

July 27, 2008

I confess that I've been struck, and somewhat surprised, by the theme of injustice and unrighteousness of God which has popped up a couple of times in our reflections on the last few beatitudes and which, it seems to me, needs to be considered again today. "Mercy" we considered as a kind of unrighteousness; and last week we also looked at "peacemaking" as requiring the practice of a type of injustice if a true and godly peace to is be found in this broken world. Today we hear,

*"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

Again the theme of righteousness or justice appears, and again we will find that there is present a necessary and powerful sense of *unrighteousness* or *injustice*.

Although "righteousness" has become rather a religious word in our language, it is something which is very much at the heart of our being as human persons – whether we are religious or not. In order to exist in communities, and in relation to the natural world around us, it is important for us to know that the "rules of engagement" are and, according to those rules, to live "justly". Eight month-old babies do not yet know about the laws of gravity and so, because of this "unrighteousness", they continue to suffer under the effect of those laws when they lean too far this or that way! Gamblers, who, we learned this week, lost \$2.6 billion in Victoria in the last year, would generally do better to acquire the "justice" which would come with learning the laws of probability and the reason why it is said that "the house always wins". We need to know what is and isn't expected of us in our relationship to the people around us. This can change subtly – and sometimes quite dramatically – from place to place, but it remains the case that the rules are there, and if they are not observed the consequences can be dire. Even if they fail at meeting the expectation, children know what their parents or teachers expect of them, mothers know what the community expects of them, bosses know what their employees expect of them, criminals know what society expects of them. In each case, quite apart from any religious connotations, we might speak of a "righteousness" or a "justice" which is simply knowing which rules apply where, and *our* righteousness or justice is measured according to our ability or willingness to live or work or operate according to those rules. I am righteous, or just, if I read the rules correctly and order myself according to them; I am unrighteous or unjust if I don't observe what is expected of me.

If the terms "righteous" and "just" can be used in this way then notice again our beatitude for today: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for *righteousness*' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." More to the point, notice what it *doesn't* say but we might actually have heard. This blessing is not spoken on those who are "religious" or "believers", or those who simply "believe in Jesus". And this brings us to the unsettling thing in what Jesus says here: if it *is* the case that our lives are governed by various rules and expectations, and that our *meeting* these expectations is the source of our security in the world and our communities, how is that that we might be *persecuted* for this righteousness – persecuted for living according to what is broadly expected of us? The reason is that the righteousness and justice which Jesus hints at in these beatitudes and right through the Sermon on the Mount in fact *looks like unrighteousness* and *injustice*. It implies a breaking of the rules of engagement, and it is for this that the disciples of Jesus may find that they are criticised or despised or pursued or rejected.

Over the last 8 weeks as we've moved through the Beatitudes, I have wondered how it might be possible to work in a reference to the way in which the Beatitudes feature in the Monty Python movie, *The Life of Brian*. For those poor souls who don't know this film, it concerns one Brian, a contemporary of Jesus. Brian, we are told, is quite definitely not the Messiah, but merely a naughty boy. It happens that one day Brian and some friends have gathered to hear Jesus as he delivers the Sermon on the Mount. Being, however, right at the back of the crowd, they only half-hear what is being said. "Blessed are the cheese makers", they imagine they hear, causing them to wonder what is so special about cheese makers. "Blessed is the Greek", they seem to hear, and are then moved to wonder which Greek it is who is blessed, before picking up that, in fact, it is the meek who are blessed, which is thought to be quite nice, given that they usually have such a tough time of it!

But the important point for our thinking together this morning is the *irrelevance* of a blessing upon Greeks and cheese makers to those who are not Greek or cheese makers, and the fact that this irrelevance is entirely lacking in what Jesus actually says. Jesus doesn't speak blessings as if it's a lottery – one for this group, and one for that, and good for you if your numbers come up. Each of the beatitudes implies the "woes" which Luke makes explicit but which Matthew leaves unspoken. "Blessed are the poor in spirit" opens up a question about those who consider themselves to be rich in spirit. "Blessed are the meek" casts a challenge at

the feet the feet of the proud in the way that a blessing on a Greek would not challenge a Roman. "Blessed are the peacemakers" is a critique of the self-righteous in a way that a blessing upon cheese makers could never be for the makers of non-dairy products!

