



Blessed are those Who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness

St. Matthew 5:6

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June 15, 2008 – Trinity 4

I wonder how many here have really ever experienced dire hunger. A few here are old enough to have lived through the Great Depression. That was the last time of truly great hardship faced in this part of the world. But even as hard as times were during the Depression, starvation wasn't the norm – people made do and they got by.

But in the ancient world – in the world where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount – hunger was a real threat – the kind of hunger that leads to starvation. It was desperate hunger, or at least the real and likely prospect of it, that drove Joseph's brothers to buy grain in Egypt. In 436 BC Rome was hit by a famine so severe that thousands of people threw themselves into the Tiber River, committing suicide the fast way rather than face a long, slow death by starvation. Historians tell us about major famines that hit Europe repeatedly in the Middle Ages that sometimes left whole countries decimated. In the Nineteenth Century, even as our technology advanced and new systems were developed to move goods, including food, all over the world, famine hit places like Ireland and Russia, and hit them badly enough that waves of immigrants from those countries crossed the ocean looking for a better life here. Even in our modern world, millions of people starve in the Third World because there's no practical economic way to get food to them or because corrupt governments direct food shipments elsewhere or sell them to line their own pockets. The pictures we see on TV of starving children and their parents are hard to watch, precisely because we see they're so desperate.

Think of the images of starving children we see on TV. Think of the desperation of those people in ancient Rome who were so hungry they'd rather commit suicide than die by starvation. Think of their great need. And yet every person in the world

has an even greater and more desperate need. It's a spiritual need that can only be satisfied by God through Our Lord Jesus Christ. This was what St. Augustine had in mind when he wrote, "Thou has made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." And so Jesus tells us in the fourth Beatitude:

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. (Matthew 5:6)

Each of us has two basic spiritual needs. In our natural, fallen, and sinful state we may not understand them, but they're always there:

First, we all, at some point, have to come to an understanding of ourselves. I'm not talking in the sense of some kind of pop-psychology self-awareness or self-actualisation. We have to come to an understanding of what we are as we stand in God's presence. This is why in our new service booklet I've put the regular recitation of the Ten Commandments *back* into the service. The liturgy communicates the Gospel to us, but none of us can be ready to hear and receive the Gospel until we understand that we stand condemned by God's Law. The Gospel is for those who understand they need a Saviour – that they can't be righteous enough on their own. And a regular remembrance of the Law that convicts us should make us all the more ready to bring our thanks and praise to the God who has saved us from the penalty of that Law.

This is why God gave Israel the Law in the first place instead of simply sending Jesus to save Adam and Eve the day after they sinned. God wants his people to have a real understanding of the seriousness of our sin and the greatness of his mercy and grace. God gave his Law to the Israelites as a way to teach them how far they had fallen from his standard and just how incapable they were of saving themselves by their good works. The same lesson goes for us just as it did for them. God continues to speak to us and teach us through his holy Word.

The writer of Hebrews tells us:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no

creature is hidden, but all are open and laid bare to the eyes of him with whom we have to do. (Hebrews 4:12-13)

To the Hebrew mind the heart was the seat of a man's passions and personality – it's the breath that God breathed into Adam to make him a living soul. The heart is the inner man we tend to hide in contrast to the outer man that the world sees. So now picture God's divine, two-edged sword, sharp as a razor cutting into your inner self, into your soul, into the seat of your passions, and laying it open, showing you all of your sin and all of your impure motives. God sees all the things we'd rather hide. And sometimes we're even pretty good at hiding them from ourselves, but God's Word cuts deep and lays bare to us what he sees. This is why it's so important that we spend time in God's Word each day. It's why we need to hear his Word preached and taught, because it's through his Word that our eyes are opened and we're made able to see ourselves as God sees us. This is what ultimately leads to our being poor in spirit – knowing that there's nothing good in us. God's Word shows us that everything we value and everything we thought was good, in the words of St. Paul, is nothing but filthy rags.

But as I said, we have *two* great needs. Knowing our sinfulness and inability to save ourselves from the penalty of our sins is the starting point – the first need. But we also need something to fix our situation. We need something or someone who can take away our unrighteousness and make us right before God. His Word shows us our desperation, but it doesn't leave us there – it also points us to the righteousness we need – the righteousness of another – the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

This beatitude as well as the next, showing mercy, comes at a critical point in this list of Christian qualities and characteristics. We need to see just how poor we are and just how great our need is, but knowing our poverty of spirit isn't meant to paralyse us – it should move us to action. God's intent isn't to leave us condemned, but to save us. He shows us our unrighteousness so that he can then point us to the righteousness Christ.

