

All Saints 2011

Rev 7: 9-17
1 John 3:1-3
Matt 5:1-12

I spent Tuesday morning in the Prison, speaking to all the Church of Ireland prisoners, then loitering with intent, letting any of the men come and talk to me. I heard stories of men who are caught in a trap by bureaucracy, men whose children are being taken away from them, men whose experiences in life would have destroyed me. Men who acknowledge their mistakes and whose sense of right and wrong would shame politicians and financiers who reward themselves for acts that destroy far more people than those of the prisoners. In the course of the week, I met elderly people in hospital who are disconsolate about being discharged home to look after a demented spouse when they themselves hardly have much chance of looking after themselves. These people are brought low. They struggle. Many of them are at their wits' end. They are poor in spirit, they mourn, they are meek. And despite all this, at least in their dealings with me, they have a graciousness about them.

The gospel beatitudes, you might think, are a model for living as saints. An ideal. They speak of people who are blessed when they are at their lowest. This is not what you might expect, and this upside down-ness of the gospel

The beatitudes talk of people who are completely stripped of pretence and posturing. People who acknowledge their own needs, people who are fully aware of their own weakness, their own powerlessness. People who are aware of their own humility. Not grovelling, but earthed. Humus, earthed, spiritual nakedness. Humility is a loveable virtue - delightful to observe in others, painfully difficult to acquire for oneself.

Perhaps a better word than humility is freedom, internal freedom. Freedom from what? From being self-seeking, self-regarding, self-indulgent, self-opinionated. Freedom *for* what? Freedom to love. You cannot love unless you are free.

The Message

You're blessed when you when you've lost all you ever had, then you realise your need of God, and God's kingdom is there for the finding. You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry—then you're ready for the Messianic meal. You're blessed when the tears flow freely—joy comes with the morning. You're blessed when you know how much you need divine help, then you will stop rejecting what's offered. Count yourself blessed every time someone attacks you for what you've said. It means is that the truth is too close for comfort. You can be glad when that happens—skip like a lamb, if you like!—for even though they don't like it, I do . . . and all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company; my preachers and witnesses have always been treated like this.

There's trouble ahead if you think you've got it made. What you have is all you'll ever get. There's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself. Your self will not satisfy you for long. There's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games. There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it. There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others. Your task is to be true, not popular. Love your enemies, live generously. Ask yourself what you'd like others to do for you, and then go and do it for them.

The beatitudes as the pattern for Christian holiness. Many people, Christian and non-Christian, admire the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, of which the beatitudes are part of a wonderful vision of what human life and society can be like when it is grounded in humility, and when we see ourselves as we truly are, stripped of spiritual cosmetics, of pride and pretence and posturing.

All of us are poor deluded souls in one way or another—and if we want to know the way out of our delusions, we have the example of Our Lord. His life as a human being shows what it means to be blessed, since he is the one who is fully poor in spirit, who mourns, who is meek, who hungers and thirsts for righteousness, who is merciful, who is pure in heart, and who is persecuted for the sake of righteousness.

This is not comfortable. But the gospel is not comfortable. The gospel speaks of judgment, of exclusion, of condemnation for those who are too late, or too lazy, or who exploit other people. In the course of my ministry I've listened to so-called church people who tell me that they would come to church more often if we did things their way and did things they would like, as if this is a matter of entertainment and crowd-pleasing. It is not. We have to free ourselves from preoccupation with ourselves. It is not what we want that matters, but what the Divine Lord wants. People who are me, me, me are every bit as imprisoned as those up the Dublin road—more imprisoned in fact, since they can not see that they are locked into their own prejudices, their own attitudes, their own small-minded obsessions.

We hear some Christians say with supreme arrogance that they have it made because, they say, 'Jesus-loves-me' – said often with an unctuousness that makes me want to poke them in the eyes. Yes, Jesus loves us, but be sure of this: he loves us too much to leave us in our complacent ruts. Jesus the inscrutable, straight-talking, challenging. Jesus the critical friend who loves us so much he is ready to admonish and challenge us.

Saints are not perfect—they wrestle. Mother Teresa wrestling:

In my own soul, I feel the terrible pain of this loss. I feel that God does not want me, that God is not God and that he does not really exist.

Isaac Watts wrestling:

*They marked the footsteps that He trod,
His zeal inspired their breast;
And following their incarnate God,
Possess the promised rest.*

Revelation

"These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; no scorching heat." This is an image of the blacksmith's forge in which tough and unyielding metal can be made into things of beauty only when they are exposed to the intense heat of the fire. The fire that cleanses, that purges, makes us malleable, that burns away our pride and pretence and posturing.

Be naked before the Lord, no pretences, no hypocrisy. Hide not your face from the world, present your face in full glory, in full imperfection, to the light of the Lord. Be honest. And persist.

If you want to know the way, be pleased to hear what he did say. You and I, sisters and brothers, are the saints of God when we take responsibility for ourselves and do what only we can do. We are the saints of God when we grow up, stop moaning, and instead roll up our sleeves and get our hands dirty. When we live generously and graciously toward others. When we bring delight to the world.