

Sunday 4 November 2007: All Saints

Readings: Hebrews 12: 18-24; Matthew 5: 1-12

The one family of God

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

A nun in the United States once said ' I like to go to Marshall Field's department store in Chicago just to see how many things there are in the world that I do not want'.

It seems somehow appropriate in a gospel as full of parable and paradox as Matthew's that Jesus should begin what we've come to know as the Beatitudes with the puzzling phrase 'Blest are the poor in spirit'. Somehow it goes against our logic and begs many questions. Jesus declares that these 'poor in spirit' are especially blessed – but who are they? Perhaps the answer to that depends partly on how we hear those words.

We're told that there were crowds of people listening to Jesus as he taught. Suppose one person in the crowd was a wealthy merchant (and we could easily translate this, if we want to, into 21st century people) – someone who dealt in exotic silks and other fine materials. He'd built up a business from nothing, he was satisfied with himself and confident. He lived on a large estate with statues of marble and stables full of horses. He travelled, he gave lavish parties, was on friendly terms with the great of the land and employed hundreds of workers.

He saw himself as someone of good taste and of good behaviour. He kept the temple laws, went to synagogue regularly and gave to the poor. What might the words 'poverty of spirit' have meant to him? Did he perhaps think of times of personal misfortune – business problems or family illness? Did he perhaps think of those moments when the reality of getting older impinged on him? Did he reflect on the thought that his immense wealth no longer brought quite the happiness it once did? He hears the words and perhaps begins to think that poverty of spirit is nothing to do with wealth – not something of the wallet but of the heart and mind so to talk about a wealth gap or a poverty trap is actually irrelevant.

He hears the words 'blessed are the poor in spirit' and dwells on them. And he comes to believe that one day the sadness that seems to be permeating him will be lifted and he'll continue to be the eminent person that he has been for most of his life. 'Yes, it's me, I'm the poor in spirit' he thinks, 'and my kingdom is in the offing.'

Also in the crowd that day was a very different person – a young woman with little money who worked long hours in bad conditions. Her job is to manufacture beauty for the pleasure of others and her employer is the rich merchant. For her, things seem so near and yet so far. She spends her time creating beauty but a beauty that's not for her. At the end of the working day she leaves it behind in exchange for a tiny sum of money. The work is hard physically – on eyes, on hands, on back. She lives in very poor housing with her two children. They're often cold and hungry and she worries about being in debt. What might the words 'poverty of spirit' have meant to her?

She hears that the poor in spirit are blessed and will inherit the kingdom and she wonders at the prospect of a life not lived in poverty and all that she associates with that for, to her, poverty of

spirit is a lack of things, but also the feeling of being de-graded and of lack of self worth which go hand in hand with poverty.

To her, poverty of spirit is trying to provide for family adequately and failing. Of being dependent on the charity of others. But now she hears that all of her present experience will, one day, be just a memory because there is something better ahead – a time when her needs and those of her family will be seen to and her dignity restored. ‘I am the poor in spirit’ she believes, ‘and the kingdom will at long last be mine.’

So, who are those who will find their place in God’s heavenly kingdom as the blessed poor? Who make up that great cloud of witnesses? Who will join the ranks of the saints in heaven? Is the poverty Jesus speaks of a matter of economics or does it have a completely different meaning taking in all varieties of our unmet needs? Does ‘the poor’ refer to the merchant? Or to the seamstress? Or is it someone else who was listening that day? Is it those experiencing faith and doubt, love and fear, joy and sorrow? Could it be us?

The Beatitudes are counter cultural and, to the world, may seem to epitomise the foolishness of religion. After all, the reality we see around us is frequently of the meek being trampled on and of the bereaved feeling they’re an embarrassment that people soon lose patience with. Of those who search for truth and righteousness feeling exhausted from engaging in seemingly endless losing battles and those who show mercy being scorned. Of the persecuted losing their lives and the peacemaker being ridiculed as a hopeless idealist.

The church, while engaging with the world, needs also to stand counter to it at times but sometimes finds it hard to discern that line and subscribes, consciously or unconsciously, to the cultural values of society, even though to do so may betray the teachings of Christ.

And it’s also certainly counter cultural today to hold out the idea of reward in heaven. That’s seen as a cruel fairytale to sustain people whose life on earth may be unbearable and only to be believed in by the blinkered or the brain-washed or those without the benefit of education.

So, do we really believe in the communion? Not, for the moment, the Anglican Communion, but the communion of saints? Those saints who are as out of fashion as the concept of heaven. It’s not that the world doesn’t have its saints – its heroes. It needs them, but they’re much more likely to be figures of popular culture than Martin or the ‘great cloud of witnesses’.

In Christ, we are united with God in a unique way. As church, the body of Christ, we are united with Christ through his offering, his sacrifice, his giving of himself and as we celebrate All Saints the pattern of this work is revealed to us once again in the lives of the countless numbers of his followers – that great cloud of witnesses. The mark of a saint, whether named publicly and marked by the liturgical calendar or un-named and known only to us and God, is unlikely to be a totally blameless life but, rather, a nearness – a closeness to God that we can sense.

All Saints-tide is a celebration of that particular joy to which Christ refers in the Beatitudes when he identifies those who are blessed by their attitudes or actions in their life on earth. He invites us to become a part of that company by summoning us to a particular way of life – a way of life that often reverses the positions and judgements of the world. He sets a very high standard for us to aim at but then, would anything less really be worthwhile as our goal? And the saints fell many

times along the way. All Saints time speaks of their suffering but also of the way in which God's love worked in them and through their imperfect holiness.

Michael Ramsey once said, when speaking in Athens, that Anglicans seem hesitant to acknowledge or show devotion to the saints, perhaps because to do so would be to impugn the unique glory of Christ. But, he pointed out, the Eastern Orthodox Church presents the Communion of Saints not with the saints as individual mediators – as people to stand between us and God – but as members with us and all those who have died in the one family of God and that it is Christ's own glory that is reflected in them. Therefore, when we honour the saints we honour Christ.

If we feel ourselves more closely bound up in the companionship of those holy people who have gone before us, and they may not be famous or well-known, then we can be drawn closer into a desire to pray, into a desire to learn about holiness, into a desire – rather than focussing on the failings we perceive in others – to work, with God, to live more closely in his way through our actions and attitudes. And into a realisation of the great variety of ways in which this can occur, for the saints demonstrate for us the enormous richness and diversity of the body of Christ. And all of this through love.

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