

**SERVICES IN AUGUST** (all at St Aidan's unless otherwise stated)

Saturday 2nd August	5.00 pm	Great Vespers
Sunday 3rd August	9.00 am	Matins
	10.15 am	Divine Liturgy
Tuesday 5th August	8.00 pm	Vesperal Divine Liturgy
<i>Eve of the Transfiguration</i>		
Saturday 9th August	5.00 pm	Great Vespers
Sunday 10th August	9.30 am	Baptism and Chrismation
	10.15 am	Divine Liturgy
	11.00 am	Divine Liturgy (St Chad's, Heywood)
Thursday 14th August	8.00 pm	Vesperal Divine Liturgy
<i>Eve of the Dormition</i>		
Saturday 16th August	5.00 pm	Great Vespers
Sunday 17th August	9.00 am	Healing Service (in Matins)
	10.15 am	Divine Liturgy
	11.00 am	Divine Liturgy (St Hilda's, Halifax)
Saturday 23rd August	5.00 pm	Great Vespers
Sunday 24th August	9.00 am	Matins
	10.15 am	Divine Liturgy
Saturday 30th August	5.00 pm	Great Vespers
Sunday 31st August	9.00 am	Matins
<i>St Aidan (Patronal Festival)</i>		
	10.15 am	Patronal Divine Liturgy
	12 noon	St Aidan's Festal Party

# The Apostle

The Monthly Magazine of St Aidan's Orthodox Church,  
Henderson Street, Levenshulme, Manchester M19 2JX

## Dear friends,

In this, my 30th year of priesthood in the Orthodox Church, I have been privileged to witness (with you) an astonishing and wonderful surge of mainly younger, but also older, people into our Church. I did not honestly think that I would see such a thing in my lifetime! Since the 1960's Christianity had become more and more marginal to society in the west and yet now we see, perhaps, the first green shoots of recovery. Many have tried to account for this revival (is that the right word?) but I think we should give thanks for it and respond effectively to the opportunities and challenges it presents. "The harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few" (Matthew 9:37-38).

Here at St Aidan's, St Chad's and St Hilda's we are seeing more labourers coming forward, those with a prospect of ordained ministry

and those with an honourable service in various lay ministries. This is extremely welcome. Before I retire in 2028 (God preserving me) I would like to see all these wonderful Orthodox Christian servants of God enabling the Church to extend and deepen its presence wherever we build an altar. If you are wondering if you could be a deacon or priest in the future, there is an article in this issue for you; one that will also be informative to others. If you are being called to some service for Christ as a lay man or woman there will be much more for you in next month's issue. God bless you!



# The Towel, the Cross and the Crozier



and considers two vital questions:

What does a deacon, a priest and the bishop actually do?

What sort of a person makes for a good and effective minister in each of these cases?

## The Towel

Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself set the tone for the ministry of a deacon when, before the Last Supper, he took the towel of a slave and

washed his disciples' feet (John 13:1-15). After the Resurrection and the empowerment of the Church at Pentecost, the apostles instituted the office and ministry of the deacon to help in the administration of food aid and pastoral support for widows and other needy persons. These, initially seven deacons, had other responsibilities and which certainly included, helping in the Liturgy, preaching and teaching. We see this breadth of service in the ministry of St Phillip's diaconal ministry (Acts 8:45-8). The deacon's service and support for the apostles' ministry and their

Acres of print have been written about the role and requirements for various ordained ministries, specifically that of a deacon, a priest and a bishop. Some articles have referenced the witness of the Fathers concerning these ministries which from Pentecost onwards have remained crucially important for the ongoing life and health of the Church. Other pieces have considered the development of these ministries within the corpus of the Scriptures and, still others, the psychological and social contexts which challenge effective ministry. My purpose here today though is much more practical

