Book 9

Palm Sunday, March 30, 1980

"BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART" Luke 19:28-40, Matthew 5:8

"Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God." When Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, some people asked, "Who is this man?" Others greeted him with the shout, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord."

Different people saw Jesus in different ways. Some individuals who were motivated by their patriotism and their hope for national freedom, saw in him a political leader and a potential deliverer.

Some who wanted nothing more than to be left alone to pursue their own interests and to follow their own ways saw in him only the center of a colorful procession, the object of a popular demonstration that for the moment was disturbing their peace.

Some who were entrenched in privilege, reaping benefit from the exploitation of vested interests, like the chief priests and other religious authorities, saw in him a threat to their privileges, and they met him with open hostility.

And some missed the event completely. There was a city going about its business almost unaware of the little procession and demonstration. Oh to be sure the noise and clamor piqued their curiousity for a moment and the merchants looked out from their stalls and the housewives peered out through latticed windows in wonderment. But when all they saw was a Galilean peasant on a donkey and a crowd of pilgrims in up-country smocks, no one cared for long what it was. The merchants turned again to the arrangement of their stocks to catch the eye of the increasing crowd of pilgrims.

Each person who saw Jesus, responded to him according to the hopes he or she cherished and the assumptions on which each based his or her life.

But there were some who saw in this man on a donkey, a vision of God. They had been moved by the truth of his teachings, strengthened by the contagion of his faith, redeemed by the power of his gracious compassion, and thus they saw in Jesus, a message from God, a vision of God's

intention for all human beings; they saw God's love revealed in a new way in this person. "Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God."

The pure in heart saw God in Christ on Palm Sunday! The others saw nothing at all unusual, or saw what they wanted to see.

"Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God." The pure in heart among us have always seen God where most of the rest of us have missed God. There are examples of this throughout the Old and New Testaments of the Bible and examples throughout the history of the human race.

The "pure in heart," the shepherds, saw God in a manger on the first Christmas. Other people saw nothing but a baby in a feedbox. The pure in heart saw God on a cross on Good Friday. Incredible! Most people saw nothing but a trouble-maker being put to death.

We usually think of seeing God only in the lovely things of life. We habitually talk of God in terms of love, beauty, goodness, so much so that when we face a situation in our personal experience or in the world at large where love, beauty and goodness seem singularly absent, we lose all sense of God. "Where is God?" we ask.

But if the only God we have is a God who is seen only in the lovely things of life, in its beauty and graciousness, in the light of a glorious sunset or sunrise, or in the beauty of nature or the miracle of a new born baby, then when we find ourselves in some tough dismaying experience in a desert where beauty, goodness and loveliness are absent, we are without God.

Not so for the pure in heart! Because of their purity of heart, they see God in many unlikely places and events. In the Old Testament, Moses experienced God in a burning bush, when he was in a very depressed mood. Elijah experienced God while hiding in a cave at the lowest point of his life. Job, in the midst of his tragedy proclaimed, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee." The Bible is filled with such experiences. In the New Testament, there is the crucifixion. Who, casually looking on would have thought God there?

But there were those pure in heart who saw God on the cross in the person of Jesus Christ. And countless people since that time have seen Calvary as holy ground. It is not accident that the pure in heart find God in some of the most unlikely places.

Soft occasions do not often bring out the deepest in human beings. Where did Jesus say, "Not my will, but thine be done?" In Gethsemane, before facing the trial and cross. When did Martin Luther write, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God?" When he was risking his life.

Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. But note this also, when anyone thus sees God in unlikely places, we can be fairly sure that he or she first found God in some likely places. Some beauty touched his or her life, some love blessed the person, some goodness made that person aware of God. It's not always easy to find God in unlikely places, but if we begin with find God in the more likely places, then we are more sure to discover God in the unlikely places as well.

"Blessed are the pure in heart." If the pure in heart see God in both likely and unlikely places, what is it that gives them this clarity of vision? What does it mean to be pure in heart?

1. First of all, to be pure in heart does not mean to be morally perfect, to be without sin or mistakes, or to think only pure thoughts. Nor does it mean one who always obeys all the rules without question.

Furthermore being pure in heart does not mean that one is naive, the kind of person who never sees evil or meanness in people or in the world. In fact the pure in heart are more able to distinguish between good and evil that most others.

