

2. HOMILY 6: ON THE BEATITUDES (= PG44; 1264B; GNO VII.I.136–148)

‘Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.’ [Matt. 5, 8], What people normally experience when they look down from some lofty promontory upon some mighty sea, that is the experience of my mind as I peer down from the height of the Lord’s voice, as from some mountain peak, upon the inexhaustible depth of my thoughts. In seaside districts one not infrequently comes across a mountain split down the centre. The part that faces the sea has been worn away to smoothness from top to bottom. In the upper part, however there is a sharp projection, gazing towards the deep. Anyone looking down from such a high promontory into the sea beneath would be quite dizzy. In the same way, my soul also is dizzy (*ilingia*), as it is caught up in this mighty word of the Lord: ‘Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God.’ God lies before us as a vision for those who have been made pure of heart,⁵ the same God, as the great John declares, ‘God, whom no one has ever seen’ [John 1, 18]. The lofty Paul is in agreement with this when he says ‘God no man can see’ [I Tim. 6, 15]. This is the smooth sheer rock which provides no foothold for itself in our thoughts. In the same way, Moses, in his own teaching on the subject, insisted that it was in no way possible for the human mind to come close to God, seeing that all power of grasping had been worn away through abstraction, ‘For’ he says, ‘it is not possible for anyone to see God and live’ [Exod. 33, 20].

‘But’, you urge, ‘eternal life is seeing God’. Yet the impossibility of this is urged upon us by the pillars of our faith, John, Paul and Moses. Do you not perceive the dizziness with which the soul is drawn to the depth of what it has contemplated? If God is life, he who sees him fails to see life itself. Yet the inspired prophets and apostles are agreed that God cannot be seen. If so, what role does hope perform for human beings? Even so, the Lord supports our wavering hope, even as he did in the case of Peter who was in danger of drowning, by setting him safe on the firm and solid surface of the water [cf. Matt. 14, 28–31]. If the hand of the Word comes to us and supports us upon some firm idea in the whirl of our speculations, we shall be freed from fear, as we take a firm hold on the Word that takes us by the hand. For he says, ‘Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God’ [Matt. 5, 8].

The promise is so great that it vastly exceeds the highest bound of blessedness. What could anyone possibly desire after such a good as that, since he already has everything possible in what he has seen? In scriptural usage, seeing means the same as possessing. So it is that when Scripture says, ‘May you see the goods of Jerusalem’ [Ps. 127, 6] it means the same as ‘May you find’. Similarly, when it (sc. Scripture) says, ‘Let the wicked be removed so as not to see the glory of the Lord’ [Isa. 26,10] the prophet means by ‘not seeing’ the same as ‘not sharing in’. Therefore, whoever has seen God has possession through that sight of whatever is contained in the list of good things, that is, life without end, everlasting freedom from corruption, immortal happiness, a kingdom

that knows no end, unceasing joy, true light, the spiritual and sweet voice, unapproachable glory, perpetual rejoicing, the complete good.

Seeing, however, that the manner of rejoicing has been shown to depend upon purity of heart, once again my mind finds itself in a state of dizziness, in case purity of heart turns out to be something impossible and wholly beyond our reach. For if that is the way forward to see God, and Moses did not see him and Paul laid it down that neither he nor anybody else could see him, it would appear that there is something impossible lying before us in this beatitude. For what profit is there in knowing how God is seen if we lack the power to implement this promise?

It is rather like saying, 'It is a blessed thing to be in heaven, because there we shall see things that are not visible in the world beneath'. If there were some method of transportation to heaven described by Scripture, it would be of some advantage to those who were told to learn that it was a wonderful thing to be there. But as long as the upward journey is an impossibility, what possible advantage does this knowledge of heavenly happiness convey? It merely saddens those who have learnt of it to discover what they are deprived of through the impossibility of the upward journey.