I think the problem for many of us is that we don't understand – we don't get – the intensity what Jesus was communicating to the people who listened to him in First

Century Palestine. As I said earlier, I doubt that any of us have really ever been truly hungry – to the point of starvation. But in a place where famine wasn't that uncommon, where water was a commodity, and where food on the table was only possible with hard work, and when times were tough there were no such things as food stamps and soup kitchens, these people would have understood what it meant to hunger and thirst – I expect that quite a few of them had probably experienced physical hungering and thirsting at some point in their lives. Jesus is talking about that kind of desperation. And the fact is that most of us have never faced that kind of physical desperation. And I think it's also true that most of us have never experienced any kind of corresponding spiritual desperation.

We've never experienced true desperation, and so when we hear him say, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," we think, "Oh, isn't that nice. He's telling us that righteousness is a good thing." No! He's telling us that we should be hungering and thirsting for righteousness with the same level of spiritual desperation that a starving and thirsting man in the desert, on the verge of death, longs for a drop of water or a little morsel of food. He's saying that we ought to be desperate for righteousness the same way those starving kids you see in the TV commercials are desperate for a crumb of bread.

It's not that we don't *want* righteousness in our lives, it's that we don't *desperately hunger and thirst* for it. Part of the problem is that the modern Church doesn't talk much about sin anymore, and if we don't talk about sin we'll never have a true understanding of what we are before God. And so we come to God wanting righteousness, but not coming desperately to him as the only source of that righteousness.

In fact, the pursuit of righteousness isn't really the fashion in today's Church. If you do hunger and thirst for it, people think you're a fanatic. Too many Christians today hunger and thirst for things like spiritual maturity, happiness, the Spirit's power, or effective witnessing skills. Some people in the Church are looking for some kind of vague "blessing" from on high. They're hungering for spiritual experience or they thirst for a

consciousness of God. Martyn Lloyd-Jones writes, "We are not meant to hunger and thirst after experiences; we are not meant to hunger and thirst after blessedness. If we want to be truly happy and blessed we must hunger and thirst after righteousness. We must not put blessedness or happiness or experience in the first place."

But that's what we do. We want to be blessed and happy and so we try shortcuts or we try to short circuit the way God works. We try to find happiness through experience of spiritual "highs." But Jesus tells us that it's not the blessing we're to look for – the blessing is what comes when our longing is for his righteousness.

I think that we also fail to really understand what Jesus means when we talks about righteousness. Ultimately what we should desire isn't some *thing* or some *activity* or some *practice* in our lives – it's to be *right with God*. The problem with the world is sin. When sin entered the human race it cut us off from the perfect fellowship with God that Adam and Eve originally had. Blessedness is the state of having that fellowship with God restored. Sin is what broke it. The absence of sin is what restores it. And so our hungering and thirsting for righteousness starts with our poverty of spirit driving us to the righteousness of Christ. In a legal sense this is what righteousness is: our restoration to a right relationship with God – our unrighteousness being covered by the perfect righteousness of Christ. When Jesus talks about righteousness he's not taking about anything in us or anything we can do – he's talking about what he's ready to give us.

That's how new life starts. But new life grows too. Even after God declares us righteous for Christ's sake, our all-consuming desire should still be to see righteousness in our own lives. We should desire to be free not just from the penalty of our sins, but from the power of them too. That's the problem for us – to put it another way, to hunger and thirst for righteousness also means a desire to be free from every desire for sin. It's relatively easy to mourn for our sin in general, but do we mourn it simply because it results in the breaking of our fellowship with God? Do we mourn our sin because it keeps us from being

blessed? *Or* do we mourn our sin because we know that it's an offence against God? Do we mourn our sin because we don't really want to do it, but would rather be righteous? There's a difference. If we're mourning our sins because of the consequences, it's like being sorry for speeding on the highway, not because you know it's wrong, but because a cop pulled you over and wrote you a ticket. Being sorry you got caught or being sorry because you have to live with the consequences of your sins isn't what Jesus has been talking about. It's easy to mourn that we're sinful in general, but it's harder to mourn specific sins – especially our favourites. It's easy to give up the ones that result in obvious earthly and temporal consequences. It's not so easy to give up the ones that gratify us in private and that no one else knows about.

This is the difference between a vague wanting to be righteous and truly *hungering and thirsting* for it. It's the difference between wanting Christ's righteousness as fire insurance – as a "Get oOut of Hell Free" card – and really wanting to live it. Too much of the time we're okay giving up the big public sins because they'd get us into obvious trouble anyway, but the real test is whether we give up those secret sins we love. If we're not willing to give them up, what we're saying is that we still don't trust God for the good. We're trying to find happiness and blessedness on our own, by our own rules. But in doing that we're telling God that we don't trust him when he speaks through St. Paul saying, "Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights" (James 1:17). Our prayer should be, "O God, make me just as holy as a pardoned sinner can be."