The pure in heart do not gloss over evil and tragedy and suffering as if they did not exist. Rather the pure in heart are those who are able to see beyond such things. When Helen Keller said about her blindness and deafness--"I thank God for my handicaps, for through them I have found myself, my work and my God," that is being able to transcend suffering and tragedy. That is being pure in heart.

The Bible says, "And Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was." What a place to find God! Nevertheless that kind of experience has made history.

The pure in heart then are those who have enough understanding and depth to see through the darkness and thus see God.

2. Secondly, to be pure in heart means to be one who is all the time searching for the truth, always seeking and always knowing that he or she never has all the truth. Those who had made up their minds that they already knew all the truth missed God in Christ on Palm Sunday. To be pure in heart means to always be open to new truth which is forever coming our way.

Thus the person who is pure in heart is never afraid to examine his or her prejudices, preconceptions and assumptions. One who thinks he or she knows it all and has a closed mind, cannot be pure in heart.

3. Thirdly, to be pure in heart means that one does not harbor hate or resentment. We all feel hate and resentment at times, but harboring such feelings, hanging onto them, keeping them and cultivating them is another matter. Thus the pure in heart do not seek revenge, do not rejoice at wrong, but are kind loving, forgiving and gentle people.

The pure in heart do not try to mislead people, are not devious and underhanded. Their motives are transparent and they are open and honest and straightforward in their approach.

For these reasons, the pure in heart see God in all kinds of situations and in all kinds of persons. They don't wear the blinders that most of us wear.

The pure in heart can see God in a broken-down drunk, in an inmate in prison, in a juvenile delinquent, in a senile person in a nursing home, in the cripple who can barely walk, in the leper, in the hippy and the square. Those who are not willing to examine their assumptions cannot see God in any of these places because they have already decided that God would not be there. That's why many people missed God in Christ on Palm Sunday and missed God in Christ on the cross and God in Christ in the manger.

Jesus Christ treated people the way he did because he saw a part of God in them. Jesus saw God in the woman about to be stoned to death as a result of being caught in the act of adultery. Jesus saw God in Matthew the tax collector. He saw God in Zaccheaus. He saw God in the lonely widow. He saw God in the poor and in the down and out. Once you begin to see God in persons and events, you begin to act differently.

Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. The pure in heart see God at work in the movments for justice and peace.

The pure in heart are in many ways like little children. That's why Jesus told his followers that unless we become like little children we will never see the kingdom of God. The wonder of little children is that they have so few pre-conceptions and prejudices until they learn them from us. Until then, they can see much that is around them that we miss. Children see God almost everywhere.

But there's hope for all of us. No matter what our age, we can be pure in heart and therefore see God. For some of us to be pure in heart will mean that we will have to slow down. So many people race through life, not really tasting, smelling, seeing, feeling or hearing.

Slow down and you will begin to see God in some unlikely places. To be pure in heart is to gain a new perspective. To be pure in heart is to work at seeing the best in people and not just the worst. Haven't you known people that called forth the best in you? That person saw something in you that you had forgotten about or didn't realize was there. The pure in heart see things we do not see. This is exactly what Jesus Christ did with almost every person he met. He saw something of God in human beings which others often did not see and called it forth.

Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. This vision of God which the pure in heart have goes far beyond anything we can imagine. Being pure in heart changes us. It means we can watch the evening news night after night on television without getting overwhelmed. It means we can read the daily newspaper from beginning to end without total despair. It means we can come to terms with the dull spots, the bad times and the hard places in any job.

The reason the pure in heart can carry on is because in this whole crazy and often mixed-up world, we get a glimpse of God working here and there and it keeps us going.

A young social worker once asked an old priest, "What's your idea of a blasphemous remark?" The old man nodded, accepting the question, and then saw down and thought about his answer for a long time. Finally, he looked at the young social worker and answered the question like this, "How about, 'too good to be true?'" That's a blasphemous remark, because what is there that can be too good to be true? Those who learn to see God in the world around them are never caught up in the short end of things. They come to know that God works even in those situations which seem hopeless.

Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God. My hope is that all of us will be seeing God more and more in these coming days and weeks and that we will see God in both the likely and unlikely places. Amen.