

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8
Psalm 67
Matthew 15:21-28

Blessed are the pure in heart

Blessed are the pure in heart, for *they* shall see God. Is this not what an Islamic State militant utters to himself as he draws his machete across the throat of the infidel? “If you were pure of heart, this would not be happening to you.”

The phrase “pure in heart” evokes images of nobility of character: to be pure in heart is to be without guile, trustworthy, clear, unselfish in our motives. It is the kind of thing we might imagine hearing said of a righteous somebody in one of Tolkien’s stories, in which the qualities of individuals are described much more richly than our thin language today seems to be able to manage.

And yet this appeal of the language quickly becomes an unthinking romanticism. As distasteful as it might seem to put the words of Jesus into the mouths of the murderous operatives of the Islamic State, being distasteful here is only a passing rhetorical trick. More important is understanding how what we think is *impurity* operates.

It is rarely the case that we hurt each other for the sake of it. As we persecute others it is important that our victims in fact understand why they are suffering. It is important to perpetrators that their victims be invited to see the reason, the logic, which justifies their suffering: you are suffering because you are bad, or stupid, or wrong. That is, it is *right* that you suffer, and you should be able to see that. And if you cannot, I will demonstrate it by cutting off your head, or sending you to languish in a refugee camp in some democracy-forsaken place, or crucifying you. For purity contrasts with impurity as clean contrasts with unclean, as sinful contrasts with sinless, as holy contrasts with unholy, as believer contrasts with unbeliever: blessed, then, are the clean, the sinless, the holy, the believing ones. The outworkings of this way of thinking horrify us as we hear the reports of foreign correspondents.

Of course, there is nothing new in this reading of what it means to be pure. Perhaps the Christian Crusader recited something similar to himself as he rode through some Jewish or Muslim village, sword swinging at anything that moved: if you had been “pure of heart” – as we are – this would not be happening. And it is not simply the religiously fanatical in whom we see this pattern of thinking unfolding: blessed is the true believer of the cause, for they shall be vindicated. Blessed is the true revolutionary, the true capitalist. And cursed are those who are not pure so.

In the end, our rhetoric about purity of heart, our presumption to be able to judge who is pure and who is not, adds to this saying of Jesus another: blessed is the means which yields the desired end, which totally contradicts a gospel-reading of the beatitudes. We have touched on this a number of times in our reflections on the Beatitudes over the last couple of months. When Jesus declares, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted,” he does not say that mourning is the way into God’s care. Neither is meekness a method for inheriting the earth, nor poverty the means to God’s kingdom. We do not construct a way to God by assuming this or that stance. Put more strongly, we cannot compel God to reveal himself to us. And more strongly again, we

cannot compel others to “purity of heart” (whatever that is): not with machetes or swords or bombs or food parcels or language lessons or well-designed and comfortable buildings.

When we speak of purity of heart we mean something like, completeness of self, wholeness of being, uncorrupted identity. And so purity of heart cannot be one option among many; it is *the* thing – the one thing – in which we are truly ourselves, the thing which creates properly “I” and “we”. No one chooses to be impure, to be divided in herself against herself; no one chooses to act in a way which reduces what he is. And yet this seems to be what we always actually do.

Whatever we do with the sayings of Jesus, then, let us not sentimentalise them. Let us not be distracted by their apparent simplicity or beauty. Let us not imagine that they are self-evident and incorruptible. While there is a necessary call to purity in the Christian message, we cannot know ourselves as pure. For it is not so much that purity gives us a vision of God as it is that the vision of God gives us purity.

And the vision which God gives us of himself is precisely one which takes up and transforms our capacity to be impure in the very act of purifying ourselves. For is it not impiety but purity which crucifies Jesus. Crucifixion is the demonstration of the unrighteousness of the one who is condemned. To be crucified is manifestly to be impure, and so those words on Jesus’ lips – My God, why have you abandoned me – are the only ones which make sense. If it has come to this, God cannot be here.

Where, then, is purity?

With the resurrection comes a reversal of our sense of the source of purity. This is not simply a happy ending in which Jesus is vindicated. It is a revelation of the order of things: of the location of goodness, righteousness, purity. These things are not located even in Jesus himself for he has been baptised into our shadowy humanity; his crucifixion is just the end to which his baptism pointed. The purity of heart of Jesus himself is seen in his relationship to the one who sent him – in that God *sees him*.

To be seen by God is to be known. To be known by God is not simply to be recognised but to be comprehended. This would, in fact, be a terrifying thing were it not that God sees us not as outside of himself but as within. For if – as we sometimes rather glibly confess – God is love, to be seen within God himself is to be seen within the sphere of love. To get a little technical theologically, God sees the Son as within himself – as part of the life of the God’s own trinitarian existence – and this is the source of the power of the resurrection. The judgement of godlessness on those who are crucified (or whatever else) is no barrier to this love.

And God sees *us* in person of the Son, in the humanity of Jesus himself. God comprehends us in Jesus – sees us in our godlessness as enveloped by the god-forsakeness of Jesus on the cross. And if the heart of Jesus is declared pure, then so shall our hearts be made pure.

God sees not only into grey hearts, but into the darkest of hearts, and God’s very seeing is light which illuminates to reveal what is sometimes so deeply hidden: that even we are children of God, that even we will be purified so that this might become visible to us.

This is the gospel: that God sees us, through everything, and that this seeing is not for the purposes of judging but healing.

Blessed are those who are seen by God and see in return, for they shall be purified in heart.

May God bless us with the quickening ray his eye diffuses, that we might be purified, and then act in ways which do the same in the world around us. Amen.
