

June 29, 2008

As we hear the scriptures, we tend to make quite natural assumptions about what it is we have heard. Take, for example, today's beatitude:

"Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

"Blessed" we have filled out already as having the sense of "happy are", or "congratulations to". "Hunger and thirst" are fairly obvious, if perhaps few of us are ever really hungry or thirsty, and so too is "will be satisfied". What about "righteousness"? "Righteousness" is a word we usually associate with a kind of moral perfection. It is perhaps most strongly defined for us in the negative expression "self-righteousness". The self-righteous person is one who thinks more of herself and her achievements than she should. More than this, the self-righteous person is focussed particularly upon herself, and not on others around her, except by way of comparison of herself with others. More positively, we also associate righteousness with the achievement of a proper or right relationship to God, whether this is something we have achieved or something God has bestowed upon us. If self-righteousness is focussed on or springs from ourselves, then righteousness focuses on and springs from God.

But there is an alternate translation of the Greek word underlying the English "righteousness" here: *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they shall be satisfied."* This translation puts a totally different spin on the way we're likely to hear what Jesus is saying. Whereas we associate righteousness with our own person, or with the particular person of others, justice has to do with what happens *between* persons. I suspect that, for the most part, few of us would describe ourselves as hungering and thirsting for *justice*, although perhaps in our more humble moments most of us could describe ourselves as hungering for a personal righteousness or perfection.

To whom, then, does Jesus refer? We might imagine that a solution would be found from biblical scholars, yet they may be of less help than we would hope. One scholar, much respected in "conservative" circles declares that the hunger and thirst is here "a personal aspiration, not a desire for social justice".¹ Another scholar, much respective in "liberal"

circles, declares that "hungering and thirsting for righteousness means a longing for the one who will bring justice to those suffering from violence".² And, of course, each of them offers a number of "proofs" of their position from Old Testament uses of the idea of hungering and thirsting after God.

What we have here is the same kind of problem we saw when Jesus spoke of blessings on the poor (in spirit). Does he (with Luke) mean simply the poor, or only the poor in spirit? These are, of course, the anxious questions of those who have an interest in *not* being poor, and desire also an interest in the promises of God. It is not much different with "righteousness" and "justice". To recall where we started – as we hear the scriptures, we tend to make natural assumptions about what it is we have heard. These assumptions will tend toward a hearing of the text in the way most favourable to our own situation or interests. If we imagine ourselves to be victims, then we strain to hear a blessing on those who hunger and thirst for "justice". If we experience no pressing hunger for justice, or even if we are in some way the persecutors of others, we look for a blessing on our internal hunger for wholeness, or "righteousness". This justice-righteousness option as an internal-external divide of our private and public existence is impossible to overcome, if we imagine that we must choose one *or* the other. For there is no way to choose between these alternatives, given that we almost define them in opposition to each other. English delivers to us two quite different sets of ideas for the one set of ideas in the Greek, which seems to force us to choose one or the other. Is the church on about "justice", *or* is it on about "righteousness"? This "or" is very strong in our thinking. While we might want to declare that both are important, the division between the two is nevertheless one which infects many of our debates in the church. More to the point, when it seems that we are under some sort of pressure in terms of time or other resources, we will tend to opt for one or the other – "Now is the time for prayer" or "Now is the time for action".

It is, indeed, the case that we must hear the blessing on both those who hunger for righteousness and those who thirst for justice, but the important thing is that these are not two different kinds of people, but one kind. What we

¹ R.T.France (1985). Matthew. Leicester, IVP, 110.

² Schweizer, E. (1976). The good news according to Matthew. London, SPCK, 91.

so easily split into two God declares are inextricably linked, and this link is demonstrated in the incarnation of the divine in Jesus. Jesus is not "God" *and* "human", but God *as* human, and the human *as* God. He is not, then, about "righteousness" and about "justice" as two things corresponding to God and to our neighbour respectively. When Jesus declares that there are two commandments which matter: the love of God and the love of neighbour, he does not give us two tasks to fulfil, but one (Matthew 22.34-40). We *can* very quickly break it down again to two tasks – loving God is about righteousness and loving our neighbour is about justice – but this misses the radical heart of Christian faith: that earth might become heaven, that my neighbour might be the presence of God for me (cf. Matthew 25.31-46), that only the just can be righteous, and only the righteous can be just.

To amplify our beatitude then, we might dare to put into Jesus' mouth, "*Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for a justice which will make them righteous, for this they will receive,*" or "*Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for a righteousness which will make them just, for this they will receive.*"

If then this is the *lack* or absence to which Jesus speaks with his promise of blessing – the lack of a justice unto righteousness, or a righteousness unto justice – *who* is he talking about? Who hungers and thirsts for such justice, or righteousness? I would have to confess, to my shame, that I at least, believe I am not yet such a one. I have, more or less, become *used* to unrighteousness and injustice.

