

<sup>23</sup> but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,  
<sup>24</sup> but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. *1 Cor 1:23ff*

As Sonia and I were thinking about Holy Week this year, we first realized that Palm Sunday was April 1<sup>st</sup>, April Fool's Day and we immediately thought of this passage from Paul's 1<sup>st</sup> Letter to the Church at Corinth. Corinth was probably one of Paul's more troublesome congregations. There was a wonderful enthusiasm, a searching after spiritual gifts. It was also a very secular city and almost inevitably Church members will have retained a measure of that in their new found Christian life. As we read through this portion of this letter to the Corinthians, with the contrast between God's foolishness and human wisdom, we turned to the Beatitudes, the opening section of Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount.

As I remarked yesterday in St Mary's, I thought of an episode of the political comedy 'Yes Minister'. James Hacker was discussing some aspect of civil service thought with Sir Humphrey and he asked how did that square with the Sermon on the Mount and the injunction 'Blessed are the meek.' Sir Humphrey rather testily observed that the Sermon on the Mount would not have survived a first draft in a Civil Service policy committee.

The Beatitudes are one of those well known passages that are so familiar, so well known that the words can lose some of their edge. As is the case of the Magnificat, the very familiarity can shield us from the radical nature of its message. 'God has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent empty away.' Has he, does he – do we even want him to?

The very words we use in translating the original text can sometimes have the effect of taming it, taking the edge off it. Take the Beatitudes, a series of statements, all beginning with Blessed – Blessed are the poor in spirit, Blessed are the meek, Blessed are the merciful. What comes into your mind as you hear the word blessed? I don't know about you, but for me there is an air of sanctity, solemnity or even a sort of 'churchyness'. It is not the sort of word you will hear in the bar in the Yacht Club or the Rugby Club. If you go back to the Greek in which this passage was written, the word we translate as blessed is the word *makavrioi*, which is also translated as 'happy', joyful.

So let us run that through again, replacing 'blessed' with 'happy'

"Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

"Happy are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

"Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

"Happy are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

When I read things this way I begin to get a sense of peace, of calm, of acceptance that comes to those who are in tune with God in their lives, who get a sense of God's presence with them in all the ups and downs of life. With that there should come a sense of joy, of contentment.

So now let us look briefly at the first of the Beatitudes. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.' Again I ask, what are we thinking of when we say someone is 'poor'? Is it just that they are hard up? We would often talk of relative poverty. Someone is poor compared to most in their society but not necessarily in comparison to those in the third world. The word used in the Greek of St Matthew's Gospel is much stronger than this. It has the connotation of poor as in the status of a beggar, one who has nothing, who is at rock bottom. So how can our Lord talk of someone in that position as being happy or joyful? Then I thought, maybe to be poor in spirit is to

recognize one's total dependence on God. That brought to my mind the words of the hymn 'Rock of ages'

Not the labours of my hands  
can fulfil thy law's demands;  
    could my zeal no respite know,  
    could my tears for ever flow,  
all for sin could not atone:  
thou must save, and thou alone.

Which brings us into the whole area of grace; the realization that it does not all depend on me, my virtue, my strength, my discipline but on God. Grace, God living and present in my life; God strengthening me in my weakness; God forgiving me in my waywardness; God sustaining me, inspiring me, guiding me in my daily life.

That is indeed to be blessed; that is to find real joy in the presence of God; that is to enter into the kingdom prepared for us from the beginning of the world. I will just close with the words of a hymn based on a portion of St Patrick's breastplate:

- 1 Christ be beside me,  
Christ be before me,  
Christ be behind me,  
    King of my heart.  
Christ be within me,  
Christ be below me,  
Christ be above me,  
    never to part.
  
- 2 Christ on my right hand,  
Christ on my left hand,  
Christ all around me,  
    shield in the strife.  
Christ in my sleeping,  
Christ in my sitting,  
Christ in my rising,  
    never to part.

*Hymn 611*