Does, then, the Lord exhort us to something beyond our nature? Has he exceeded the bounds imposed on human capacity by the immenseness of his command? Not so. He does not bid wingless creatures fly, nor those to live under the water whose allotted realm is the dry land. If then in every other case the law is adapted to those who receive the ordinances, and enjoins nothing above nature, we are surely at liberty to conclude that the prescription of the beatitude is not without hope of fulfilment.

How then could John and Paul and Moses and any like them have fallen short of the lofty beatitude, whose essence consists in the vision of God, neither Paul who says, 'A crown of righteousness is laid up for me, which the just judge will give me' [2 Tim. 4, 8], nor he who lay on the breast of Jesus [cf. John 13, 25; 21, 20], nor he who heard from the divine voice, 'I have known thee above all' [Exod. 33, 17]. If, then, we cannot doubt that they are blessed 'who are proclaimed to have possessed a superhuman knowledge of God, and blessedness depends on seeing God and seeing God on being pure of heart, purity of heart, through which our blessedness is assured, cannot be an impossibility.

How then can we say that those speak the truth who with Paul claim that the knowledge of God is beyond our power? Should we not say that the voice of the Lord himself contradicts them in promising the vision of God to those who are pure of heart?

It seems to me that it would be an excellent idea to discuss the matter briefly to ensure that our investigation of the subject in hand proceeds in an orderly manner. The divine nature in and of itself, whatever its essential character, lies beyond our human

apprehension. It is unapproachable and inaccessible to human conjectures. There has never been found among men anyone to grasp the ungraspable with the human intelligence, nor has there ever been found a method of comprehending the incomprehensible. For this reason, the great apostle calls his ways 'unsearchable' [Rom. 11, 33]. He means by that that the road which leads to the knowledge of the divine essence cannot be trodden by human reasoning, for as yet none of those who have gone before us on the road have provided us with a trace of how He may be grasped by a knowledge which is above all knowledge. He who by nature is above every nature, He who is both beyond the senses and beyond the mind, is seen and grasped by some other method.

There are many methods of such understanding. So, for example, it is possible by means of the wisdom that can be seen in all things [cf. Ps. 103, 24] to have some sort of perception of him who made all things in wisdom. In much the same way in human constructions, some perception of the artist may be inferred from looking at his creations, on the assumption that his work displays his art. But it is not the actual nature of the artist that is so revealed, but only the artistry that he has displayed in his work.

In a similar way we may look at the order of creation and so receive an impression of the wisdom not of the nature of him who ordered all things in wisdom [Rom. 1, 20]. Again, if we consider the cause of our own life, and remember that God made us not out of necessity, but out of a good choice [cf. Plato, *Timaeus* 48A 1–2; Plotinus *Enn.* iii.ii.2.33–36], in this way too we can speak of seeing God, becoming aware of his goodness, not of his essence. In a similar way, whatever else raises the mind to a better and nobler conception, each and every one of these we can call knowledge of God, each of these noble ideas bringing God before our eyes. Power, purity, immutability and freedom from the opposite, imprints upon our souls the image of a divine and noble idea.

What has been said displays after a fashion the truth of the Lord, who promised the vision of God to the pure of heart. Nor, again, is Paul a liar when he displays in his own words that he has not seen God nor can see him [cf. Eph. 1, 19; 3, 7; Phil. 3, 21]. For God who is by nature beyond our sight is visible in his activities (*energeiai*), being perceived in the characteristics (*idiomata*) that surround him.⁶

But the ability to infer something of the nature of the agent from his activity is not the sole purpose of the beatitude. Some perception of the supreme wisdom and power of God might perhaps be available to the wise men of this world by inspecting the harmonious order of the universe to the children of this world. The nobility of the beatitude seems to indicate something further for those capable of receiving this advice. The idea that occurs to me will be clarified by examples. In human life bodily health is a good. But the blessing derives not simply from knowing the nature of health but actually from being

healthy. For if someone discoursed on the excellence of health while living on a sickly and unwholesome diet, what advantages did he derive from his praises of health, if his own life is worn out by illnesses? So, too, ought we to understand the text that lies before us, namely that the Lord is insistent that blessedness consists not so much in knowing God as in having God within.