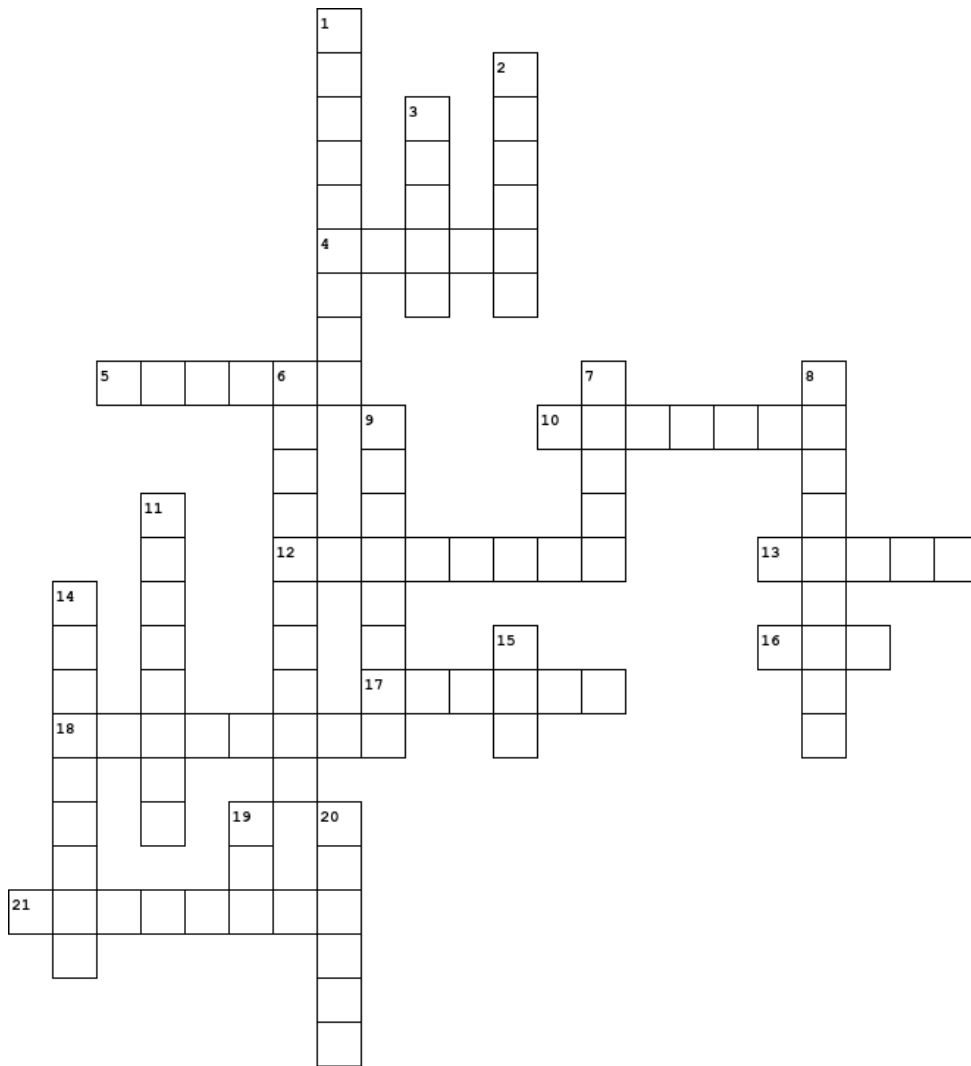
## Across

4. St Gregory of \_\_\_\_ was a nearby bishop and friend of St Radegonde
5. English name for the saintly bishop of Poitiers who was born 200 years before St Radegonde. You can still visit his holy relics in Poitiers, at his cathedral
10. Saint \_\_\_\_ was the Bishop of Paris who insisted that King Chlothar allow his wife to become a nun
12. She required nuns to be \_\_\_\_ so that they could read and copy Holy Scriptures
13. The monastery she founded is called Holy Cross Abbey (in French, Abbaye Sainte-\_\_\_\_)
16. Her husband complained he had married a \_\_\_\_ and not a queen
17. Many of these holy objects were destroyed during the French Revolution. However, with great courage the nuns in Poitiers saved their most precious one
18. Capital city of King Chlothar, where St Radegonde unintentionally ended up when she first tried to escape before her marriage to this king. Therefore she accepted it was God's will for her to marry him.
21. King Chlothar ordered that the brother of St Radegonde be \_\_\_\_\_

## Down

1. She established the first of these Church institutions for women in the territory of what is now France
2. 13th day of this month is her feast day
3. College in the University of Cambridge, England that has St Radegonde as one of their patrons
6. The French \_\_\_\_\_ was a period of tumultuous change in late 18th century France, including efforts to end Christian religious practice
7. This state among kings St Radegonde considered a victory.
8. The state in which the body of St Radegonde was found when her tomb was opened 9 centuries after she had died.
9. Name of the city in France most associated with St Radegonde, where even today you can venerate her tomb, leave flowers in her memory and ask for her prayers
11. We can all be these people who visit holy places to draw closer to God and His saints. Much better than being a regular tourist!
14. This saintly bishop of Arles wrote the monastic rule she followed
15. The number of years that St Radegonde was married to her King Chlothar
19. She was taken as a "prize of \_\_\_\_" aged 11 or 12
20. The saintly bishop who instructed St Radegonde when she was a child, after her capture in war. This bishop later consecrated her to the religious life

# Saint Radegonde - Crossword



The clues are on the next page...

successors has endured to the present day and these are essential to the life and health of the Church.