None of this is much in view in the film itself, which is simply a very clever send-up of religion and religious people. But to get a grip on why a person might be persecuted for *righteousness*' sake – why Jesus' beatitudes might be offensive – we need to see that we all have an interest in what does or doesn't count as righteousness, what does or doesn't count as justice. We take offence if someone does not observe those expectations, or feel insecure if we fail ourselves, and it is all the more unexpected and offensive if such failures are rewarded with a blessing.

To be persecuted "for the sake of righteousness", from the point of the view of the persecutors, is to be persecuted for being *unrighteous*. This further means that if those Jesus speaks of here are persecuted because they live according to the righteousness of God, then to the rest of the world God's righteousness and justice looks like *unrighteousness* and *injustice*. We find ourselves again faced with the unrighteousness of God, and the freedom of the Christian believer on account of God's "unrighteousness".

This "unrighteousness" of God we can unpack a little with reference to something which, for reasons quite unfathomable, the lectionary will omit in a couple of weeks as it moves through its selections from Paul's letter to the Romans. There Paul declares that Christ is "...the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (Romans 10.4). This little declaration has much taxed biblical scholars, but we seem to be close to Paul's intention with our talk of God's "unrighteousness" – or God's *different* righteousness. In Jesus Christ, crucified and risen and presented back to us as the effective sign of God's love and merciful dealing with us, we meet God's willingness to circumvent the demands of rights and responsibilities and to *confer* righteousness and justice on those who "believe", irrespective of our achievements with the rules and laws laid down for our lives. To "believe", in the Christian sense, is not to think that there is a God, and that God requires certain good works of us. Rather, it is in the first and most important instance to dare to imagine that God forgives. More than that, it is to dare to imagine quite specifically that *I* am forgiven, that *you* are forgiven! We are forgiven even the things we dare not utter to another, or even admit to ourselves.

But even this is still all too "religious". As long as we allow this forgiveness simply to be something which passes between us and God in our headspace or heartspace, it is inoffensive to those who deny that there is a God we might transgress against in the first place. There is no need to persecute for

righteousness' sake if the righteousness at stake is an easily dismissed religious imagining. Yet these blessings are not about isolated Greeks or cheese makers and their particular interests, but about us all. They do not relate merely to the religious sphere, but to the whole of life and world. To receive such mercy and forgiveness from God is to give it, and expect it, in the world around us.

And this is where we might begin to suffer for the sake of righteousness, for here, to the watching eyes of the wider world, as well as sometimes to the eyes of other believers, Christians transgress on the matter of rules, righteousness and justice. It is one thing to tell myself that I am forgiven, and to take comfort in it. It is another thing to forgive someone else. It is one thing to ask for mercy for myself, and even to give it to another who might have wronged me; it is quite another to advocate for mercy between two warring parties, for now my personal choices spill over into the public sphere. It is an extraordinary thing we do week after week when we stand and hear it declared, "Your sins are forgiven". For here we stand at the heart of God's righteousness. We dare to believe that God has relinquished his rights. Yet we *also* declare that we will relinquish such claims we might have a right to make against others (cf. Matthew 18.23-34). If this second step does not take place, we can have no confidence that the first has (cf. Matthew 6.12).

No one really cares if Christians think that God has forgiven them; but *to forgive as we have been forgiven* – this commands attention and invites scrutiny because it calls into question what we take so much for granted: that everyone knows the rules, and should be treated according to how well they meet them. To grasp how extraordinary is the declaration of peacemaking mercy in the good news about Jesus Christ, simply choose your favourite (most loathed) baddie, and imagine declaring to that one "your sins are forgiven", and living as if that were indeed the case.

To declare "thanks be to God" each week in response to the declaration of forgiveness is to commit ourselves to that love of justice which is the doing of mercy, and this as the sign that we are learning to walk humbly with God. This is no mere "nice" way of being which we might expect to be blessed or congratulated by all but the enacting of a new and challenging type of humanity – *new* because it involves a different set of "laws" for what will make us whole and secure, *challenging*, because now my righteousness springs from the grace of another and not from within me and my own efforts.

*You are forgiven*; by this you are bound for your lives to God and to each other. Just so do our failures become the grounds for an extraordinary new gift – the re-creation of ourselves through the word of forgiveness. For *this* surprising and liberating righteousness, and the justice which will flow from it, thanks be to the God who creates us, loves us and redeems us. Amen.