

**FIRST TALK GIVEN BY FATHER JOHN HEMER MHM  
TO THE GRAND PRIORY OF ENGLAND  
ADVENT DAY OF RECOLLECTION 2011**

**John The Baptist.**

In Mt. 3:11-12 John presents a picture of the coming Messiah – for him Jesus - where the lines are very sharply drawn: *His winnowing fan is in his hand, he will clear the threshing floor his wheat into his barn; but the chaff he will burn in a fire that never goes out.*

A popular idea at his time. This is what it will be like. Once we thought all of us were the chosen people but some of us behave so badly that they must have to face retribution. And there were different definitions of who was right and wrong. People haven't stopped being moralistic, they are just moralistic in a different way

John's God is not harsh or angry but just and consistent. He will not leave goodness unrewarded nor wickedness punished. He expects Jesus to follow on from here. He also believes that the 'Day of the Lord' has arrived, that God is intervening in a special way.

Because of the manifest evil around him John does expect something frightening, dramatic like fundamentalists, Catholic & Protestant who wait for great portents and signs and disasters which will make everybody believe.

Perhaps Jesus' coming gives him the courage to finally face Herod, the collaborator, fox, and that leads very quickly to his arrest. John baptises Jesus, Jesus goes off into the desert for 40 days. John thinks "well it's only a matter of time before Herod and all his party get their come-uppance so I can say what I want to say". He's not too worried when he gets arrested, Jesus the Messiah will soon sort things out. He's spent plenty of time as a hermit in the desert so apart from the confinement prison is probably no harder and possibly easier than the life he's led. He just sits and waits for the fireworks to begin. But they don't.

His visitors tell him that rather than sort out good and bad, Jesus has gone soft. Tax collectors, prostitutes who have betrayed the nation, who have led to its moral decay are his friends. Synagogue officials are scandalised – he breaks the Sabbath. John saw things so lax that he could no longer work with it, so withdraws to the desert. Jesus seems to be making things more lax. No wonder John's confused.

Everyone said the church would get better after Vat II and all the lapsed would come back. Some say it's got much worse, that we've sold out to the world. That's what John feels. Turn to Mt. 11:1-11

So he sends and asks Jesus: Are you the one to come, or are we to expect someone else? Surely there's more to God's intervention than this! So He reminds John that there is more than one way to think about the coming of the Messiah, this great judge idea is the one currently popular. John defines himself in terms of the prophesy of Isaiah: *a voice crying in the wilderness* So Jesus reminds him of things Isaiah said about 'the Day of the Lord'

*Your dead will come back to life,  
your corpses will rise again.  
Wake up and sing you dwellers in the dust! (26:19)*

*That day the deaf will hear the words of a book  
And, delivered from shadow and darkness  
The eyes of the blind will see.  
The lowly will find ever more joy in Yahweh  
And the poorest of people will delight in the Holy One of Israel (29:18-19)*

*Then the eyes of the blind will be opened,  
the ears of the deaf unsealed,  
then the lame will leap like a deer  
and the tongue of the dumb sing for joy. (35:5-6)*

*The spirit of the lord has been given to me,  
For the Lord has anointed me.  
He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor,  
to soothe the broken hearted (61:1)*

Isaiah was Israel's greatest spokesman for God, if this is how he spoke of God's coming then John has no cause for alarm at all, this is the salvation he's been waiting for. And: *Blessed is he who takes no offence at me.* John could become bitter and cynical at this stage: "Have I spent my life just for this?" but blessed is he if he does not, if he has the courage to think again. Jesus does not tell John that he's wrong, just that there is more to it than he thought.