‘Blessed are pure of heart, for they shall see God’ [Matt. 5, 8]. It does not appear that God is offering a face to face vision of Himself to those who have purified the ‘eye of the soul’.⁷ Instead the nobility of the saying perhaps means, what is elsewhere stated with greater clarity, that ‘the kingdom of God is within us’ [Luke 17, 21]. By this we are to learn that whoever has cleansed his heart from every passionate disposition, perceives in his own inner beauty the image of the divine nature.

By means of the few words he spoke, the divine Word seems to contain the following advice,

Men, whichever of you longs to have sight of absolute goodness, do not lose hope of ever beholding the object of your desire, when you hear that the divine splendour is raised above the heavens, that its glory cannot be told, that its beauty is past telling and its nature cannot be grasped. For what you are able to grasp is the measure within you of the knowledge of God, for he who made you formed you in the beginning, at the same time adorned you with such goodness.

When you were first created God imprinted upon you reflections of his own nature not unlike someone impressing the form of a seal upon wax. Vice, however, poured round this godlike character, has made the good in you of no value, hidden as it is by base coverings. If you, however, by a careful manner of life, were to wash away the filth that has become coated over the soul, your own godlike beauty will shine out. The same sort of thing happens with iron. Once it has been freed of rust by the whetstone, what was previously black now shines out with its own rays to the sun and affords great brilliance.

Your inner man, which the Lord calls the heart, is like that. Once it has scraped off the rust like incrustations that grow on the soul like a sort of evil mould, it will recover its likeness to its archetype and will be good. For good is in all respects like the good. Therefore, whoever sees himself sees within himself the object of this longing and so the pure of heart becomes blessed, for by contemplating his own purity he sees the archetype in the image. In a similar way, those who contemplate the sun in a mirror, even though they do not look straight at the sun, see the sun no less in the ray in the mirror than do those who look directly at the circle of the sun. So too you, even though you be inadequate for the contemplation of the unapproachable light, if you return to the grace of

the image which was planted in you at the beginning, you will find what you look for within you.

What is the deity but purity, freedom from passion and separation from every kind of evil? If these things be in you, then assuredly God himself is within you. As soon as the power of reasoning within you is unmixed with any kind of vice, free from passion and separated from all manner of defilement, then you will be blessed by great sharpness of sight, because in your purified condition you will know what, to those who have not been so purified, remains unseen. Once the material mist has been stripped away from the eyes of the soul, you will see in the pure clarity of your heart the 'blessed vision'⁸ brightly. What then is it? Purity, holiness, simplicity, all the lightful rays of the divine nature, through whom God is seen.

That these things are so from what has been said no one will dispute, yet the initial difficulty seems nowhere nearer to a solution. As he who is in heaven has a share in the heavenly wonders, whereas inability to ascend thus high means that we gain no profit from what we profess, in the same way no one will doubt that purity of heart is a passport to happiness, yet the mode of being freed from such defilement is not unlike the ascent to heaven.

What ladder of Jacob, what fiery chariot of Elijah lifting him to the heavens will be found, whereby our heart may be raised heavenward and shake off its earthly burden? If anyone thinks of the soul's necessary passions, he will at once admit how difficult and hard it is to be freed from the evils that surround us. Our very birth is the fruit of passion, growth takes place by its means, our life terminates in it. Evil has been intermingled with our nature from the outset, because of those who received passion into themselves at the beginning by disobeying and so giving the disease a home in themselves. And, as in every species of living being, the same nature persists as one follows the other, so that as far as nature itself is concerned, what comes into existence is identical with that whence it came, so it is that man comes from man, the passionate from the passionate, the sinner from the sinner. In some sense, therefore, sin comes to exist along with things that come to be. It is born with it, grows alongside it and ceases only when life is ended.

Virtue, on the other hand, is hard to come by and demands much sweat and labour, and is achieved only with much seriousness and struggle. This is the lesson we have often learnt from the divine Scripture when we hear 'that the road that leads to the kingdom is narrow and hard' [Matt. 7, 13; 14]. On the other hand, the road that destroys life is broad, downward and easy to walk on. Scripture never defines the higher life as totally beyond us, especially as it lays before us in the holy books the wonders of so many men.

