

Pentecost 7
27/7/2014

Mark the Evangelist

1 Kings 3:5-12
Psalm 119:129-136
Matthew 13:1-33, 44-52

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

If we are lucky, every now and again it will occur to us that a passage of Scripture we are reading is not about what we might imagine it is about.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” – who are these? Is it, for example, those who are likely to be found in a place like this at a time like this? What do we mean by this very religious-sounding word, “righteousness”? The Greek term which is translated here is *dikaioσύνη*. Feel free to forget this word straightaway; the point is simply that it is not an English word we are dealing with here and, so, neither is it necessarily a category which corresponds to what we might hear or feel when we hear the word “righteousness”.

Just to drive the point home, that Greek word can be translated as “justice”, and often is in the New Testament. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice.”

Now, if we know that the same word is translated here as “righteousness” or “justice”, then these two versions of the same beatitude must mean the same thing, right? Only in a very limited sense is this the case, for righteousness and justice mean quite different things to us. If you do a search of *The Age* newspaper’s website for the words “righteousness” and “justice”, justice occurs (roughly) 150 times more frequently than righteousness. We favour the one in English very much over the other. This is to say that even if we can translate the one Greek word with either of these two English words, we hear something very different in each case.

The point of all this is to help us to edge a bit towards an answer to the question: who is it whom the beatitude indicates? Who are these hungering and thirsting ones? We might imagine that biblical scholars can help us here, but we will be disappointed. A scholar from the more conservative end of the theological spectrum will typically emphasise the “righteousness” reading¹ while one from the more critical, liberal end will identify the sense as “justice”.² This corresponds to the theological caricatures of conservatives as interested in piety and the soul, liberals as interest in the world and politics.

Justice is one of the central concerns of modern society. A typical case is the rhetoric of justice on the lips of political leaders in a dozen lands in the aftermath of the loss of the MH17 over the Ukraine. Here the language we typically associate with the term justice abounds: *demanding* justice, *bringing to* justice and *delivering* justice. To take up the language of our beatitude today, what would it be for those who hunger and thirst for justice in this context to be “satisfied”? Satisfaction here – the delivering of justice – is retributive justice: conviction and punishment. We all understand this, and probably nearly all want it, and rightly so. What I am interested in here, however, is not the mechanics of legal process but what we imagine the word “justice” to denote. The *injustice* here is obvious and it chills the hearts of the owners of as many frequent

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

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

flyer points as are a probably present here today. This injustice is death, sudden, unexpected and, in a carefully qualified sense, “innocent”. But note the nature of the justice which is demanded here: is it not much the same? If the delivered justice is not death – the death penalty not being applied in most of the affected countries – life-long incarceration is the very least demanded. In the unlikely event that this is ever brought about, we will hear of those convicted as having been “brought to justice” and hear on TV the reflections of the families of the dead as to whether or not they are “satisfied” with the outcome. Could this really be what the beatitude is about, a hunger and thirst for this kind of justice? Would this be true satisfaction?

If we were to unpack the word “righteousness” in a similar way, we would find that it, too, is skewed in a particular direction which seems to make it unsuitable for translating the Greek here. Of those occurrences of the word “righteousness” on *The Age* website, about a third have to do with “self-righteousness”. This reflects the strong moral edge the word has for us, particularly as we apply it ourselves. We might generalise by saying that we are concerned with righteousness when it comes to ourselves, and justice when it comes to others. To accuse someone of self-righteousness is to question their sense of justice – their responsibilities to, or expectations of, others.

Here we see that the contrast in our heads between the concepts of justice and righteousness actually hides a close relationship between them: to cry for justice is to imply the righteousness of my own judgement. To put it most starkly: the demand for justice is an act of self-righteousness. In any particular situation this has to be qualified appropriately but it remains the case: we must be sure that we see clearly – that we are righteous, that we know good and evil when we see it – in order to demand justice of *others* and not of ourselves. Can it be then, that we could hunger and thirst for righteousness, if our cries for justice imply that we are already righteous, even if everything is not yet right?