The person who would make a fitting deacon should therefore be a person of prayer, deeply formed in the riches of the Church's worship, faith and life. He should be someone who cherishes and performs humbly the servant role of a towel carrier. This servanthood characteristic of a deacon must endure if he is subsequently elevated to the office of a priest and it is to this ministry that we now turn.

## The Cross

Fundamental to the biblical understanding of a priest is the making of sacrifice, a precious offering to God for the salvation of the believers – including, of course, himself. In the Old Testament such sacrifices were always offered liturgically, only by those anointed by God to perform them and in a state of ritual and personal purity. A crucial change occurred (as witnessed in the New Testament) when our Lord Jesus Christ voluntarily offered Himself up on the cross as a spotless and immaculate oblation for the salvation of the world. In this He was the perfect sacrifice, both priest and victim. This sacrifice

inaugurated a new covenant, sealed in His blood and presented sacramentally to the faithful in the Eucharistic bloodless sacrifice that he instituted at the Last Supper.

The central role of an Orthodox Christian priest is, therefore, to offer the sacrifice of the cross in the Divine Liturgy so that all of us might receive the risen Lord in his Body and Blood. The Word and the Spirit from the Father make the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church. The priest is charged with this awesome and humbling role of serving at the Holy Table and handling heavenly things on earth. Without a profound sense of his own unworthiness and without a genuine humility based on this, no man should ever dare stand in the altar before God for the people and before the people for God. Of course an ordained priest is much else besides. He is the pastor, a good shepherd for the people, caring for them in all situations of their lives. He is a prophet, essentially being God's mouthpiece in preaching and teaching. He is an elder or presbyter, responsible for the good health and well-being of the community placed in his care. Let's face it, he also has to be a good manager (if he is a parish priest), someone who knows how to run a parish with all due diligence

and care, employing the talents of all its members.

Given all this, who in their right mind would ever want to be a priest?! There is a sense in which nobody should actually want to be a priest! So often in such circumstances there is a lack of seriousness or humility in the person concerned. The voice of the people and the bishop in the acclamation of "Axios!" (he is worthy) is really the crucial determinative factor in the suitability of anyone to be ordained a priest. Of course "Axios" means that he is worthy because he knows himself to be unworthy! Together with humility there must also, of course, be a deep and abiding love for people and an intense desire for their salvation in the mind and heart of a priest. Any hint of careerism, ambition or egotism always has the whiff of sulphur about it. The sweet fragrance of an honourable priest is his own crucifixion for the salvation of others, (Galatians 2:20)

## The Crozier

I have used the Orthodox western terminology but, in the Greek east, the bishop's liturgical staff is called the pateritsa (or zhezl in Slavonic). This represents the authority of an Archpastor who must inspire, guide and sometimes correct the ways of

the people, working in conjunction with his priests and deacons. He must be deeply formed in theology, maintain the unity of his diocese in love and service and, with his brother bishops in Council, guide the whole Church. At a personal level, he should have a deep and abiding love for all the souls placed in his care. He should be resilient in the face of obstacles, persecutions and temptations; a man of great prayer and fervent love for the Lord and his people, protecting them from all assaults of the enemy. He must be a Christian leader in the truest sense of that word; someone who still carries the towel, clings to the cross and leans on the crozier which is indeed the staff of the Good Shepherd himself, our Lord Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, these are the roles and qualities in Christian faith and life that make for a diligent loving and effective ministry of Christ, be he a deacon, priest or bishop. For any who are drawn to this service in a faithful manner, there will be a deep awareness of their own unworthiness. They might then think that they could not therefore possibly fulfil such a sacred and onerous calling: but I say this: "He who calls you is faithful, and He will do it". (1 Thessalonians 5:24).

voice that if the bishop still refused to consecrate her, it is because you fear a man more than God...remember, shepherd, that one day you will be asked to give



accounts of the soul of your sheep! She was duly consecrated, because as St Medard is reported to have said, he preferred God to man.

