

Lent Compline Talks 2018

St Mary's Kidlington

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The Beatitudes

4: Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth

In the authorised version of Matthew's beatitudes we read the familiar "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth". The New English Bible's version of this beatitude is "How blest are those of a gentle spirit; they shall have the earth for their possession".

Interestingly there is no equivalent in Luke's gospel, which is thought to be earlier; Matthew's gospel reflecting the experience of the church in post-Easter persecutions.

The authorised version and NEB - both acknowledged as the most scholarly translations of the earliest Greek versions available - say essentially the same thing "meek" equals "of gentle spirit" and "inherit the earth" is the same as "have the earth for their possession".

It is really quite unambiguous in its apparent meaning; and, on first reading, one is tempted to explode "what rubbish". Look at any leader who has had large swathes of the earth for their possession either literally as land - from Alexander the Great, via the Romans who controlled Jesus' Israel, to Vladimir Putin; or as worldly possessions - think Sir Philip Green - then meekness is certainly not the first description that springs to mind. It was not Churchill's "meekness" that was celebrated in the recent film "The Longest Day"! Clearly, we need to look much more deeply into this apparently ridiculous beatitude.

In previous compline talks, I noted that Matthew seeks to portray Jesus and his teachings as the messianic fulfilment of old testament prophecies. And in Psalm 37.11 - one of the messianic psalms - we find "The meek shall possess the land"; very similar to this beatitude. What land is meant? Probably the promised land. All through the Old Testament a physical land was seen as God's promise to the people of Israel. And 'possessing the land' implied much more than simple occupation; it signified a sense of place, security, an inheritance from God. But the land was constantly invaded and the people exiled and scattered. And yet the promise of their regathering to the land remained as a key aspect of the old Covenant. The people of Jesus' time were looking for the coming of a Messiah. John the Baptist's question from prison "Are you he who is to come, or should we look for another". Small wonder then that many of Jesus's hearers mistook his messianic vision as the overthrow of the Romans and Jewish control of what they considered their "promised land". And it is not only the people of Jesus' day - even today we hear exactly the same message from the Israeli government to justify the building of settlements in the west bank because they consider it their God-given inheritance - and at last they have the power to enforce this. Their only problem is that another group, the Palestinians, hold roughly the same view. But are the actions of the Israeli government what anyone could reasonably call "meek" - they have the most advanced military machine in the area and as far as one can see, they use it ruthlessly.

So, for the moment, let's leave inheriting or possessing the earth and turn to meekness. Again if we look to the OT for an understanding of Matthew's text, the only person in the OT described as 'meek' is (guess who) Moses (Numbers 12.3) "Moses was very meek" or in the NEB "Moses was .. a man of great humility, the most humble man on earth". And Isaiah's (29.19 & 16.1) prophesy "the meek shall increase their joy" and that the messiah will be "good tidings to the meek".

Today people rarely use the term 'meek' but, if you asked, they would probably equate it with 'weak'. But its meaning is very different. My ancient OED says it comes from old Norse 'miukr' meaning soft and gentle and defines 'meek' as 'piously humble & submissive; submitting quietly to injury' - almost a perfect description of Jesus; but no-one would call either Moses or Jesus 'weak'. Moses, was one of the strongest and most determined of leaders; Jesus' meekness is a sign of his strength as love overcomes hate and hope overcomes fear.

St. Gregory of Nyssa suggests that the Beatitudes form a set of steps which help us climb from one to the next. So, the 'poor in spirit' in the first beatitude become the meek, become gentle and kind, even in the face of adversity and hardship. Jesus was "meek and humble of heart" (Matthew 11:29). A person that is meek is one who exhibits self-control, and that often requires greater strength than resisting external challenges. Bishop Stephen writes that humility is the very foundation of the character of Jesus who, for our sake, took the form of a slave (Philipp 2:7). Meekness should, therefore, be the foundation of the life of the church. St. Augustine advises us to be meek in the face of our Lord, and to be humbly obedient to him. Obedience and submission to the will of God are not in vogue these days, but they are what will bring true peace in this world and in the next.

In this world we are not just individuals but part of the ongoing human story. We must therefore also be meek in relation to our brothers and sisters in this generation and in the generations yet to come. The meek do not exploit and oppress others; they are not given to vengeance, they are not violent, and they do not try to seize power for their own ends; but neither are they weak or ineffective in life. They may be gentle and humble, but they can and do champion the needs of the weak and the oppressed. In short, they have emulated the nature of Jesus in their lives and learned from him.

How can I become meek if my natural instinct is not to be meek? Other passages of the bible are clear that meekness, gentleness and goodness are part of the fruit of the Spirit - they are produced in the Christian by the Holy Spirit. So, to cultivate a spirit of meekness we must literally 'walk in the Spirit'; we must be so controlled by the Spirit of God that the qualities of Christ can be produced in us. A tall order that calls for a lifetime's effort!

So now we have a clearer idea of what meekness means and the very real strength and determination that it implies, let's turn back to "the earth" which the meek will inherit. We humans have, by our evolution, quite literally been given charge of "the earth" our planet as our home. As Bishop Stephen points out, today it is quite obvious that the whole human race needs to learn a meekness and humility in relation to the earth for the sake not only of humanity now, but of the generations who will come after us. Human actions are directly affecting our climate; together we are depleting the earth's resources. How will our "inheritance of the earth" affect our children and grandchildren? The Church needs to be leading the way in meekness and humility before creation in loving and caring for the earth.

And it is not just this physical earth that we are to care for. When Jesus at his trial was asked by Pilate "Are you a king then?" Jesus made it clear that his kingdom was not the "promised land" of Israel of the Jewish concept: "My kingdom is not of this world". Jesus' kingdom is the whole company of believers in the past, in the present and in the futures that we can now only glimpse "through a glass darkly".

The promise of this beatitude "The meek shall inherit the earth" is for all who are in Jesus' New Covenant. And the promise will be fulfilled in a far more glorious way than any of us can imagine or could imagine. That new creation, the kingdom of God, will be populated not by powerful despots, by tyrants, or by manipulative schemers but, both here on this earth and in heaven, it will be filled with those who are truly the "meek".