

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God

Good morning St George's.

I got an email from Bruce Nicholls this week saying he was anticipating this Sunday as the 'high point' of the Beatitudes. He reminded me that all the world faiths have a deep searching for purity, with different paths and means of achieving this. Ramadan.

But what is purity of heart?

Dreary Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote a book called 'Purity of heart is to will one thing.' The pure in heart are those whose devotion is not alloyed, not mixed. They are single-minded, simple. They are marked by a wholeness, integrity of being. There is a purity to children, not because they do no wrong, but because they are simple.

We learn over time duplicity, to hide ourselves. The pharisees were masters of hiding. "You give a tenth of your spices but you have neglected the more important matters of the law— justice, mercy and faithfulness." Hiding in complexity of the Law. As Genesis 3 reminds, the story of hiding is central to human nature. We learn to wear masks as we go about our life. We get so comfortable in these different masks that we dare not take them off. We live lies so often. Sharon Hymer "Secrets are concerned with splits - splits between ourselves and others in our lives, splits within our own psyches, and splits between ourselves and God."

Self-Deception in 1 Jn 1:5-10

This is the heart of the problem in the reading from 1 John. Self-deception is pointed out three times in different ways in the five verses we heard from 1 John.

- (v 6) If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in darkness, we lie
- (v 8) If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us
- (v 10) If we say that we have not sinned, we make (God) a liar, and his word is not in us.

John assumes that we are sinners. Walking in the light clearly does not mean achieving some sort of moral perfection, but truth-making. Therefore, perhaps we can think about purity of heart as being in terms self-deception and truth-making, rather than without sin. Purity of heart is a way of living that harmonises every facet of life with the presence and light of God. So, how does John invite us into walking into the light? By truth-telling, by confession. V. 9 'If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'

Confession

I want to suggest that some practice of confession is a core pathway to purity of heart. And that is not just because I am writing my thesis on confession. But I do have to confess, that I put my hand up for this topic because I figured I could kill two birds with one stone so to speak - preaching on it gives me an opportunity to clarify some of my thinking.

Thesis: Confession as healing remedy, and how narrative ideas might inform our practice.

Early Church thinkers employed imagery that is therapeutic rather than judicial. Confession does not merely bestow absolution from guilt, but on a deeper, more organic level it confers healing and restoration to wholeness. Sin is disease, to go to confession is to enter the hospital. If sin is disease or wounds, (and Jesus uses this understanding when he is asked why he hangs out with sinners, he replies, it is not the healthy that need a physician but the sick), then we might think of purity, not in terms of the absence of wounds, but wounds that are clean and healing in the light, rather than festering in the darkness. Susan Pitchford writes: "Our first impulse is to keep these wounds well bandaged and out of sight: we don't want to discuss them, see them, or think about them. But another thing I know from having been a nurse is that a lot of wounds heal best when exposed to air and light. The Church knows this too, which is why it provides us with the tools for healing our wounds and being reconciled to God." So purity of heart is not so much moral perfection, rather clean wounds instead of festering ones. Wounded healers. Caravaggio image.

1. Healing Power of bringing things into the light

Bonhoeffer: "Sin demands to have a person by themselves. It withdraws them from the community. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. **In the darkness of the unexpressed it poisons the whole being of a person.**"

Cottrell ++York: To make a confession of sin is simply to do in an open, vulnerable, and transparent way what every Christian should be trying to do every day, which is to bring our lives, and especially those things that are still hidden in darkness, into the light of Christ."

But you may think, why can't I just confess it to God, why do I have to talk to someone else?

Well, of course can do that. And God is ready and waiting to forgive and Embrace like the prodigal's father. But, if we find it easier to confess to God than another human, Bonhoeffer says "we must ask ourselves whether we have not often been deceiving ourselves with our

confession of sin to God, whether we have not rather been confessing our sins to ourselves and also granting ourselves absolution.” An apology that is not expressed is simply not an apology. **It is also for our benefit.** Externalising concretises the confession and forgiveness. We might second guess, wondering, are we simply forgiving ourselves. But to hear another person, after hearing a confession, say: you are still loved. You are still welcome. You are forgiven. Gives us assurance of that forgiveness!

We do it for our sakes, not God’s. The all-knowing One does not learn anything new in a confession, rather the maker of confession gets to know about themselves. Bringing things burdening us into the light helps and heals us, so we can walk in light.

2. Confession restores relational connection

Returning to John’s letter. John writes, “but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with...” What might we expect here? God or Christ?

But what does John say? V. 7 “if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.” Living pure (simple, unalloyed, clean) lives, living in the light without self-deception leads to true and deep fellowship with each other. Whoever is committed to ‘truth-making’ comes into the light. And fellowship with each other is the most obvious consequence of ‘truth-making.’

What does this mean? When the masks are up, we can think, oh this community at St Georges accepts me, but if they really knew... If they really knew where my mind goes... If they really knew those shadow thoughts. If they really knew how I speak to my family, they wouldn’t accept me. Only once sin is confessed and we find that we are still welcome and loved do we find true fellowship as gathering of sinners, not saints.

What’s the implication for us as a Church? There is a connection between our truth-making and the quality of the communities we create.

Returning to the Sharon Hymer quote I shared at the beginning: “Secrets are concerned with splits - splits between ourselves and others in our lives, splits within our own psyches, and splits between ourselves and God. Once we confess, we realize that we are no longer isolated as we recommit ourselves to God and to the community of the faithful.” When we get our stories straight, when the masks come down, there we find true fellowship.

More to be said.

Much more could be said about the liberating and life-giving power of confession. But I wanted to focus on those two aspects that I see play out in our reading. Bringing things into the light to lead us to purity & the affect that truth-making has on our fellowship.

Application

So what's the application of this? What are we going to do about it? Traditionally, Lent has been a time, for doing a spoken Confession to another person, as a preparation for Easter. We're two weeks out from Easter. So if there is something particular that has been weighing heavily on you. Or something that has been swept under the carpet to forget about it. But you can't quite ignore your lumpy carpet. Maybe the Spirit has been highlighting something for you. I would encourage you to consider a concrete, spoken confession. Trust. Safe. Accountable – mutual? Reconciliation of a penitent.

Baggage: I am aware some people may have baggage around this topic, where it was perhaps coercive or abusive. If that's the case, talk to somebody about it. I believe in the healing power of externalisation, even when it is not things we have done wrong, but even the wrong that has been done to us.

Confession not reconciliation or restitution: Those are important. Restitution can be liberating, and it is sometimes necessary. However, sometimes we can be eager to offload and immediately might not be the best time to seek to make amends. Step 9 of 12 step programs is to make amends only if doing so would not further injure the relationship.

Examen: If the idea of confession seems a bit too much, a bit too full on, or you don't feel like you have anything specific that you would bring to it. Then you might want to consider if you don't already do so, a daily practice of Examen leading up until Easter.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

It is only in the light, and by the light do we see God. When the masks come down. Confession is one way we walk in the light, the light by which we know God, and know ourselves. In the darkness of the unconfessed, sin keeps alone, but in confession, the forgiving work of Jesus Christ is made real in the mouths of our brothers and sisters. We see God in the face of each other. **1 John 2:1-2** 'May it be the real I who speaks. May it be the real Thou that I speak to.' C. S. Lewis