4 March 2018: Eucharist
The Third Sunday of Lent

Exodus 20: 1–17; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 1: 18–25; John. 2: 12–22

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Beatitudes: ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness’

When was the last time you were truly hungry? A hunger that tied your stomach in knots and dominated your every waking thought.

When was the last time you really thirsted? Your throat parched, your voice cracked, your brain barely able to function as every cell of your being cries out for water.

Living in C21st Britain, most of us have been spared the unrelenting agony of real hunger and real thirst. Instead, most of us are simply faced with the minor disruption of our routines – the mid-morning rumbling of the stomach that reminds us that we skipped breakfast or the discomfort of not enough to drink on a hot day. Even on the few occasions that I’ve done a 48 hour fast for charity or gone without water as part of my Lenten devotions, the hunger pangs, the thirst has been somewhat artificial and unreal. My body may have started to falter, my mind to play tricks on me as I struggled to think of anything except what I craved. But at any point, I could have just gone to the fridge or turned on the tap. I may have been battling temptation or trying to express solidarity with those in need but there was no real threat to my existence. It was my habits that were being disrupted, not my basic biological needs and desires. If I’m honest with myself, I’m typically more compelled by the desire to finish a gripping novel or binge-watch a new series on Netflix, than I am by the daily needs of bread and water.

And as a result it is very hard for most of us who have lived the privileged lives of access to clean drinking water and always knowing where our next meal would come from, to understand the beatitude we are reflecting on today – “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Mt. 5: 6).
Jesus’ teaching is rooted in the reality of a suffering people – the poor, those who mourn, the meek, the hungry and thirsty. Today the Scriptural backdrop is the verses of Psalm 107 – those so hungry and thirsty that their lives ebbed away, until they cried out to the Lord in their trouble and he delivered them from their distress (Ps. 107: 4–9).

When life for most of us gathered here today is broadly comfortable, with our physical needs mostly met, where is the passion that cries out ‘Hear my prayer, O Lord’? (Ps. 102: 1) Where is the bodily desire, the hunger and thirst for the coming of the Kingdom? It seems easy to reach compassion-fatigue, to hold the needs of most of the world, for most of history, at one remove. Indeed, neuroscience backs this up. One of the most shocking bits of research I’ve come across in recent years is a study that shows that “people who are higher in socioeconomic status have diminished neural responses to others’ pain” (Varnum et al 2015; https://asumaclab.files.wordpress.com/2014/08/social-class-affects-neural-empathic-responses.pdf); let me repeat that again as it’s such a shocking and counterintuitive message for most of us – “people who are higher in socioeconomic status have diminished neural responses to others’ pain”; the wealthier we are, the less we actually empathise with the suffering of others; yet ironically the more empathic we think we are. Wealth and status isolate us and we have to actively learn empathy afresh as we gain both.

Perhaps as a result of this, over the years some have tried to make this a verse about personal holiness, a teaching that calls for us to focus on our inner life and keeping of the Law. But that is to misunderstand not only the Sermon on the Mount but also the wider thrust of the Scriptures. Even the ten commandments we heard recited in our first reading are not simply a route to personal holiness but rather to right relationship. No matter what secular society might wish, religion is not a private affair. Righteousness here, dikaiosuné, is the justice that flows from right relationship with God, right relationship with our neighbour, right relationship with ourselves. As Jesus teaches elsewhere, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul, and with all your strength. Love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Mt. 22: 37–40)
As we meditate on Bishop Steven’s call for us and the whole Diocese of Oxford to think about what it means to be a more contemplative, courageous and compassionate Church, it is easy to suppose that today’s beatitude falls under the first heading – an abstract call to contemplate righteousness more deeply. However, it seems to me that at its heart for us today it is a call to courage. To recognise the importance of desire, to be not just lukewarm for God and his Kingdom, but raging with hunger and thirst for him as a fundamental imperative which shapes every other relationship and part of our lives.

The Choir will sing later the Latin text of Psalm 42, ‘Like as the hart desireth the water-brooks, so longeth my soul after thee, O God’ (Ps. 42: 1). It will sound beautiful and exquisite, set to the wonderful music of Palestrina. But will it provoke in us that raw thirst for God, that primal need which Jesus today calls, ‘Blessed’? If we hear these words aright, they should drive us to the sort of response we see in today’s Gospel. Jesus’ hunger and thirst for righteousness takes him to the Temple but he does not pray quietly in a corner, renew his personal relationship with God and go home. No, at one of the holiest times of the year, in the build-up to Passover, he makes a whip out of cords and drives the men selling cattle, sheep and doves for sacrifice out of the Temple; he scatters the coins of the money-changers and overturns their tables (Jn. 2: 15). Full of righteous anger, consumed by the prophesied zeal for the house of the Lord (Ps. 69: 9), he cries out, ‘Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a market-place’ (Jn. 2: 16).

Here is hunger and thirst for righteousness; a passion for right relationship between God and his people, between God’s people and one another. Jesus the social justice warrior in full flow.

So how can we be inspired by this beatitude today? Well, first I would like to encourage those of us who are lucky enough to be well fed and always with enough to drink to set aside some time this Lent to fast – to be truly hungry, to be parched with thirst. To experience this in our bodies in order that our hearts might be led to a real desire for righteousness. It will be somewhat artificial but nevertheless it may renew us, reinspire us. Remember that a little later in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, ‘When you fast…’ (Mt. 6: 16), not ‘If you fast…’
Secondly, let us ask God to show us where our complacencies need to be disturbed and shaken up. Let us pray that he will fill us with desire, will make us hunger and thirst for him and his Kingdom; that it may dominate our thoughts, direct our hearts, change our lives. We need to change not only as individuals but as a community; whether you come to Christ Church regularly or are worshipping with us for the first time today, we must have the courage to ‘pursue the just thing justly’ (Deut. 16: 20) together; to hunger together, to thirst together, not only for a deeper, right relationship with God but a deeper, right relationship with one another and with the whole world. What sacred cows is God asking us to drive out of Oxford today? What tables in Christ Church need overturning?

The Kingdom is coming. The day of the Lord is breaking in, when, as we hear every night in the Magnificat, the proud will be scattered and the rich sent empty away (Lk. 1: 51, 53). In that upside-down world, those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, after justice, after right relationship with God and one another, will be filled. The question today is, ‘Will that be us?’