Subsequently, St Germain the contemporary bishop of Paris (buried at St Germain-des-Près in Paris, another good location for pilgrimage), supported St Radegonde and boldly demanded/ negotiated with King Chlothar to support her in the monastic life.

St Radegonde left behind remarkable written records of her life: she corresponded with contemporary local Church leaders before selecting the Monastic Rule for Virgins of Caesarius of Arles,

and she was often guided by the nearby bishop we know as St Gregory of Tours. She maintained good relationships with her stepsons as they became kings in their turn (one source quotes her writing "Peace among kings, that is my victory").

St Radegonde requested and received holy relics, including a well-documented relic of the True Cross (shown in picture, with the beautiful covering probably dating to the 6th century). The nuns in her community have preserved this relic to this day: during the French Revolution, the quick-thinking mother superior slipped out the actual relic with its cover before yielding the larger but empty golden container to the godless revolutionaries. You can still visit and venerate (at limited times) the preserved relic with the Benedictine Sisters of Holy Cross Abbey (Abbaye Sainte-Croix) outside Poitiers, now contained within a newer travelling reliquary. I was blessed to do so during a brief return pilgrimage to Poitiers in 2023!

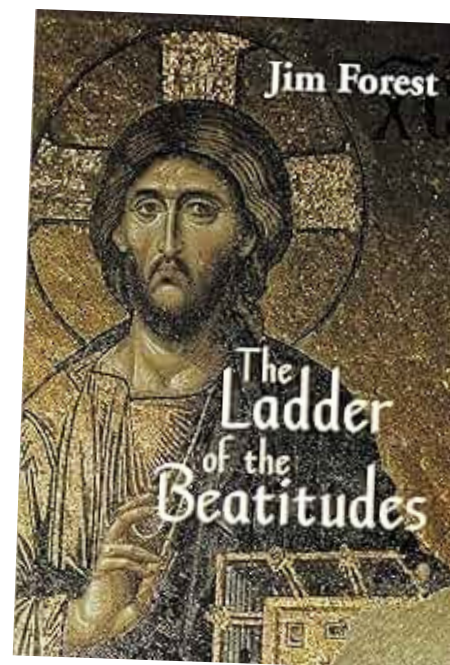
**- Katherine (Kathy) Kahn, is back living in the UK and currently undergoing treatment for bladder cancer; although we do not see her much in person she thanks us for our prayers!**

St Radegonde experienced much suffering throughout her life: as a small child, her father, the King of Thuringia (in modern day Germany) was murdered by her uncle who then took over responsibility for raising her as a princess. By the time she was 11 or 12 years old, the Franks (from modern day France) invaded Thuringia and killed her uncle and many other people, but preserved as “prizes of war” the two young royal children, St Radegonde and her beloved brother (whose name we do not know). In all this, God had a plan. The children were carried off to the kingdom of the Franks, and placed under the care of St Medard, a holy bishop, who taught them the Christian faith. They read widely, including the works of St Hilary of Poitiers, a local Church Father. Once she completed her education and had reached maturity, St Radegonde was expected to become the wife of the Frankish King Chlothar who had taken her captive. However, St Radegonde had fully embraced Christianity and her strong hope was to consecrate herself wholly to God as a monastic. She decided to escape from her upcoming marriage by running away, navigating by the stars and spending 3 nights travelling on rivers and on foot. Yet despite her best efforts, the river

currents ended up carrying her to Soissons, the royal city where King Chlothar eagerly awaited her. At this point, St Radegonde accepted that God’s will was indeed for her to marry, although she did everything she could to live an ascetic and God-pleasing life within the confines of her marriage. The King was irritated that people around him said he had yoked himself to a nun and not a queen!

After six years of marriage, with no offspring, St Radegonde’s homeland of Thuringia rebelled. Perhaps as a precaution to hold onto power there, King Chlothar arranged to murder St Radegonde’s brother. Deeply mourning this loss, St Radegonde fled the royal court again, seeking the protection of the Church. She went to consult with the aged bishop St Medard, her former tutor. He was hesitant to consecrate her to the monastic life, given her bond of marriage and the royal role of her husband. Indeed, King Chlothar sent his men to bring St Radegonde back. At this point, she found a monastic habit in the sacristy and approached the altar where St Medard was preparing to celebrate the Divine Liturgy, demanding that the bishop consecrate her to God. According to accounts of her life, St Radegonde called out in a loud

Book Review - The Ladder of the Beatitudes  
By Jim Forest, (Orbis Books)



The beatitudes—the words of Jesus Christ in the sermon on the mount—are set out the Gospels of Matthew, chapter 5:1-11 and of Luke 6:17-23. The beatitudes “are like rungs on a ladder, which Christ has arranged in an exact order.... The ladder is crowded with those [like each of us] who wish to enter the kingdom of God, but they [and we] are under attack by small demons.... Succumbing to various temptations, some are shown

falling off the ladder. The Christian life is climbing the ladder of the beatitudes—and when we fall off, starting once again” (p. 2).