John is the summit of what people can do for themselves when they take life and God seriously. *Of all children born to women there has never been anyone greater than John the Baptist.* (Mt:11:11) But Jesus knows that isn't enough. There is no grace in John, there is no such thing as a free lunch. God is not vindictive but he is strictly just. Jesus goes far beyond this, to a God who is really compassionate and merciful. People who have got themselves into a mess through their own fault don't have

to 'pay everything back'. Many of us have received a version of Christianity which is more the religion of John the Baptist than Jesus. Priests have been very good at preaching repentance and condemning evil but often not daring to preach grace. And even when you do, people don't always like it, and they accuse you of watering the gospel down. A religion of "tell me what to do and I'll do it, no matter how hard" is much easier than "Love God and love your neighbour" when they won't even tell me who my neighbour is, or more important who my neighbour isn't.

It is not a case of John is right and Jesus is wrong. Clearly Jesus admires John's purity and integrity and the evangelists are unanimous in saying that Jesus' encounter with him was decisive. But the difference is between "what shall we do" and "what can we become?" People are attracted to John and Jesus likes what he does but realises that it's not enough and that is John's movement really takes root people will end up the victims of just another type of moralism, albeit more refined and with the borders drawn a little wider. So it's the time for Jesus to act. Without being disciples of John we can probably never become disciples of Jesus. We can never follow him without desiring the good and shunning evil, but if we never get beyond that, we will never really get the point of the gospel.

Luke 3:10-14. John is very practical and quite understanding of the fact that human beings are often trapped in situations they can't just get out of. Instead of telling the tax collectors to stop collaborating with the imperialist Roman swine, he just tells them to take no more than they have to, likewise with the soldiers and tells the ordinary punters to help someone who is poor. To do something which is in their grasp. Sometimes I've heard people talking about how we have to change our whole lifestyle and stop participating in global exploitation. Fair enough, that may well be true but that sort of talk often leaves people high and dry about what they can do practically to help others.

So John's suggestions are full of practical common sense, but they are an exercise in damage limitation. His word to tax collectors is: "Take less". Jesus word is "*Come down Zacchaeus, hurry, because I am going to stay at your house today*" To the soldiers who torture him his word is not a lecture about human decency, but *Father, forgive them for they know not what they do*. Jesus is not interested in damage limitation, but in transformation. John is like a policeman who wants to stop two warring factions battering each other. Jesus wants to get them to sit down and talk to each other and learn about each other. Sometimes all we can manage realistically is the first, but we can never just stop there. Jesus says of him in Jn. 5: *He was a burning and shining lamp, and you were willing to rejoice for a while in his light.*

*But the testimony which I have is greater than that of John;*

What Jesus offers is so much more.

In the run up to the year 2000 there was a lot of talk about the millennium, some religious groups expected dramatic things to happen and there was even a secular version of millennial fear in all the Y2K computer worries.

It's significant that the Catholic Church had nothing to do with any of that balmy religious speculation. We did not celebrate the millennium; we celebrated a Jubilee, a Holy Year exactly what Jesus talked about.

What Jesus offers is not judgment, but jubilee

### **The Beatitudes. 5:3-12.**

It was often suggested that while the Ten Commandments were a good guide to ordinary Christian life, for those who wanted to be really perfect, to really excel, there were the beatitudes. To see them as counsels for a higher degree of perfection is to misunderstand them. They are rather a gospel of golden opportunities, saying to people that if they find themselves in these situations, then they have a chance to meet God and enter the kingdom. Some of them - poverty of spirit, mourning, hunger, persecution are not so much qualities to be aimed at as starting points for a journey towards God

#### *1. How blessed are the poor in spirit: the kingdom of Heaven is theirs.*

Many have commented on how this differs from the parallel saying in Lk. 6:20; *How blessed are you who are poor, yours is the kingdom of God.* It is been suggested that Matthew, shying away from the consequences or the difficulties inherent in the original saying (as probably found in Luke) has deliberately 'spiritualised' this sentence, and in so doing has softened its impact. Was Jesus saying literally that the state of poverty was a happy one? Most unlikely, and even a limited experience will teach one that poor people are not necessarily any more spiritual than the rich, indeed can be every bit as selfish and avaricious as the most unscrupulous of millionaire entrepreneurs. Was Jesus trying to liberate them from their economic situation? Was he being patronising? Was he telling people to submit to the unjust economic system at the time because their poverty made them blessed? Is he saying that poor people are more likely to be good than rich people? All these questions are answered by the expression *poor in spirit*. Matthew is not spiritualising or toning it down, but is trying to interpret and explain the meaning of a saying that could otherwise be highly ambiguous and open to the grossest of misinterpretation. Matthew's text clearly does not refer to mere material poverty as a blessing. The expression first of all points to insight into one's own condition.

