A Reflection for All Saints Day, 1st November

The Gospel for All Saints Day is the text of the Beatitudes from the start of Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*, a summary of the entire value system of what Jesus understands the practice of the Christian life to be. Rather than *eulogising* the saints (there are texts which would have served that purpose), the Beatitudes describe a *pattern of life* – and one which is nurtured only at great cost and as a result of enormous self-discipline and self-restraint. Here are the Beatitudes – *blessings* – themselves:

> *When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*
> *'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
> *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*
> *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*
> *Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*
> *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*
> *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
> *Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'* Matthew 5.1-12

It is perhaps sobering that this text ends up with an encouragement in the face of *persecution*. It is not what we might have expected, almost certainly not what we would have chosen. The 'saints', however, are above all those who have continued to bear witness to the *nearness of the kingdom of God* not only when the going was *easy*, but specifically when the going was *tough*. They have shown themselves *committed* and *resilient*. They are people of *moral and spiritual strength*. They are able to *maintain their integrity* even when the values of the world around them pull in different directions.

There is, in the Beatitudes, a summary of the entire faith as it has been mediated through the different focuses of the Bible readings Sunday by

Sunday over the last few months. They reflect the clarity of vision of disciples who recognise in Jesus Christ someone whose teaching is dependable, but who is, in himself, more than a prophet, instead, the one in whom we encounter the very *Presence of God*. They reflect a moral and spiritual commitment which is willing to *empty itself* for the good of others, just as Jesus Christ empties himself to take the form of a servant (cf Philippians 2.5-11), which self-offering becomes the pretext for his



glorification before God. The saints are those who share in this self-offering and consequently become illuminated by the same radiance and glory. Like the Apostle Paul, they have let themselves be 'poured out like a libation' (cf 2 Timothy 4.6), as a consequence of which all that is left of their ego and self-will is transformed into compassion and mercy. They have become *embodiments* of the entire Biblical value-system, over against the wilfulness and self-obsessions of the world.

And yet the values themselves are far from inhumanly demanding or 'heroic'. They are profoundly ordinary, modest and low-key. They are about the *training of the ego*, the development within us of a mature spirit of self-control. A few years ago I was invited to try and express them in terms which would make sense in the world today – not that the Beatitudes themselves are *other-worldly*, but that they are possibly a bit *abstract* in comparison with he practicalities of life in the contemporary world. It had been suggested to me that the nuance of the language in *Aramaic* (as Jesus actually *spoke* these words – not in the more formal Greek with which they have been edited into the Gospel), these sayings are rather more *earthy* than 'blessings'. Apparently, in Aramaic it is more likely that Jesus would have spoken in terms of what brings forth within us moral and spiritual *fruitfulness*. The Beatitudes are what will enable us, in turn, to *bear fruit*. I commend both the Gospel text as it stands and also the poem, the one a meditation on the other, and both of them reflections on how we may yet become saints.

Fruit Which is Ripe for the Picking

New Beatitudes

Al atardecer serás examinado en el amor. [Juan de la Cruz]

Like ripe fruit is the one who is empty, but for God's whisper alone which stirs from her depths.

Like ripe fruit is someone willing to suffer, in whom love swells up from within.

Like ripe fruit are those who master their ego, and, instead, are sustained by the earth.

Like ripe fruit is the longing for justice. In whoever so longs, what is just will burst forth.

Like ripe fruit is the friend of compassion, who, stripped bare, sees in others their truest, blessed, selves.

Like ripe fruit is someone whose heart is consistent, who breathes the same breath as all things which have life.

Like ripe fruit is the one who plants peace, dropping hints of the Sabbath-day Rest, and thereby unleashing the Presence of God.

The one who is ripe for fruition will be silenced, displaced, and misused – told that she is deficient and confused. But she knows God's Name.

It is the calling, the destiny, the gift of prophecy to be wronged. Broken pipes source the roots.

This orchard is a precious place where we have a true home. See these trees; pick these fruit. They are now ready, and tasty, and good.

At the end of the day you will be tested – but it will be in love.

Nicholas Heale