

‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth’

All of our hymn books bear testimony to the tremendous contribution of Charles Wesley to the tradition of hymn singing in churches right around the world. Among the favourites in our own hymn book would be hymns such as ‘O for a thousand tongues to sing’ and ‘Christ whose glory fills the skies’. But I have to confess that there are the odd ones that really do not appeal to me. Among these I would number ‘Gentle Jesus, meek and mild’. This leaves me with a rather insipid, almost wimpish, vision of Jesus, the sort of person who gets pushed around in the school yard. So what is Jesus saying when he says ‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.’?

Before tackling that, let us have a look at words from the prophet Isaiah:

5The Lord GOD has opened my ear,
and I was not rebellious,
I did not turn backwards.
6I gave my back to those who struck me,
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;
I did not hide my face
from insult and spitting.
7The Lord GOD helps me;
therefore I have not been disgraced;
therefore I have set my face like flint,
and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
8he who vindicates me is near.
Who will contend with me?
Let us stand up together.
Who are my adversaries?
Let them confront me.
9It is the Lord GOD who helps me;
who will declare me guilty? *Isaiah 50*

These words, from one of the Servant Songs from Isaiah, are traditionally seen as prefiguring Jesus’ sacrificial ministry. In the Gospels this is a role he freely accepts, one that he positively chooses, so there is certainly nothing of the wimp in this.

So maybe the first thing we do is to remind ourselves that Jesus' words in the Beatitudes are 'Blessed are the meek' and not 'Blessed are the weak.' So let us have another look at that word meek, and the word that it translates in the original Greek in which this passage was written, *praei*¹⁰, which has connotations of forgiveness. Again forgiveness can be misinterpreted as a gesture of weakness but as anyone who has really entered in to the whole process of letting go of hurts knows only too well; to forgive is far from weakness, or an easy way out.

'Blessed are the meek.' So who are the meek? Let us take a look at one of Jesus' parables, the parable of the guests at the banquet. Jesus begins by telling of a man who, on entering the banquet hall, takes one of the best seats only to be told to take a place at a lower table. Jesus then tells his hearers:

¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. ¹¹ For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." *Luke 14:10f*

To be meek then is not to exalt one's self, not to stand on your own dignity, not to insist on your own rights and privileges. It is to adopt the mind of Christ, it is, in the words of Paul in his letter to the Philippians to:

be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

^{Phil 2:6} who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,

^{Phil 2:7} but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

^{Phil 2:8} he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death-- even death on a cross. *Philippians 2:2ff*

It is to be one who is prepared to turn the other cheek, who is prepared to go the second mile. It is the way of non-violence, that again is so often misinterpreted as the way of weakness. I recall a time we were visiting the Taize community in France. It was the year after the fall of the Berlin Wall and communist governments all over Europe were swept away. One of the Brothers told our group of a visit he had made earlier in the year to a Parish in a small village in Czechoslovakia. The old priest told him of how for years only a few had attended the Church Sunday by Sunday, how the police had photographed worshippers going in, some losing government jobs as a result, how locals had dismissed them as cranks, asking why they continued. Then he recalled how suddenly the whole system that had sought to eradicate all place for religion had suddenly collapsed. Their faith, their faithfulness and their witness had outlasted a power that seemed invincible.

The way of meekness is to stand with him who gives his back to those who struck him, who gives his cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; who did not hide face from insult and spitting. It is in short to follow the way of the Cross. Jesus said to his followers:

"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶ For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?

Those who save their life will lose it, those who lose their life will find it. It is in this finding and losing and losing and finding that we find our true peace and joy with Christ.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.