18 February 2018: Eucharist
First Sunday of Lent
Genesis 9: 8-17, Psalm 25: 1-9, 1 Peter 3: 18-end, Mark 1: 9-15
The Revd Canon Dr Edmund Newey, Sub Dean
Beatitudes: ‘Blessed are the meek’

Today and over the coming Sundays of Lent the sermons at Sunday’s Choral Eucharist will each focus on one of the beatitudes. The beatitudes are the blessings that Jesus spoke to his disciples as he began the intensive course of teaching that we know as the Sermon on the Mount. I call them ‘blessings’, but that isn’t quite right: the beatitudes are not blessings, nor in fact are they commandments. Jesus doesn’t say, ‘Thou shalt be meek, for then thou shalt thou inherit the earth’. The beatitudes are descriptions, not imperatives. As Rowan Williams has said, in giving us this teaching Jesus means something like this: look at these people; think about them; ‘these are the sorts of people and the sorts of situation where you will see something called blessedness’ (The Kingdom is Theirs, Christian Socialist Movement, 2002). Here – as you encounter the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who suffer persecution for righteousness’ sake – here you come face to face with holiness. Actual lived holiness, not the theoretical idea of it we have in our minds.

In reflecting on the Beatitudes over these coming weeks, we are responding to the Bishop of Oxford’s call that every church and community in the diocese listen deeply to these sayings, setting them at the heart of our common life, as we explore what it means to be more contemplative, more compassionate and more courageous as a Church.

What a wonderful invitation this is! It is, truly, a mission statement because it asks us look at our world and our lives afresh with a perspective given us by Christ. This is not, primarily, an agenda – another set of tasks to get on with. In the first place it is simply the opening of a window – pulling back the curtains, throwing wide the shutters, flinging open the casement – so that we can see clearly, breathe deeply and begin to understand who we are, where we are, here and now, through the eyes of Christ.
Listen to the beatitudes, look at the people and the places they point us to: these are the kinds of people and places where you see true blessedness. And once we have listened and looked may we then have the grace and strength to join in. ‘Go and do likewise’ (Luke 10:37), as Jesus says in another context.

We begin today with the third beatitude: ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth’.

In hearing these words of Jesus, immediately we run into a problem: what are we to make of that troublesome little word ‘meek’? Perhaps you remember the churches’ Easter advertising poster a decade or so back. Printed in black ink on a red background, it mimicked the famous image of Che Guevara. It showed Jesus as revolutionary leader, staring out into the distance, resolute of countenance, crowned with thorns: the caption underneath read: ‘Meek and Mild? As if: Discover the real Jesus this Easter’.

Inevitably the poster was controversial: one correspondent in the Church Times pointed out that, scripturally, it would have been more accurate for the caption to read: ‘Meek and Mild? Among other things’. The poster emphasised one facet of Jesus’s character: his visionary proclamation of the kingdom, his challenge to cultural and religious convention; money changers cast out of the temple, Pharisees and Sadducees rebuked. *Meek and Mild? As if.*

But, as well as afflicting the comfortable, Jesus also brought comfort to the afflicted. ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens’, he says, ‘and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.’(Mt 11:28-29)

‘Gentle and humble in heart’ – or ‘meek and lowly in heart’, as the Authorized Version translates it.

‘Meek and Mild. Among other things. Discover the real Jesus this Easter’. Well, you can see why the advertising people didn’t go for it, can’t you?

But it’s precisely because of the lack of marketing traction that we need to pay attention to Jesus’s words here. What is this meekness that to us sounds so feeble, soppy even?

Faced with a challenge of this sort, the preacher’s first resort is usually to re-translation. Perhaps the original Greek means something a bit different; perhaps ‘meek’ is the wrong word. But a quick trawl of alternative renderings doesn’t yield anything much more
attractive: *praus* in the Greek, *mites* in the Latin, *sanfmitig* in the German, *doux* in French. Gentle, kind, calm, humble – even the most inventive linguist would struggle to get far beyond that semantic range.

So if re-translation won’t work, all we can do is to look at the kinds of behaviour that Jesus indicated with this troublesome term. What does a meek person look like – or, better perhaps, what does a meek person *not* look like?

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, asking to sit at Jesus’s right hand and his left – they *are not meek*; those who come to the dinner party and take the lowest seat are.

The rich man, dressed in purple and fine linen *is not meek*; Lazarus *is*.

The elder brother of the prodigal son, resentful at the favour shown to his younger sibling by his father, *is not meek*; the father, who runs in the heat of the day to greet his repentant son, *is*.

But often it’s more subtle than this. The Simon Peter who says to Jesus, ‘You, Lord, *will never wash my feet*’ *is not meek*; but the Simon Peter who weeps with sorrow at his threefold denial or leaps into the waters of the Sea of Tiberias, fully clothed, at the sight of the risen Jesus, *is*.

Here, then, is the key. The meekness that Jesus points us to and lives out in his life is the opposite of pride. In the scriptures the vice of pride is the root and essence of sin; and the virtue that counters it is meekness. In the life of Christ this is what ‘meek and lowly of heart’ means: not cowed, apologetic, shame-faced, but simply free from any need for the assertion of the ego because utterly orientated to the flourishing of others. *Free from self, free for others, free with* the abundant life that is God’s:

During supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

…

After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, ‘Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord—and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher,
have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you…

And as the narrative of this sacramental act end, Jesus says this: ‘If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them’. (John 13:1-17)

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.’

Blessed are the those without pride, those who know their need of others and of God; for they shall learn how to dwell at peace here on earth and be made ready for the fullness of God’s blessing in heaven’.

May we hear that invitation and let it draw us out of ourselves into the freedom of humanity made new in Christ; who with the Father and the Spirit lives and reigns, now and for ever. Amen.

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Ag pride: the root and essence of sin; washing of disciples’ feet; ; he who was rich for our sake became poor (2 Cor 8:9, 13:4) humility - humus

Not saints and martyrs in popular sense – he’s such a martyr! – those whose goodness, if that’s what it is, has a look at me quality to it, those whose goodness makes us feel worse about ourselves, less human… too rounded off (RDW, p.11), icon/idol

Genesis: ‘covenant’ used seven times [binding together of God and humanity…]

1 Peter 3: ‘in order to bring you to God’ [not by force, but by invitation]

Mark 1: ‘with you I am well pleased’ Ecce homo, perfect humanity

Beatitudes: not blessings, not commands, but invitations into a new freedom in God

Not presumed that all will possess each beatitude – cp Pauline body

BUT all are seen and comprehended in Christ

Rewards of each beatitude are not utilitarian, but simply the outworking of the gift that each beatitude instantiates. Gift not always a welcome one: eg.

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich. (2 Cor 8:9, 13:4)

And this rich freedom is seen most clearly in the sacramental act around which the whole journey of Lent and Holy Week centres: