

3 November 2002

ROBERT COTTON'S SERMON

10am FESTIVAL EUCHARIST FOR ALL SAINTS AT HOLY TRINITY

You are an intelligent congregation, so I have no hesitation in going to the hardest Beatitude. Many books speak movingly about the first four: blessed are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek.... Each one referring to a key personal, godly virtue. Then there is a second set of four, which are really about the virtues that bind us together: mercy and peacemaking. That leaves you with the impression that there are eight, but there are nine. The ninth: "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."

That's not easy, in what it says, or indeed in the way it says it. Could this Beatitude be summed up as 'Rejoice, because they are persecuting you?' That's not far from the quip 'if so many people are against me, I must be doing something right'. I rather like that, and I sometimes feel that. As I said, it's a good quip, but there is not a shred of Gospel truth in it. So let me illustrate. There is a group within the church at the moment who are going hammer and tongs for Rowan Williams. They want to be a sect; they want there to be opposition. They are trapped in the belief that the world is against them because they, and they only, have the truth. They are, they say, the truth's protectors. But this is not Gospel belief and this is not Beatitude behaviour.

I believe that their behaviour is based on a longing for power. You'll know something of that. You know the unruly child, or the stropy teenager, who all the time pushes boundaries, trying to make themselves heard, seeking opposition, because only then do they feel that they are important and that someone is listening to them. That is the sort of behaviour I am seeing in this group at the moment: people who cannot persuade others that they are right, who don't have confidence in their own belief and so they go out searching for opposition. 'Rejoice', they can say, 'because someone is persecuting us'.

But Jesus did not say that and the Beatitudes do not say that. The Beatitudes say 'blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you falsely on my account'. Full stop. Then 'rejoice and be glad' – a separate sentence. So I do not think they are behaving in accordance with the Beatitudes.

This Beatitude caught my attention I have to admit because ministering in this parish, and I am sure for many of you being this parish, just at the moment is not very easy. We have to face it that much of the time being a Christian is relatively straightforward, pleasant and easy. People, even if they don't follow our way of living, give us their tacit sympathy and backing. I looked to see that Beatitudes 2, 3, 5, 6 and 7 might fall under that category: if you don't know them off by heart, they are about helping those who mourn, being gentle, merciful, holy and being peacemakers. Generally actions like this get good public backing. But there are times when doing our Christian living, however valuable it is, does not elicit much sympathy.

So let me give you another illustration. There are some people in our choir here who see November as the month of death. Three special services in a row: we have All Souls

'Commemoration of the Faithful Departed', we have Remembrance Sunday, and then we have a rather peculiar thing three weeks into November when we host the RoadPeace service. RoadPeace being an organisation which gives particular care and attention to those who are victims of road traffic accidents. It's a rather odd thing, but they phoned me up six years ago saying 'Can we have a special service?' and they've got rather stuck here. They enjoy coming. But I have to acknowledge that running that service each year in November does not generate much sympathy or support. We don't get much thanks for it, because being a people who dare to look in the face of tragedy and death and help others remember their loved ones is the sort of thing that others avoid. It is not persecution, but it is not necessarily easy being a place and a people who can dare to look at death.

But if November is the month of death, then also it is the month of sacrifice. Next Sunday is Remembrance Sunday: the Sunday archetypally that we remember sacrifice. I am slightly concerned about using that word on Remembrance Sunday, not that people did not sacrifice a lot, but that 60 years further on any talk of sacrifice can get rather generalised, and sometimes rather romanticised. So on the following Sunday, November 17<sup>th</sup>, we're going to look at financial support for this parish. Immediately I start saying that, then I'm into a language of talking about sacrifice that is real, immediate, to do with money, and to do with you, not other people's sacrifice. That's not easy, not least because this sacrifice is about supporting this parish that not only cares for you but also does an awful lot of work for others.

You might start to think that November's not going to be a bundle of laughs. It's not yet persecution, but if Jesus spoke in the English vernacular, I think Jesus would have said a Beatitude that went roughly along these lines: 'if you do this on my account, then discipleship is not always going to be a bundle of laughs'. He did not phrase it quite like that, but he did give us these words.

Remember that what the Beatitudes do is that they declare God's blessing. They don't offer recognition, they don't offer reward from God - 'if you behave like this, or if you do that, then I'll reward you'. They simply declare God's blessing. Jesus said 'You may be feeling far from me (the meek), but you're blessed.' 'You may be feeling insignificant (the poor and hungry); you may be feeling troubled (those who mourn and the peacemakers) but that does not stop me, God, blessing you.' THAT is Gospel truth. Jesus calls us; we respond; we continue in that response even when sacrifice, or ingratitude or opposition comes our way; God blesses. Amen.