None of this is to deny the pain, the deprivation which causes us to cry for justice. None of it is to suggest that there ought to be no bringing to account, or no intense and passionate work to set right what is wrong. The point is simply to be clearer about who cries, out of what, against whom, for what.

Perhaps what we hunger and thirst for is that “it” would simply all stop: the confrontations, the frustrations, the confusions, the oppositions, the needs: Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *rightness*, for they shall be satisfied. The danger here is that we become basically negative: what we want is *not* this, *not* that, not those self-righteous, unjust others who deny us a common sense of rightness. Just as seriously, this can become a judgement against ourselves: I wish I were not as I am, judging myself as unrighteous and so setting down the rules about whether I can or cannot be healed.

As we have reflected on the Beatitudes over the last few weeks, however, one of the themes which has been developing is that they are not about us, yet. We have found that the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, are not us, yet. For we cannot know ourselves as poor in spirit, as meek, as mourning for what has truly been lost; we cannot know that our judgements are just and, so, that we are righteous. And so what is promised – the kingdom of heaven, comfort, the earth, satisfaction of hunger and thirst – is also not ours. Yet.

The problem is that when we think of such things as justice and righteousness, we imagine them to be attributes which we or others might possess. In particular, we imagine that we can possess them in ourselves, as achievements – typically moral achievements. This affects our understanding of the speaker and true hearer of the Beatitudes, Jesus himself. When it comes to justice and righteousness, we will speak of Jesus as just, righteous, sinless, in an absolute sense. By this we mean that Jesus did no wrong, broke no laws, always did what God required in a particular situation. The important thing here, however, is the *idea* of justice and righteousness which controls our thinking here: that justice and righteousness are a matter of rules which we do or don't observe. Jesus *is* just, *is* righteous, in himself, in the moral achievement of always obeying the rules.

But the New Testament understands the matter differently. Jesus' righteousness, his justice, is not a matter of "always doing the right thing." Jesus' achievement is that he always remains in relationship to God as a son to a father, a child to a parent. What Jesus has is not a list of achievements which can be presented to God, but a kind of birth-mark by which God recognises him as his own. As we use the language of salvation the church does not imagine that Jesus has come with a new law, a new way to do things which can be achieved more easily than the old way. Jesus "achieves" righteousness, justice, by being as a human being what the second person of the Trinity has always been – Son of the Father. While we are always very interested in what Jesus the man does, how often, in our orthodoxy, do we wonder what the divine Son "does" in the trinitarian reality of God? What the Son does is "be" the Son – to receive who he is from the one who makes him Son – the Father. We should not be distracted by the boyishness of the language here, for it is just a distraction. The important point is that as the Son has always been to the Father, so also was Jesus. Jesus is righteous because he continues to "be" through his relationship to the one who sent him. His achievement is that in the midst of the ambiguities and contradictions of the human moral life, he remains the Son and *in that* he is fully and properly human.

To hunger and thirst for righteousness, for justice, is to know that we cannot satisfy our own hunger or slake our own thirst, not simply because we or those around us are unjust or unrighteous. Rather, our very measuring of our justice and righteousness is the source of our failure. To be satisfied here is to be set free from that which causes us to hunger and thirst – our separation from the one who would call us daughter, son: our imagining that this is not yet enough.

Satisfaction will not come from finally being able to do the right thing, or having the right thing done to us. What is the right thing to be done in Gaza? What is the right thing to be done when too much has been said and done between once-were-lovers? What is the right thing to be done when God's people crucify God for God's own sake?

The crucified Jesus is raised by no power other than that God speaks his name again: "Son". The church begins by no power other than that God speaks to his scattered people, "Children". Satisfaction of the hunger and thirst for justice or righteousness in the broadest sense only comes when God claims us as his own and we, in turn, claim God.

Here what is said and done matters less than who we are. This is a dangerous thing to say, and it ought to be said only in fear and trembling. It is not a political program. It is not a moral rule. It is the declaration of God's grace which grants us freedom to work for righteousness and justice without fear of judgement.

For the judgement has been declared: in all things, just and unjust, righteous and unrighteous, God is ours, and we are God's. And that is enough.