The words “Blessed are the poor in spirit” begin the first beatitude. The Orthodox layman, Jim Forest, asks: “What does poverty of spirit mean? It is my awareness that that I cannot save myself, that neither money nor power will spare me from suffering and death. Poverty of spirit is getting free of the rule of fear, fear being the great force that restrains us from acts of love.” (p. 22). Whenever we defer our will to the will of God, we open ourselves to God’s transforming power....” (p. 25).

The words “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” conclude the first beatitude. “Those whose treasure is God are already within the borders of the kingdom of heaven” (p. 33). I find this a helpful reflection on how to draw closer to Christ. I hope, dear reader, that you too find it of value.

The words “Blessed are they who mourn” begin the second beatitude. “An immediate consequence of

poverty of spirit is becoming sensitive to the pain and losses of people around me [as well as] ... people I don't know and don't want to know. To the extent that I open my heart to others, I will do whatever I can to help—pray, share what I have, even share myself. The most common grief is linked to death, the anguish of a devastating loss..." (p. 38). The mother of a child who died in her womb said after two years of mourning that "her experience taught her that 'mourning creates transparency in people. It tells people that we are in pain and that we have experienced some type of loss. It opens us up for others to know'" (p. 41).

The words "for they shall be comforted" conclude the second beatitude. "The key word in Greek, *panakalein*, means not only 'to be comforted or consoled' but 'finding an ally or helper.'

The words "Blessed are the meek" begin the third beatitude. "Meek Christians do not allow themselves to be dragged along by the tides of political power or to be led by the smell of money.... Meekness is an attribute of following Christ, whatever the risks" (pp. 49-50).

"The night of the Last Supper, Christ provided the apostles ...

with an example of meek service to others (See John 13:5)" (p. 53)....

Finally, we see the meekness of Christ bearing the cross and submitting to crucifixion, begging from the cross the forgiveness of His Father for those responsible for His death (Luke 23:34)" (p. 54).

The words "for they shall inherit the earth" conclude the third beatitude. "Inheritance as understood in the law courts has to do with the distribution of property to the living after someone has died, but in a biblical context it means receiving all that God has promised." (p. 59).

The words "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" begin the fourth beatitude. "Christ calls" us to hunger for righteousness (p.66)." This requires us not to covet possessions or achievement or recognition.

The words "for they shall be satisfied" conclude the fourth beatitude. "Christ teaches us to focus our hunger not on food or possessions but on righteousness: a life in unity with God, a life of mercy, a life transformed by love" (pp. 75-76).

The words "Blessed are the merciful" begin the fifth beatitude.

## *Saint Radegonde - Feast Day August 13th*



Our Mother among the saints, St Radegonde of Poitiers, France was a 6th century Queen who lived an incredibly adventurous life, submitting to the will of God through many trials. She established the first monastery for women in Western Europe, and is often shown holding a book and quill pen, reflecting her deep love for learning: She insisted that nuns in her monastery were literate, which was most unusual for women at that time. You can still visit and venerate St Radegonde's tomb in the crypt of her church in Poitiers, France (shown in photo): it is a wonderful place for pilgrimage.

When I visited her shrine with my niece in 2019, we asked for St Radegonde's intercessions to help her in her schoolwork, which was a big struggle at the time. Thanks be to God, 6 years later my niece has completed high school successfully, including earning early college credits! We are so blessed to have an array of saints who are ready to "be on our team" and intercede for us before the throne of God, if only we know about them and ask for their help. Saint Radegonde seems quite forgotten in our days, although she was popular in England in the Middle Ages. For example, she is one of the founding patron saints of Jesus College, Cambridge.

I am not sure when the tomb was last opened, but when opened in the 15th century her body was found to be incorrupt. There are many old plaques of thanksgiving surrounding her shrine, from grateful pilgrims for the help given them through her prayers. May St Radegonde intercede for all us sinners!

