

MAKARIOS AND COMPANY

29th January 2017

Mayfield Salisbury

Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

There are many verses, sentences, in the Bible, which we are unlikely to recognise immediately; but the Beatitudes are surely known to us.

Over the years I have attempted to persuade people that among the possible definitions of faith one that rings true for me is that faith is the inhabiting of an environment of nourishing imagery. That imagery will take many forms, and we are not required to occupy the same territory as our fellow believers occupy. Equally, the imagery need not be Biblical, even if it often is.

Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted.

‘Beatitude’ comes from the Latin for ‘blessed’- that is, in the Latin Bible produced by Saint Jerome in the fifth century, the Bible for a thousand years in Europe and fifteen hundred years in the Roman Catholic Church until the middle of the twentieth century.

Blessed are the meek; for they shall inherit the earth.

Beatitude is also the title of leading clergy in the Orthodox Church. In the Western Church, Cardinals are called Your Eminence, the Pope Your Holiness, in the Eastern Church a Patriarch, as of Constantinople, is known as His Beatitude.

Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness; for they shall be filled.

Returning to the idea of faith being the inhabiting of an environment of nourishing imagery, and noting that that world includes more or less familiar verses from the Bible, I would go further and suggest that the power will lead to connections among the things remembered, connections often made subconsciously, and operating at a deep level.

Just note some of the verses from the Bible which inhabit our imagination. 'And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good.'

After the flood, 'while the earth remained, seedtime and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.'

'And (Jacob) dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth and the angels of God ascending and descending on it.'

God called unto Moses and said, 'Draw not nigh hither; put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.'

Blessed are the merciful; for they shall obtain mercy.

I suppose there are people who wish to challenge these and other Biblical quotations and demand of them, How can that help me? Or What is the essential truth in these words?

But often the benefit is hidden, the blessing not obvious.

Some of you will know RS Thomas' poem, Folk Tale

Prayers like gravel

flung at the sky's

window, hoping to attract

the loved one's

attention. But without

visible plaits to let

down for the believer

to climb up,

to what purpose open

that far casement?

I would

have refrained long since

but that peering once

through my locked fingers

I thought that I detected

the movement of a curtain.

The Greek for Blessed is Makarios. Each of the beatitudes in the Greek New Testament begins with the

word Makarios. Many of us, I imagine, think immediately of the Cypriot churchman and politician who was the patriarch and president of Cyprus after independence from Britain in the 1960s and 70s. His anname was Mikhail Khristoudoulou Mouskos, and he chose Makarios as his patriarchal name, becoming Makarios the Third.

A controversial character, exiled and imprisoned by the British in the Seychelle islands for a spell, a devoted supporter of Enosis, the union of Cyprus with Greece, he challenges me with the thought that blessedness may often be messy, and the search for peace and mercy and righteousness may often involve dirty hands.

When Martin Luther King accepted the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1963 he 'repeated the commands and the promises of Jesus in the gospel of liberation as enunciated in the Sermon on the Mount; 'When the years have rolled past and when the blazing light of truth is focused on this marvellous age in which we live, men and women will know, and children will be taught, that we have a finer land, a better people, a more noble civilization, because these humble children of God were willing to "suffer for righteousness' sake."

Some of you will remember the says when learning passages and poems 'by heart' was part of the staple diet of education. We learned David's lament for Saul and Jonathan, the Ten Commandments, Remember thy creator in the days of thy youth, and other passages. When I sat Higher English, I was able to answer three questions by using poem which I either knew completely

by heart or knew much of it - Milton's *On his blindness* and Keats' *Ode to Autumn* by heart, and a fair proportion of Gray's *Elegy*.

There are two versions of the beatitudes, St Matthew's in his fifth chapter, and St Luke's in his sixth chapter. It is generally agreed that Luke's is the older, and that Matthew took four from Luke or from their common source, and both altered them and added to them.

The alteration is often described as spiritualizing,, in that where Luke has Jesus say that the poor are blessed, Matthew adds, that it was the poor *in spirit* who were blessed; and where Luke has the hungry and thirsty being blessed, Matthew has that those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness* were to be blessed. It has been suggested that the people to whom Matthew was writing his Gospel were a church with few, if any, poor or hungry people among their members, or that they had people with other troubles, if not material, and that the Gospel in this section was shaped for its recipients.

Early in the life of the Church Jesus was likened to Moses, and the Sermon on the Mount, these three chapters of St Matthew, five, six, and seven, compared to Moses communing with God and receiving the Ten Commandments, on a mountain. So the Beatitudes are compared to the Commandments, as Christ is the new Moses, the leader to liberation, as Moses was of the Exodus.

How many of the commandments matter, do you think? Do the first four matter, or only the ones prohibiting bad behaviour? I think we may ignore the prelude to the

Decalogue, 'I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.' Liberation was the background to the commands; and the religious prohibitions as important as the more obviously ethical. Freedom, religious habit, and good behaviour all fit together.

So, when you next pass Archbishop Makarios' grave in Cyprus, spare a thought for the risks of blessedness, and consider that the negative prohibitions of the six commandments do not amount to good living.