SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, April 2, 2023
Palm Sunday

Solemn Evensong
4 p.m.

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
Matthew 5:8
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Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

On the Sundays of Lent, at Evensong, our preachers have explored the Beatitudes of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount. We have discovered that they are challenging and, as a parishioner said, harder to live up to than the ten commandments. Tonight, on this Palm Sunday, at the beginning of Holy Week we could have paused the series, but I thought that this next Beatitude might make a good reflection as we enter into the mystery of the Lord's passion, death, and resurrection.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

On Ash Wednesday, the first day of Lent, the Choir sang Psalm 51 – the *Miserere* – from its opening words, *"Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy loving kindness."* The psalmist acknowledges the sin that is always before each one of us, and the sobering reality that each of us was born in sin, and lives with sin. But the words are not wallowing in self-pity, rather, the psalmist looks forward again and again to God's forgiveness and plenteous redemption; and in verse 10 we read these words, *"Create in me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me."*

In today's society, the heart represents the seat of emotions and, in particular, love. But in the Hebrew Scriptures, which formed Jesus as a child and a young man, the heart is far more than that, and far more than a metaphor. The Hebrew people did not seem to have any understanding of the brain as the most important organ of the human body; instead, the heart was considered to be the center of human existence – not just physical life, or even emotions, but intellectual reasoning too. As the Bible Project website puts it so succinctly, *"The heart is the generator of physical life; it is also the center of your intellectual and emotional life; it is also where you make choices motivated by your desires."*

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So, when Jesus says 'Blessed are the pure in heart' he is not thinking solely about love and emotions; this beatitude is not just about sexual purity, as it is often interpreted today. Rather, to be 'pure in heart' is to have one's whole life aligned with God and his ways; for God to be at the center of our lives and, therefore, the touchstone of all the choices that we make in this world. Significantly, it was *and still is* the central theme of the prayer said every morning and evening by Jewish people when they recite the Shema: *"Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. And as for you, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."*

When Jesus was asked by the lawyer what is the greatest commandment, without hesitation he recited the Shema, and then connected it with the Golden Rule from Leviticus: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."* (Matthew 22:37-40)

As Reuven Kimelman, Professor of rabbinic literature at Brandeis University has said, *"The Shema summons Jews to feel an all-consuming love of God. It's a love that is unreserved, all-demanding, at all times, in all places and in all circumstances. Nothing is excluded. Thoughts are to be focused, words are to be spoken, and deeds are to be done."*

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Significantly, the bible contains many examples of a heart that is *not* centered on God, and the terrible consequences of what come from that kind of self-centeredness – not just because of lust, but for poor choices, angry thoughts, and disinterest in truth and justice. Ezekiel puts it very powerfully: "*I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, so that they may follow my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God. But as for those whose heart goes after their detestable things and their abominations, I will bring their deeds upon their own heads, says the Lord GOD.*" (Ezekiel 11:19-21)

And we find an even more striking image in the Book of Deuteronomy in a passage that is talking about the essence of the Torah or the Law, describing God's love for his chosen people. In the passage, God a*lso* has a heart: "*Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the LORD set* ***his heart*** *in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today."* (Deuteronomy 10:15) And what are God's chosen people required to do? The answer is quite extraordinary, and speaks powerfully of the need to align the heart with God's ways which, in turn, turns the heart towards other peoples' needs: "*Circumcise, then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer. For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall fear the LORD your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear. He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen. Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven."* (Deuteronomy 10:16-22)

To be pure in heart is not simply to be attuned to the ways of God so that my own life has purpose, it is also to look beyond my own needs and to the needs of others. Purity is not separating ourselves from the world and all the filth that is in it, rather, it is centering the soul on God so that we recognize God in our midst, and allowing him to change and transform the poverty and the brokenness of the world. To be pure in heart means that I will see God, but also that realization that God has already seen me. Turning this Beatitude back-to-front, Archbishop Rowan Williams once said this, "*Simplest but perhaps the hardest in some ways - to be single minded, to be focused, to have Christ in view, the more you concentrate the harder it gets. Purity of heart can only be given not attained by effort…Blessed are those who see God, for they are the pure in heart, they are held, grasped, pure single minded. We can't make it up - we just have to have enough of the habit of noticing God to let him in when he comes and see him when he is there."* [1.]

And this, my friends, is what we will be doing in Holy Week; coming close to God so that he may come close to us. Being pure in heart so that we will actually see God, and in seeing God, recognize that being pure is to be filled with *his* unfathomable love.

I have often pondered on a particular part of the Passion narrative that is only found in Luke's Gospel. It is when Jesus is hanging on the cross, and the bystanders, and the soldiers, and the priests are mocking him

and taunting him. Their hearts are clearly not pure. Then, Luke tells us of a most moving encounter; the other Gospels tell us of the two thieves, crucified either side of Jesus, but in Luke it is a little different; one of them simply rails at Jesus from his desperation and despair, *"Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!"* His heart is so full of himself it has no room for anyone else, let alone God. But unexpectedly, it is not Jesus who responds to the one we call the unrepentant thief. Instead, and Luke tells us immediately, in spite of his own pain and suffering, as he is also dying on a cross, the other thief rebukes the other criminal for what he has just said and then turns to face Jesus and says to him, *"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom*." It is such a poignant moment that the repentant thief should use the holy name of Jesus – the name given to Mary by the Angel – because it means Savior. In turn, Jesus turns to him and replies, "Truly *I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."* Could it be that the repentant thief has a pure heart and can see God on the Cross? And from the Sacred Heart of Jesus flows love for that poor unfortunate who could be you or me.

It was Julian of Norwich who had a vision of entering through the pierced side of Jesus on the Cross and into his heart. She said, *"With a glad expression our good lord looked into his side and beheld it, enjoying. And with his sweet looking he led forth the understanding of his creature by that same wound into his side, within. And there he shewed a fair, delectable place, and* ***large enough for all mankind that shalle be saved to rest in peace and in love.***" (Tenth Revelation)

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God; or, as Rowan Williams suggests, we just have to have enough of the habit of noticing God to let him in when he comes and see him when he is there.

Create in me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me.

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1. Bible study given to a conference in Wales, August 31, 2000.