We cannot rest content or be resigned to the way the world is. Christian holiness is not about escape from the world but in myriad different ways with a concern for a kinder, juster, more compassionate and loving world. The tears of the mourning become the quiet, humble resolve of those who yearn that things might yet be different.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

The poor in spirit know their need for God’s grace - for God’s mercy and forgiveness, for God’s love. And in that deep self-knowledge and in thankfulness, by God’s grace they begin to see others with the same mercy and compassion they have received from God in Christ. They know their need of God’s grace. Now they begin to look upon others with the same mercy they have themselves received. That doesn’t mean they don’t condemn evil done. But they see the world and other people in all our confusion with eyes not of judgement or them-against-us but a humanity in constant need of mercy, compassion, forgiveness, healing and restoration.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

I really struggle with this one. I have heart which seems to want to go in many different directions at once, adventurously and sometimes addictively tossed to and fro by what comes its way. Blessed are those whose hearts are focussed on the love of God and of neighbour first and foremost, whose hearts are guided at all times by the love of God. I have met people like that - they, I believe, have seen God before ever they reach heaven. I pray for the grace - and self-control - to learn to be one of them.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

The meek - those who trust in the power of kindness, compassion, mercy and love to be enough, with strength and resolve - and who yearn for a better, kinder, more just and compassionate humanity and world - will be those who bring true peace. That doesn’t mean a turning away from seeking justice - in relationships, in communities, societies and the world - which just allows injustice and cruelty to flourish. It means rather fighting injustice with a quiet strength which rejects hatred, coercion and manipulation so that humanity finds reconciliation with itself and with God, the righteousness for which we hunger and thirst, the peace of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

These are not the ways of the world. The powers of the world - from the manipulative or bullying partner to the ruler who rules through violence and the abuse of power - will be challenged and will respond with all the powers at their disposal. The priests and nuns of El Salvador, the civil rights marchers of the USA and many, many others knew this in terms of violence received and even death. But God was with them, they were and are held in a love from which nothing in heaven or on earth, neither life nor death could ever take them.

I hope that these thoughts might help us reflect on where we are on the path of the saints. Are we humbly aware of our dependence upon God’s grace so that we cannot but show mercy and compassion to others? Do we weep over humanity in its brokenness yet in faith yearn for something better? Are we quietly resolved to work only through the power of love, seeking justice and peace? Are our hearts truly focussed on the love of God and neighbour? A church of people on this path, however small, will be God’s instrument for transforming the world. And that is a beautiful calling.

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