11 March 2018: Eucharist
The Fourth Sunday of Lent

Numbers 21: 4–9; Ephesians 2: 1–10; John 3: 14–21

The Revd Clare Hayns, College Chaplain

Beatitudes: ‘Blessed are the pure in heart’

There was a drama in College this week. There were reports of a student and young boy who had been seen running around the Christ Church treasury hallways looking under bins. Concerned emails flew around the various College departments. Who were they and what were they doing? The Lodge manager was called and CCTV footage was accessed. The culprits were then identified. It looked as if it was a 3rd year languages undergraduate… and the Chaplain’s 12 year-old son! But what were they doing? On Wednesday last week something rather lovely happened. There was a college-wide, 24 hour Easter-Egg hunt. Students who had been working hard all term put down their books for a few hours and raced about finding clues to be able to redeem prizes. It was joyous. My role as well as Chaplain is welfare coordinator and this egg hunt achieved as much as term’s worth of welfare events. People were having fun. They were playing. They were remembering what it is to be a child again.

And I wonder if playfulness and child-likeness is the key to understanding this sixth Beatitude.

Jesus said: ‘Blessed are the Pure in Heart, for they will see God’.

The common mistake we often make with the beatitudes which Edmund pointed out at beginning of this series is we look at them as attributes to work at in order to receive blessing.

This works better with some than others. We can work at becoming peacemakers and we can develop attributes of meekness. But it’s harder with others: do we really have to work at mourning more? Or try being a bit more persecuted than we already are?
And this way of looking at things doesn’t work well when considering the Pure in Heart. The Pharisees worked hard at becoming pure by their cleanliness rituals and strict rules on contamination and religious purity. But Jesus had harsh words to say to them if they focussed on outward rather than inward purity:

‘You hypocrites, you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside are full of the bones of the dead and all kinds of filth’.¹

It’s not ‘blessed are the pure’ but ‘blessed are the pure in heart’.

In biblical language, the heart is the very core of a person’s being. The very essence of the person.

The psalmist understood this when he cried out: ‘create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me’.²

Another way to look at it is this. What if the beatitudes aren’t about a list of conditions we should try and meet or virtues to aspire to; but rather Jesus is inviting us to imagine what it is like to live in the Kingdom of God, and to begin living in this way.

And he does this by showing us certain people or situations where the Kingdom of God is already being revealed.

Look at these people, he says. They get it. Learn from them.

I imagine him going around the crowds as he pronounces these blessings and pointing to people as he goes. Blessed are the Poor in Spirit – he points to a person asking for help from another. Blessed are those who mourn – he points to a group in tears over their lost one. Blessed are the Pure in Heart – I imagine him pointing to a group of children rolling down the mount and shrieking with laughter.

Two things about the those who are ‘Pure in Heart’ that might help us this morning.

1. The Pure in heart know they are loved

There are three main lies that we are taught and spend much of our lives trying to live up to. They are: ‘I am what I do’, ‘I am what other people say about me’ and ‘I am what I have’. They are so deeply engrained in us it’s extremely hard to be rid of them, and they can create a barrier which prevent us from experiencing the love of God.

¹ Matthew 23:27
² Psalm 51:10
The Pure in heart are people who know these are total lies and that first and foremost they are beloved children of God. ¹

I think here of my friend’s little girl with Downs Syndrome. She knows she can’t impress anyone with what she has or does. She doesn’t care a jot about what people say about her -but she knows she is loved. She is just fully herself and a joy to be with. She is pure in heart.

Today is Mothering Sunday and hopefully we have known that unconditional love between a mother and her child. I say hopefully because that’s not the experience of many and it can be hard for us to believe the unconditional love of God if we haven’t experienced it through earthly relationships.

But rooted within our readings today are reminders of God’s love that is shown to us, not because we deserve it, but because of His Grace.

Our Epistle reading said ‘God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our sin, made us alive with Christ – by Grace’. (Ephesians 2:4-5)

And we heard again this morning those famous words from John 3:16:

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’.

We don’t have to make ourselves pure before we are to be loved; we are made pure by God’s love, which is freely given to us through Christ.

So, the Pure in Heart know they are loved.

2. The Pure in heart Play

Grant last week spoke of the need to fast, which is an important spiritual discipline.

I would like to encourage us to play more. Brene Brown, an eminent author and researcher interviewed thousands of people and found several patterns in those who she describes as ‘whole-hearted’ - those who seem to live life to the full - and one of the

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¹Henri Nouwen’s sermon ‘Being the Beloved’ speaks of this and can be watched on YouTube - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v8U4V4aaNWk
patterns she found is that they all seem to make time for play, for simply having fun for the sake of it.4

Jesus tells his disciples that: ‘unless you change and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’. (Matthew 18:3)

When did you last just play and have fun for the sake of it? Children do it all the time, but somehow we adults forget how important it is. What did you love to do as a child? Lego, trains, hide and seek, board games, dancing. A retired friend of mine who used to be editor of a national newspaper still exhibits this childlike delight in the world. Whenever we go to see him he whisks us off to see his moth collection or to the tree house he’s building for his grandchildren.

Michael Quoist’s poem in ‘Prayers for Life’:

‘God said I like youngsters. I want people to be like them….youngsters – twisted, humped, wrinkled, white-bearded – all kinds of youngsters... I like little children because my likeness has not yet been dulled in them. They have not yet botched my likeness. They are new, pure, without a blot, without a smear’.5

What is now known as Mothering Sunday was traditionally known as Laetare Sunday which literally means ‘Rejoice’ – it was day in the middle of Lent which was set aside for a day of celebration in the midst of the sombre season, and where families would be encouraged to spend time together.

The Bishop of Oxford has asked churches and communities to reflect on the beatitudes this year and to consider how they might help form us as a people called to be Compassionate, Courageous and Contemplative.

As we consider this beatitude, I wonder if we might become a Church who remembers what it is to be child-like. A people so rooted in the knowledge of God’s love and grace that this bubbles up in us so we can’t help but rejoice in the sheer glory and beauty of life; that we can be people who know how to have fun, and who play.

And the treasure we will find as we do so will be far greater than a chocolate egg – it will be eternal life itself.

Amen

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4 Brene Brown, The Gifts of Imperfection, Hazledon, 2010