

Lent Compline Talks 2018 St Mary's Kidlington

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The Beatitudes

7: Blessed are the Pure in Heart, for they shall see God

This beatitude is very familiar to us through the well-known hymn “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see our God” and I suspect that many of us have, on occasion, sung that on autopilot without either realising its demands or thinking carefully about the implications of the promised reward.

Let's start with the phrase “pure in heart”. At the last ‘Open space’ on the character of Christ the topic was ‘purity’. What do we mean by that? It can be illuminating to look at a word's antithesis. What does the word “impurity” bring to mind? In terms of human behaviour it often has a sexual connotation. So “purity” certainly has implications of cleanness and inner chastity - we can recall what Jesus said about thinking lustful thoughts, let alone the actions. But purity of heart means much more than sexual morality.

The Greek for pure is *katharos* which simply means clean (which is where we get our word “cathartic” for a cleansing experience.) A very similar Greek adjective is *akeratos* which means unmixed, or unadulterated. Purity of heart is much more than chastity, more than the legal purity required by the Old Testament scribes and Pharisees (for example the dietary laws - Jesus turns that on its head when he says “it is what comes out of a person's mouth that defiles, not what goes in!”). It is more even than a general purity of conscience. Purity of heart also requires a purity of intention and that is most of all required works of mercy (which we considered yesterday). If we are honest, we find it very difficult to act without any mixed motives. We may give of our time or money sacrificially, but the danger is that we bask in our own self-approval or the approval of others, which is why Jesus goes on to talk about “doing our good works in secret”. There is a lovely story about John Bunyan who, when congratulated on a splendid sermon by someone in the congregation, sadly replied “The devil already told me that as I was coming down the pulpit steps”. Bishop Stephen sums this up as “living from the inside out” which he compares this with the concerns of many who live “from the outside in”, and are concerned with prestige and outward appearances.

How can we get a “pure heart”? Christians are called to bring unclean and divided hearts to God in meekness to be made clean. For some this may begin with a moment of conversion - quite literally a “change of heart”; but I suspect that for most of us it is continuing lifetimes work. And it will not be easy. The process of evolution has embedded in all of us drives which run very contrary to the Christ-like ideal. We are programmed to survive, even at the expense of others; to reproduce our species, for males with many partners, for females with what appear biologically to be the fittest. When Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, Jesus told him that he must be “born again” and Nicodemus' response was couched in very biological language - “Can a man enter a second time into his mother's womb?”. The essential change is not that sort of biology; but it really is biologically based in the evolutionary development of our brains. Teilhard de Chardin, the French catholic priest and evolutionary biologist argues that it is man's ability to think and analyse and to contemplate immaterial things that is a further step in evolution - the “noosphere” which is where Christian purity of heart can develop. But it is not inevitable - our complex brains can take us in all sorts of directions. We shall only gain purity of heart when, in the words of the second line of the hymn, our “soul is Christ's abode”; and he will not force his way in, we must invite him. Through the work of the holy spirit we shall be more aware of our impurities, and our thoughts and actions will hopefully become more and more pure.

And so, to the promise “the pure in heart shall see God”. What an amazing statement! The Old Testament view is that no-one could see God and live. For Moses God appeared as the burning bush or as ‘the hem of God’s garment’ on Mount Sinai. Those of you who heard the Messiah excerpts last week will remember the passage from Job “I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand in the latter day upon the earth. And though worms destroy my body, yet in my flesh shall I see God”. Clearly all this implies that only after death shall we see God.

Is the promise reassuring - I suggest it might also be fearful. In Cardinal Newman’s “The Dream of Gerontius” set to music by Elgar, when Gerontius asks his angel “shall I see my Lord” he is told “Yes, for one moment thou shalt see thy Lord - one moment only - but thou knowest not my child what thou dost ask. That sight of the most fair will gladden thee, but it will pierce thee too!”. How will we feel when all of our pretensions are stripped away and we stand before God who is pure goodness. Thankfully, as we talked about on Sunday, if we have been merciful, then we can be sure of God’s mercy.

But is it only after death that we shall ‘see God’? I suggest that this beatitude implies that here and now, by faith, we will ‘see God’ in the events and circumstances of our lives. So, let’s end with some thoughts about what it means to “see”. We use the word in two ways - vision and understanding. Of course, our eyes are important - as any defect makes obvious. However, the image we perceive is only partly dependent on our eyes but is constructed by our brains - the visual images in our dreams shows that clearly. This means that, for the same external reality, we ‘see’ different things depending on our brains as well as our eyes. The brain is a learning machine. A trained art expert will be able to ‘see’ in a painting things that most of us would miss. So too we must constantly train our brain so that we create “a pure heart” within us. Then, as Paul puts it, although we now see “through a glass darkly”, then we shall see our God and Lord “face to face”.