

The Sermon on the Mount....

I want to continue on Sunday mornings refreshing our understanding of the basics of the Christian faith. God, the Creeds, the Bible and Sacraments – all these we have recalled over the last few months, trying to build up in ourselves a sustaining collection of knowledge that is at once intelligent and heartfelt: thoughts for our minds and our devotion. Let us look today then at Our Lord's great sermon on the mount.

It would be marvellous if I could take you to where he preached it. It wasn't on a mountain, but on a little hill by the Sea of Galilee. Countryside that is much like English meadows, running down to the lovely lake which is just like Windermere or Wastwater, except that it's at the northern end of the great rift valley, 600 hundred feet below sea level, an atmosphere that is calm, mellow and scented with wild flowers – with the lilies of the field which, you will recall, Our Lord invited his listeners to consider.

We ought to make a pilgrimage. It would be good for us. It's odd you know, but before the so called Reformation there were such things as holy books, holy statues, holy things and holy places. Unfortunately there was a rabid outbreak of forensic literal-mindedness by which some people came to believe that it was all right to have a Holy Book but that all the other holy things were idolatrous – as if God had withdrawn his brooding presence from the world.

Anyone game for a pilgrimage then?

Our Lord goes up the little hill by the lake and begins with the word *Blessed*. The original word he used was *makarios* which means *happy*. Happy in the sense of being complete and fulfilled. So that the Greeks had a saying *Call not a man happy until he's dead* – which means that it's only at the end of a man's life when you can see whether he has fulfilled and completed his task.

Happy are the poor in spirit. Or, as St Luke's Gospel says simply *Happy are the poor*. How can you be happy if you're poor? We must remember that Jesus is a great ironist. After all he called the vacillating Peter a rock. He grinned at the pompous, self-righteous officials and said *God does not call the righteous but sinners to repentance*. Happy are the poor then. In one sense, yes. Remember that other parable in which Jesus said that from him to whom much is given much will be expected. Money brings moral responsibilities. And the more money you've got the greater your responsibilities. That's the original meaning of the word *duty*.

If I may be allowed a rather rueful personal reflection here, I must say that as a parish priest in the City I often think of this. And now and again I'm driven to fear that if what's left of Christian civilisation in England does go down the pan, it will be because some of those who have the money refused to pay for it.

Happy are they that mourn. That must be a contradiction mustn't it? Yes it is. But, coming out of the right mouth, a contradiction is not a piece of nonsense but a striking way of catching our attention. Our Lord is speaking of the comfort which mourning

brings in death. Solidarity with them that are sad. And the life of the world to come – *for the communication of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living*. But Jesus is speaking also about those who mourn over a spiritual death. How many times the prophets in Old Israel mourned over the way the people – the nation – had turned from God and lost themselves in foolish fascinations, with trivial pursuits, shallowness and nine days' wonders that cannot sustain anyone. Recognise this eh? Well, we have his promise that this dereliction, this bereftness, will not last forever. *Happy are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted*. And *comfort* means encouragement.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Another touch of the divine humour. You feel like saying, *No they won't!* For the people who inherit the earth are not the meek but the brash. But the brash don't inherit the earth – not really. The brash are too busy trying to control the earth, to use it up, to divert the earth to their own lucre, actually to have time *inherit* it. That is to appreciate it. The brash are those who end their days asking the rueful question, *Where is the life we have lost in living?* And realising at the end that they have been

*Betrayed in the maze of their ingenuities,
Sold by the proceeds of their proper inventions...*

But the meek can inherit the earth because they don't feel they have to own and control it.

Blessed are they that do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled. Of course they will! But you have to hunger and thirst for *your own* righteousness – not the other bloke's righteousness.

Blessed are the merciful. This is hard. To be merciful means that when you find someone who has certainly done wrong, you don't see this as an opportunity for delicious vengeance. You don't rub his face in it. You don't stand on your dignity – where you will only look a prat anyhow. You act mercifully. And be warned: good and irreproachable as we no doubt think we are, *we* shall need God's mercy. And Jesus tells you: you just won't receive God's mercy unless you're merciful yourself.

Blessed are the peacemakers. To be sure they are. But it doesn't mean Koffi Annan and the gangs of international moralisers who go around telling *other people* to make peace. It means making peace yourself with the person you're at war with. Again this promise comes with the severest warning: if you come to bring your offering to God and you recall you are at odds with your brother, go and make peace with him first and then bring your gift to the altar. It doesn't say *Wait for your brother to come and apologise to you*. The onus is on you to make peace.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Yes, they will. But purity of heart doesn't mean not having naughty thoughts. It's nothing to do with that scene where Sharon Stone uncrosses her legs or that other scene where Brad Pitt takes his shirt off. It's nothing to do with sexual lust at all. And, have you noticed, the people who make the most noise about sexual sins are always those who don't like it much anyway? Purity of heart is to will one thing. You want to see God? Simple. But you must really desire to see Him.

You can't have God and something else. You can't have religion as a pious hobby – like Mr Bulstrode. Religion is not part-time. And those who are not pure of heart will not see God. They will go to hell. But that's no great shakes – because they never wanted to see God anyway. If we love God, we can have God – all of Him. If we don't love God, then we won't see Him; and that's that. No one ever went to hell except by their own choosing.

There, then, by the lakeside of Galilee or Windermere or Wastwater. Or the Serpentine. Or the duck pond. Or by the side of nothing deeper than the kitchen sink – you have the greatest sermon of all time and all eternity in which Our Lord set out in a few sentences the inner psychology of the Kingdom of God. Here it is, he said. And you can have it, if you want it. All of it. Do you really want it?

Be careful how you answer.