There are two distinct ideas contained in the promise of seeing God. The first is actually knowing the nature of him who is totally above us; the second is being mingled with him through the purity of our lives. As to the first manner of knowing, the voice of the saints lays it down as being an impossibility for us. The second the Lord promises to human nature through his present teaching, when he says; ‘Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God’ [Matt. 5, 8].

But how this purity may be achieved you can discover by examining nearly all the teaching of the gospel. By examining its exhortations one by one, you will find a clear account of the meaning of purity of heart. There he (sc. Christ) distinguishes two types of vice in words and in deeds. The former, that is the evil manifested in action, is castigated in the old law. But now he has laid down the law about another type of sin. He does not punish the evil action so much, but tries instead to ensure that the evil shall not occur in the first place. He does this by removing vice from the will and in this way distancing life itself even further from evil deeds.

Vice is many sided and has many faces, and to each of the forbidden things, he has offered a remedy through his own exhortations. Because each of us suffers from the weakness of anger throughout the whole of our lives, he begins his healing from a higher ground, by laying down absence of anger⁹ as an ideal at the outset. He says [cf. Matt. 5, 21–22], ‘You have been taught by the old law, you shall not kill, now you must learn to distance your soul from anger against your brothers.’ He does not absolutely inhibit anger —sometimes we can use such a spiritual impulse for a good purpose— but what he does forbid absolutely is an angry disposition towards one’s own brother for no good purpose. He says, ‘Whoever is angry with his brother without good reason’ (though this is not in the text of Matthew, or in the *apparatus criticus*). The addition of the qualification, *eikhi*, shows that often enough the use of anger can be quite appropriate, when our passion is aroused for the correction of sin. This type of anger Scripture ascribed to Phinees when by his slaughter of the lawless he propitiated the anger of God against the people [Num. 25, 6–11].

He moves on thence to the healing of sins committed through pleasure and by his command removes the improper desire for fornication from the heart [Matt. 5, 27–32]. So you will find the Lord correcting the rest, one by one, in order, by his precepts emending every species of evil. By forbidding us even the right to self defence he prevents the unjust use of our hands. He exiles the passion of greed by commanding us to give even what is left over to him who would take something from us [Matt. 5, 39–40]. He cures our cowardice by bidding us despise death [Matt. 10, 28]. So, in general, you will find through each of the commandments the dissecting Word [cf. Heb. 4,12]¹⁰ acting like a plough, rooting out the evil roots of sin from the depths of the heart and, in this way, securing purification from the crop of thorns.

In both these ways, therefore, does he benefit our nature; he promises us what is good and offers us teaching to help us on our way thither. If the zeal needed for good things seems to you burdensome, throw in your lot with the opposite life and you will discover that vice is even more demanding, that is, if you attend not to the immediate present but to what follows. The very sound of hell will serve to separate a man from his sinful pleasures without any labour or zeal. Fear by itself, once it has taken root in his thoughts, will of itself be sufficient to do away with his passions.

One might increase one's desire even further simply by considering what is implied, rather than stated, by the beatitude. If the pure of heart are blessed, those whose minds are filthy are surely much to be pitied, simply because they contemplate the face of the adversary. If the divine character is imposed upon us by a virtuous life, it is quite clear that a vicious life takes upon itself the form and features of the adversary (sc. the devil). God is variously named by each of the many good things we predicate of him; light, life, immortality and other things of the sort. In like fashion the inventor of evil¹¹ will be named from the opposite qualities; darkness, death, corruption and whatever else shares the same nature as these.

Once we have discovered in what ways vice and virtue are formed, seeing that we possess freedom of choice in both directions, let us fly from the form of the devil and take upon ourselves the likeness of God. Let us become pure of heart that we may be blessed, as the divine image is formed in us through the purity of our lives, in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory for ever and ever Amen.