We recently acquired at home a full set of the old TV series "M*A*S*H" – all 251 or so episodes! – an old favourite of both me and Annette. In one episode we recently saw (again!) the new surgeon at the hospital (B. J. Honeycutt) has his induction into an army surgeon's work when they come across a platoon which has just suffered an attack on the road. After tending to a couple of the casualties, Honeycutt turns over the body of a soldier, only to have to crawl away to throw up his lunch in response to what he saw was left of the soldier's front. In response, his companion "Hawkeye" Pierce offers first consolation, and then the ominous remark, "The worse thing is, you'll get used to it"

Our newspapers scream out about injustice and unrighteousness, even if they are no clearer as to what is going on, or what to do about it than their readers. What effect does it have on us? I suspect

that for many of us we just become used to it. This is to some extent a natural response, a survival mechanism, a way of protecting ourselves lest we become overcome with the weight of it all. We inure ourselves, we become habituated to injustices around ourselves and unrighteousness in ourselves. Externally, imposing justice is beyond our capacity, living justly ourselves is extraordinarily difficult because of the way everything is connected to everything else and internally, the efforts of personal devotion and discipline are also very hard work. In the face of the challenges, we understandably acquiesce. It is easier not to struggle, or to desire, or to hunger, for the disappointment is too much.

And, just so, we become "accustomed to death before it comes" (Moltmann). Matthew doesn't include a series of "woes" to complement his beatitudes in the same way that Luke does (Luke 6.[20-23], 24-26), but if he did we might imagine the one corresponding to the blessing on those who hunger for justice to run like this: "*Woe to those for whom this is as good as it gets; woe to the stoic; woe to the apathetic; for having grown used to death, they are already in its grip.*"

If it is the case that we have been beaten into

...we become "accustomed to death before it comes"

stoicism or indifference about injustice and unrighteousness, let us hear that *God* has not. God hungers and thirsts for righteousness and justice for his image on earth. The ministry of Jesus is a hungering and a thirsting after a just righteousness and a righteous justice. Jesus laments over a Jerusalem which kills its prophets and so finds itself desolate (Matthew 23.37-39). With great passion he cleanses the Temple of obstruction and misuse (Matthew 21.1-17). In the midst of that passion of heart, he responds in grace and mercy to the needs of God's people. And from the cross he utters the impassioned cry of all the broken creation, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27.46). As it is for the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve, so it is also for the Son of God. Jesus suffers the injustice and the unrighteousness of the world, and so dies with it, for no one is righteous or just apart from the righteousness and justice of others.

If it *is* the case that we no longer hunger and thirst for justice and righteousness, then the cure is not simply to become active, although activity is a necessary part of it. Action is not the means of receiving God's blessing, but of giving it. What we might *receive* is in God's hands, and in the hands of others. The cure is to be found in the realm of prayer. The content of the prayer is simple enough, and given to us by Jesus: "Your

kingdom come, your will be done..." (Matthew 6.10). But the *fervour* with which we pray that prayer is a matter of whether or not we imagine that, for us, the kingdom has *already* more or less come. That is, this is a prayer for those who still know injustice and unrighteousness, and hunger and thirst to be free of them.

If that is not us, or if we have become numb or indifferent or otherwise closed off to our own brokenness or the brokenness of the world, then there is first required of us a different prayer. I suggested a few weeks ago that it might be necessary for us to pray for poverty, that we might know the sheer *giftedness* of the kingdom of heaven. Something similar applies here: we should pray for a hunger and thirst for righteousness and for justice. But this involves, in fact, something like praying for the experience of injustice and unrighteousness. This ought not to surprise us, for these are in fact much closer to us than we might imagine. We pray, in a sense, for the *passion* which sees and feels what is already there, but has been bludgeoned into the resigned acceptance of brokenness.

As the passion of Jesus was a hungering for justice and righteousness, a thirsting for the coming of God's kingdom and the effecting of God's will on earth, so too is the life of the Christian disciple. But as the passion of Jesus met with the love and affirmation of God, so too does the life of the Christian disciple. To hunger and thirst for righteousness is to learn the way of Jesus, to know not simply what is lacking but also to know the *love* for life which makes the absences so sharply felt. And it is to commit to

working in the world in such a way as to point towards the world's perfection, promised in the risen Jesus, God's certain future for all creation still to come.

In this prayer and this work, we learn the humility and poverty of spirit which Jesus congratulates, because it will be met with God's gift of all the heavens and the earth, satisfaction for all hungering and thirsting.

For the promise of this gift, and God's desire to make us all "worthy" of it, and thanks and praise be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- *What do you hunger and thirst for? Has any such hunger or thirst become more apparent from this reflection on Jesus' beatitude?*
- *In the terms described in the sermon, would you describe your own hunger and thirst as being for "justice" or for "righteousness"?*
- *Where about you might there be a "hungering and thirsting" for righteousness or justice to which you have been blind?*
- *Would you find it easy or comfortable to pray for a "hunger and thirst for righteousness"?*