Here are some more details about St Radegonde's life, to help you with the crossword, and so you can get to know this wonderful saint and ask for her intercessions!

# Poetry - In My Song

*I cry out of love and not out of shame  
As the words I seek praise Your name  
For my body is weak  
And my brain is foul  
My heart is meek  
Against the Devil's growl  
For I am a wretch  
Who despoils your essence  
And who causes you to stretch  
Your ever patient presence  
In my song, I long for Your touch  
To feel your love, that I miss so much  
For You are with grace  
And will not wrench asunder  
My soul in this place  
The Dark One tries to plunder  
My lungs fill out with the Holy Spirit  
That then seeps out into every ounce of dust  
That the Lord our God used to set the limit  
Of Adam on whom he placed his trust  
In my song, I sing to You in love  
In my song, I sing for You in love  
So that You may know my heart  
So that others may know Your heart*

**By Kevin Michael/МИХАИЛ Shaw**

“One of the most repeated prayers in the Orthodox liturgy is: ‘kyrie eleison—Lord have mercy.’ Each time we recite the Our Father, we ask the same measure of mercy from God that we give to others” (pp. 80-81).

The words “for they shall obtain mercy” conclude the fifth beatitude. “At the Last Judgment the merciful receive mercy: .... Christ says: ‘Truly I say to you, whatever you did to the least person, you did to me’ (Matthew 25:34, 40)” (p. 86). “While Christ cites six merciful types of activity—feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, providing hospitality for the homeless, caring for the sick and visiting the prisoner--the works of mercy include any action of caring for others, especially those who are most easily ignored or dehumanized...” (pp. 86-87).

The words “Blessed are the pure in heart” begin the sixth beatitude. “Spiritual values that defend the heart are memory, awareness, wakefulness, attention, hope, faith and love” (p. 89). See Psalm 23/24:3-4 (p. 90). “Purification of the heart is the endless struggle of seeking a more God-centered life.... Prayer is essential to this endeavor.... Prayer refers to all we

do to turn our attention to God” (p. 96).

The words “For they shall see God” conclude the sixth beatitude. “In First Corinthians 13:12 St Paul wrote: “For now we see in a mirror darkly, but then we shall see face to face...” (p. 104). “The struggle to purify the heart is founded in the hope of nothing less than seeing God” (p. 104).

The words “Blessed are the peacemakers” begin the seventh commandment. Only a person who has taken the first six steps “that purify the heart can help rebuild broken bridges, pull down walls of division, assist us in recovering a small degree of our lost communion with God and with one another” (p. 108). “In His final discourse before His arrest, Christ says to the apostles: ‘Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you’ (John 14:27). After the resurrection He greets His followers with the words: ‘Peace be with you’ (Luke 24:36; John 20:19)” (p. 109).

“Who is the peacemaker who is needed? It is each of us” (p.126). “The ear and eye have much to do with peacemaking; the less carefully we listen, the less attentively we see each other, the more likely we are to become

embroiled in irresolvable conflict.... A still more important dimension of peacemaking is prayer—prayer for enemies, adversaries, opponents or whomever we fear, find difficult or wish would vanish from our lives” (p. 127).

The words “for they will be called the children of God” conclude the seventh beatitude. “When Christ was asked by His disciples, ‘Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?’ His answer was surely not what they expected. Christ placed a child in the middle of the group and said, ‘I say to you truly, unless you repent and become like children you will never enter the kingdom of God’” (p. 133).

“There are eight beatitudes if we recognize the last two verses as one, as both describe the suffering often imposed upon those who live the Gospel: .... Yet in another sense, there is only one beatitude, because all are aspects of life in communion with God. Each of these eight describes aspects of being in the kingdom of God” (pp. 1-2).

The words “Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness ... Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil

against you falsely because of Me” begin the final beatitude. “Those who try to overcome division are often punished, sometimes severely, as many prophets were, as Christ was” (p. 136). “Poverty of spirit ... is the on-going process of dying to self, because there is no other way to love God and neighbor” (p. 146).

The words “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven... Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you” conclude the final beatitude. “The last of the prophets, John the Baptist, was ‘a voice crying in the wilderness’” (Luke 3:4; Isaiah 40:3-5). Christ summons us to rejoice because ... ‘your reward will be great in heaven’” (Matthew 5:12; Luke 6:23” (p. 154). “What keeps us from the beatitudes is fear—fear of others, ... fear of poverty and ultimately, fear of death” (p. 156).