The poor in spirit seem to be those who have a relentlessly honest view of themselves and their own helplessness. This corresponds very closely to what we mean in English by humility, i.e. being in touch with the soil, not being subject to flights of fancy about oneself. The word used here, **ptwcoi**, does mean destitute, beggars. This is not a counsel just to have enough, it is not “blessed are the frugal!”

This realisation of one's condition, one's helplessness is not something that we can engineer ourselves. It simply assails people who are truly honest about their life. Many people spend a lifetime running away from poverty of spirit, and all of us resist it to some extent. Most of us would like to believe that we are self-sufficient, that we can call the shots, even where our religion is concerned. The opposite of this poverty is security. Whenever someone looks on his money, his position, his reputation, his possessions, his image as the thing which really makes him secure in the world he is relying on something which is not God. The one who is poor in spirit does not just turn to God out of some sense of piety, some vague religiosity. He realises in his incompleteness that he needs God desperately, he is like someone whose head is held under water gasping for air. At the moment he realises that, he has a chance to enter the kingdom of God. He has a chance to grasp that reality which Jesus struggled so hard to put into words. The kingdom is not a reward for goodness, it is the possession of those who learn to depend ultimately on God and nothing else.

This beatitude is about detachment from anything which will give a false sense of security, but it is also about *attachment* to the only one who can give any kind of security. Luke's parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Lk 18:9-14) is probably the clearest illustration of what this beatitude means.

*2. Blessed are those who mourn:  
they shall be comforted.*

If poverty characterised the human condition in general, then grief is the most likely response to that. This may be mourning over personal loss, lament over Israel, the state of the world or even one's own sins. Mourning had also become a common metaphor to describe faithful Jews, in stark contrast to frivolous and cynical people who do not care about the state of the nation. Whatever the reason for the mourning, it is always a chance either to simply cling to the past or to make a new start. When people cling to the past, they are not really mourning, they are in fact refusing to accept their loss and until they do that they cannot move on. I once knew a couple in London whose eight year old son had one day just bowed his head and died. Destroyed by grief, for several years the kept

the boy's bedroom exactly as it was the day he died. The grief did not abate, they remained stuck until the husband's job forced him to move house and so dismantle the room. After that they were able to really admit the boy's death and get on with their lives. The opposite of mourning is not laughter or rejoicing, but denial, numbness, repression of feelings. "Big boys don't cry". This leads to blockage, and the mourner cannot be comforted. People who are unable to mourn, to feel and admit their pain, cannot really rejoice either, they can only amuse themselves.

For Israel the greatest mourning in her history had been at the exile, when her whole world was destroyed, and every hope she had was taken away. But she was able to mourn her loss: *By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept, at the memory of Sion.* (Ps. 137:1) When she came home again after fifty years, she was changed forever. The majestic poetry of Deutero-Isaiah was the result of the exile. The incredible depth of insight found in the servant songs of Isaiah would have been impossible before the exile. Here she realised in her pain that God could and did accomplish his purpose even through a broken, demoralised people. One way of coping with such enormous change is simply to pretend it never happened, to keep talking about how wonderful everything was in the past. Israel did not fall into this trap, and so grew through her pain.

*For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.*

*5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.* (Is. 53:2-6)

The giving of consolation is a matter of divine justice. People who honestly weep for their situation will be comforted by God. The willingness and ability to mourn is no longer taken simply as a part of life, but it is for the believer the result of a special insight into the human condition before God. So this beatitude is a consequence of the previous one. Those who know how deep and total their poverty is, accept it, mourn for it and in that receive new life.