Our hunger for righteousness should result in our own spiritual renovation, but it should also turn us outward to the world. Martin Luther wrote, "The command to you is not to crawl into a corner or into the desert, but to run out...and to offer your hands and feet and your whole body, and to wager everything you have and can do." The rest of what Jesus has to say about our character grows out of this desire not just to be restored to right relationship with God ourselves, but to see the world restored to that right relationship too. We ask for this every time we pray, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." That

isn't a passive prayer we pray as we wait for God to come down from heaven and straighten everyone and everything out. It's an active prayer that asks God to show us what we can do to see righteousness prevail on earth.

The result of our desire for God's righteousness is that he fills us. In the most basic sense, when we come to God, knowing our own sinfulness, contritely confessing it, Christ gives us his own righteousness. But that's only the beginning. Remember what Jesus said to the Samaritan woman:

Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water."...Jesus said to her, "Every one who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (John 4:10, 13-14)

After he had multiplied the bread at Galilee Jesus said to his disciples, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst" (John 6:35). But the fact is that we will hunger and thirst again if we leave the source of our spiritual nourishment. The amazing thing is that as God's renewing grace works in our lives, he keeps opening up new horizons. Beware the person who thinks he's made it and doesn't hunger anymore! As long as we keep coming to him, Christ will feed us, but our desperate hunger will always be with us, because as he satisfies what we're desperate for today, he shows us what we need to hunger for tomorrow. Perfect righteousness waits for us only in heaven where we "shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more...For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water" (Revelation 7:16-17).

Think again of those people in ancient Rome who committed suicide rather than live another day with starvation. Think of the starving kids in Africa and South America we see on TV. Think of that kind of desperation and translate it into spiritual terms. And now consider that our

spiritual need is a million times greater than any physical need we can ever have. We live here on earth for at most maybe a hundred years, but Jesus is talking about eternity. He gives us a very simple promise: where there is this kind of desire for righteousness, there will be a filling – and the filling will be Christ himself. He is the living water. If we drink from his well, we will never thirst again. He is the bread of eternal life, who promised that, "he who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35).

Have you drunk deeply at that well and fed on that bread? Or are you still feeding on the things that can never fully satisfy? This morning we come to Our Lord's Table, and here he gives us the sign and seal of the new life, of the perfect righteousness, that only he can give. As we come to his Table here's something to think about. When you bring a starving man – a man desperate for food – to your table, does he take a little nibble, maybe even a whole mouthful, and then wander away because there's something else more engaging: family, sports, fishing, golf – something else that he'd rather be doing. No he stays at the table as long as there's food and he eats until he's full.

Because we so often fail to see just how desperate we are – maybe because we don't spend enough time in prayer and in God's Word – but because we fail to realise our desperation, we often become part-time Christians. We come to Christ and take a nibble, then head off to do our own thing. The Lord sets his Table here and invites us every week, but we go off and do the things we'd rather do, not realising we're spiritually in need. Worse yet, we may come here every Sunday, but we leave our new life in Christ at the door. We're Christians here, but the rest of the week we live with little thought for God.

You see, he's the vine; we're the branches. But we forget that once we were dry, brittle, dead wood. It's only because Christ has grafted us into himself, the living vine, that we have been given new life. We are his body. We have been made one with him and find our life as part of that body. As members of his body, it's his flesh and blood that give us life. And so he gives us physical bread and wine here at his Table, but this bread

and this wine are the outward and visible sign of the inner spiritual life he has given us. He is the only one who can satisfy our hunger and our thirst. We ought to be coming to him desperately. When we're sent off to love and serve him in the world outside these walls, we ought to be doing so out of joy for what he's done. We were spiritually starving and he fed us. How can we not go out with joy to serve him. And if we go out to joyfully serve him all week – and that's what *true and real* worship is all about. How can we tell him, "No thanks," next week when he calls us back to his Table. If that's our response to what he has done for us, we're falling far short of hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

Again, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." The Divine Son of God has set his Table and invites us to partake of his spiritual food. He invites us saying, "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst." Come and eat. Go out joyfully to serve. And come back again in joy to give God thanks and praise for what he's done.

Please pray with me: Gracious Father, we give you thanks and praise for your great mercy. When we rebelled against you, it was you who came after us, sending your own son to die so that we can be reconciled to you. Father, gives us an understanding of the desperate spiritual situation we're in. Forgive us for so often being blasé about righteousness. Fill us with your Spirit that we may truly hunger and thirst for the righteousness you offer to us in the person of Jesus Christ, and give us a great hunger and thirst to see that righteousness in our lives. We ask this, Father, in the name of the one who has come to give us the righteousness we do not have, Jesus Christ. Amen.