Jim Forest concludes this insightful and prayerful reflection on the beatitudes with the words: “Those who climb the ladder of the beatitudes are in the best of company: the prophets, the martyrs and the saints—the great cloud of witnesses” (p. 158).

**- Father Emmanuel**

## *Poetry - To Repent*



*To repent with a broken heart is surely good,*

*For our tears reflect a portion Christ shed for us,*

*To feel unworthy, is just the beginning, but to know Christ is to know this is the truth,*

*Yet your ability to sin is far less than His capacity to forgive and you cannot escape his love,  
Only a heart that seeks not forgiveness but exaltation shall shrivel into death, but we who seek  
the grace of our Lord shall surely find refuge.*

*There is no longer a sin I can hide from, yet not a sin in which renders me powerless, as I have  
become like an Israelites door in Egypt, covered by the blood of the Lamb,*

*my debt is paid,*

*though I am far too poor to afford,*

*so I thank my Saviour,*

*He who has delivered me from my rightful and justified condemnation.*

*As for those who hear the word of God, and make a nest in their heart for the word of God,  
shall they not also be nestled in the heart of Christ, the word of God?*

*Therefore am I a fool to despair in meditation?*

*I will acknowledge my wickedness as I do my need to breathe, present but absent minded, yet  
I will never forget, it is Christ who is enthroned on the mercy seat of my mind; now just as one  
drowning longs for the air they once breathed without care, my sin will always be before me, but  
before it, the grace of God.*

*Now finally, let neither our participation in salvation nor struggle be in vain, let it be righteous  
and worthy,*

*though neither are we,*

*So be it not through deed or fast or knowledge of what is good that we be like Christ,*

*rather in humility, love and mercy, a true reflection of our Christ, Jesus.*

**By Callum Johnstone**

twenty-four hour days, that flood had to be worldwide, and it had to cover the peak of Everest... but when Jesus says "sell everything you have and give it to the poor"... oh well that we have to take figuratively! But we all do this! We all have our things that we feel the need to come up with an explanation for! "It clearly can't mean that - right?" "I don't want it to mean that, because if it means that, then it requires something from me that I don't want to do!" We try to explain away the things that Jesus teaches - because we don't want to do them. All of us can be wilfully blind!

## A Question

As we close, let me ask a question; the two blind men could see who Jesus was, when the Pharisees could not - what do you think: Could they see who Jesus was despite their physical blindness - or it because of it? Because of their stable position in society the Pharisees didn't want to see who Jesus was - they were blind. Because of their need the blind men did! Their illness opened up greater spiritual vision. And so let us reflect on this as we consider our own cries for mercy, and our own pleas for healing. What if your physical blindness gives you spiritual sight? Would you still want

God to heal you? If your physical illness grants you spiritual health, would you still want to be made well? If your financial poverty brings you spiritual riches, do you still want God to fulfil your financial needs? When we develop our spiritual sight we see it is often our hardships that are God's greatest gifts.

Does this mean we never ask God for help, and healing? No! Of course we do! Because we believe that He can do this! Do pray about everything, nothing is too big or too little for God... but... if He doesn't answer your prayer (at least in the way you would like) you don't take that wrongly and say: "He has abandoned me" you don't come to the conclusion "I didn't believe hard enough - I need to believe harder and then God will have to answer my prayer". No - we instead say: "thank you God that you know what is good for me better than I do". "Thank you God that you love me enough to keep me from having money, health, or reputation that I would destroy myself with."

Let us pray, "Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me a sinner - but if my blindness, or my poverty, or my illness be that very mercy, Lord Jesus Christ help me not to despise your gift of mercy."

All glory to Jesus Christ. Amen.

- Doug Clark, St Hilda's, Halifax

## Sermon - True Blindness

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In our gospel reading we have two blind men who follow Jesus crying out "Have mercy on us, son of David!". These men not only followed Jesus down the street - but they even followed him all the way into someone else's house! It appears as though these men were not simply 'trying their luck', wandering down the street shouting "hey Jesus - how about you make us see...!" It appears they were pursuing him with some determination! And notice what they call Jesus - 'Son of David'. What is the significance of this? Simply put - they are calling Jesus the Messiah! These men are blind - but that could 'see' that Jesus was the Messiah!

### Do you Believe?

And so seeing their determination what does Jesus do? He asks them "do you believe that I am able to do this?". It is important we understand Jesus' inquiry, because this question can be really badly misinterpreted in ways that leads to great spiritual confusion, harm, and even abuse. Misunderstanding Jesus' question here has led to the idea of 'faith healers' - that if you just believe enough then God

will heal you of whatever is wrong with you. Therefore - if you visit one of these faith healers and you walk away still ill, disabled, blind... then it's because you didn't believe enough...

In this model, faith is understood as some kind of internal 'thing' that you have to muster up. Something you have to work up inside yourself, but you can never really know if it's enough. But that is not what Christ is talking about here - or anywhere else in Scripture. When Christ says things like "your faith has made you well" He's not saying "well done - you had more faith than all the other blind people in Jerusalem and that's why I am giving you the special treatment"! So what is He saying?

When Jesus asks - "do you believe that I can do this" it's not a question that gets at whether they are enough; it's about whether they believe Christ is enough! "Do you believe I can do it..." This is what faith is - believing God's promises are true and living like they are. God promised Abraham a piece of land on the other side of the world and said: "get up and go" and Abraham got up and went, because he believed that God's promise was

true. Abraham didn't have 'enough' faith, he simply had faith that God was enough.

And so Jesus is saying to these two men "it's one thing to yell in the street, 'Jesus son of David have mercy on us' but do you really believe that is who I am? Do you really believe that I am the one who can make blind people see? Or are you just trying to get attention and money." "Do you believe that I can do this" - "yes Lord" they reply. This is the kind of faith that we must have.

## Trust God

When we are sick or when we are sinful; when we come to God in confession or when we pray to God that we would be made well - we come in faith, believing that God really can forgive us, make us clean, make us well. But faith is not some kind of magic. Faith is not a method of getting God to do what we want him to do: "well if I believe enough then I can guarantee the outcome..." No! Faith is coming to God and telling Him that we believe that if HE wants to, He can make us well; whether that be physically well, or whether that be spiritually well - we believe He can do it... regardless of whether He does or not - because sometimes ... what God wants, is not what we want! I generally want to have no financial

problems, never be sick, and never be tired... that's what I want! But God has very good reasons why He lets all those things happen to me! In order to help me with my humility, to help me grow in patience, to help me grow in prayer, and trust, to help me be a better person than I would be if I didn't have all those problems!

We always assume that we know what's best for ourselves, and it's not always the case - in fact I would go as far as to say - it's hardly ever the case! If you've ever parented a child or owned a dog (these feel like similar pursuits at times) - you know that's not the case! If I allowed them to - my two dogs would eat everything in our fridge - including a couple dozen things that are toxic to dogs, that would rupture their stomachs and kill them. My children - or certainly at least my youngest child (!) - would eat chocolate and ice cream for breakfast if we let her. She would run around all day without any clothes on, climb out of windows, and run down the street! She believes that doing all of these things would make her happy! But her mother and I know that they would make her ill and injured!

For the same reason, because God loves us, He doesn't always give us what we think will make us happy. In fact, sometimes He has

to allow things to happen to us that make us very unhappy in order to save us in the long term; in order to shape us into the image of Christ, in order for us to thrive and become fully human. When God does not answer our prayers the way we would like, it is not due to the lack of our faith, but the fullness of His.

## True blindness

These men - despite their physical blindness - could see who Jesus was and believed that He could heal them. Let us compare these two men with the Pharisees we read about next. After Jesus heals the blind men, He then drives out a demon from another man - and what do the Pharisees say? "It is by the prince of the demons that he casts out demons." You would

think this event is kind of hard to misinterpret! This man is possessed by a demon, everyone agrees it's a demon; the Pharisees agree it's a demon! Jesus casts it out, and the man - now free of the demon - starts praising God! "Oh... this looks like the work of the devil!..." How blind do you need to be to come to that conclusion?

Why are they blind - why can't they see what is so patently obvious? Because they are desperate to find any explanation for what Jesus is doing, that won't require them to follow him. The Pharisees don't like what Jesus is doing, and so they'll go to all kinds of ridiculous conclusions to try to explain away what he's doing, rather than confess the obvious answer - which would require them to change their minds, change their lives, and follow him. It's very easy to sit here in church and laugh at the Pharisees and judge the Pharisees. But I think we should be careful, because I know at least for myself, a lot of times I am more like the Pharisees than I want to admit. I too can come up with some great explanations for why I don't want to do things.

Have you ever noticed that even the people who are the most literal biblicists, insist that the earth was created in six

