



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

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Sunday, January 30, 2005
The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

*Choral Eucharist
at 11am*

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, Rector
on
Matthew 5:1-12

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REMEMBER WHO YOU ARE

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

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.

“Now let me hear your prayers,” her father said, tucking her snugly into bed and kissing her on the forehead. It was a cherished ritual that she had done with him or her mother or both of them as far back as she could remember. Usually it was, “Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take.” [Her younger brother’s version was, “If I should die before my wake...” until his parents at last corrected him.] Then, “God bless Mommy and Daddy and my brother and all my aunts and uncles and Grandmas and Grandpas and cousins (and insert all sorts of friends and animals) and please make me a good girl.” But not only did she most certainly want to be a good girl (and she was a good girl), she was growing up; ten years old and in the fifth grade. “No, Dad,” she said. “I want to say my prayers by myself now.” Once, she had asked her father what an angel looked like, because she was sure she had seen one on the rooftop in the bright sunlight. She was ready to speak to Jesus all by herself. So her Dad left her to pray alone.

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

It was late into the night, after one of those rare, truly delectable clergy dinners. Asked to stay on after the other clergy guests had departed, the retired bishop, following dessert and a little port wine, confessed to his host, the young priest, “Did you know that I stayed away from church for an entire year?” The young priest, a rector, had just asked the retired bishop if he would like to “have an altar” at his parish to celebrate the Eucharist at quiet weekday services, and the bishop’s eyes glistened as they filled with water. His wife had died after a long illness. There had been some ugly church politics that had hurt him. Many of the beloved and familiar landmarks that he depended on as a traditional churchman were gone, and he felt more alone than he had ever felt in his life. He was moved by the invitation, now that he was in his old age, to begin again simply as a priest, celebrating the holy mysteries. Had he somehow, like Nicodemus, been moved by the Spirit of God to be born again?

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

Today's Gospel is the sublime beginning of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Saint Matthew. Our portion of the Gospel is The Beatitudes, in which Jesus pronounces his blessing on spiritual dispositions that fit us for life in heaven while they leave us vulnerable according to conventional wisdom on earth. The poor in spirit, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, among others, are hardly the people slated for success in the world, let alone New York.

I recall evil old Mordred in the great 1960s musical, *Camelot*, singing his wickedly good song, "The Seven Deadly Virtues." [In the Rector's study up on the sixth floor are the seven virtues in the stained glass windows on the east wall; on the west wall are the seven vices. I have to say, the vices are much more interesting!] Mordred gives voice to the world's satire on the Beatitudes – for example, his line, "I find humility means to be hurt. It's not the earth the meek inherit, it's the dirt."

¹ Mordred may be right, but Jesus was not competing with the dispensers of worldly wisdom, he was looking far beyond them. If you read Saint Matthew's text, you see that Christ's disciples, those who have already chosen to follow him, come out to him out of the crowds, and he teaches them. The Beatitudes and the whole Sermon on the Mount *are intended for the formation of disciples, those who have already made a leap of faith, a decision.* Jesus' Beatitudes are meant to shape our lives in such a way that we can learn to be happy to be in the presence of God.

The innocent young girl and the broken old bishop – each experienced the purity of heart spoken of by Jesus as the condition necessary to see God. Purity of heart requires the childlike trust and simplicity of soul so often spoken of by Christ; but this is not confined to the chronologically young. After a long hard journey, the old bishop found himself in the same place as the young girl saying her night-time prayers alone for the first time.

Sometimes we need to clear away spiritual rubbish in order to attain purity of heart. In the winter of 1970 at Yale Divinity School, I joined a group of fellow students for a snow-shoeing weekend in Vermont. I took along Soren Kierkegaard's little book, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing*. This relentless book, by a great and relentless author, presses home the point that purity of heart is necessary to see God and the Kingdom of Heaven. We can see God's Kingdom, Kierkegaard says, in this world, in the people, places, things and events of daily life, as well as forever on the other side of death. But in order to see God, our sight has to be cleared of distractions. That book *Purity of Heart* propelled me, upon returning from our weekend in the snow, to make my first sacramental confession to a priest. The housecleaning was helpful. I felt I could see more clearly.

Recently I received a flyer in the mail inviting me to a Clergy Leadership Conference. Though I couldn't attend, there was a quote on the flyer cover from President Harry Truman, of all people, that is a keeper: "I tried never to forget who I was and where I'd come from, and where I was going back to." These are prudent words for getting along in this world, more prudent than old Mordred's cynicism in *Camelot*; and Truman's wisdom nicely suggests Jesus' notion of the pure in heart.

John Keble, a father of the Oxford Movement (the nineteenth century Anglo-Catholic Church revival) and the author of the hymn we just sang, "Blest are the pure in heart," was an old fashioned English Tory Country Parson. Keble was a throw-back, even in his own nineteenth century, yet he inspired the English clergy by his transparent holiness; and he was noted for his dislike of sham and pretence. Reaching across an ocean of time and place (from Oxford to Missouri) the saintly English vicar would have liked the blunt American president's words. "I tried never to forget who I was and where I'd come from, and where I was going back to."

By remembering who we are, we approach purity of heart. As far as God is concerned, we are all equal in our genealogy; we are all direct descendents of Adam and Eve. Our family tree's root and trunk are registered in the Good Book. It is an inheritance, however, leading to death; as God

¹ *Camelot*, "The Seven Deadly Virtues," lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner (sung by Roddy McDowell).

said to our first parents, we are dust, and to dust we shall return. But the Good News is we are also, by baptism, members of Christ, reclaimed children of God, and inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven. If we try always to remember these things; that is, if we try never to forget who we are and where we have come from, and where we are headed, we will do well. We will learn the purity of heart spoken of by Christ, and we will see the God whose kingdom Christ's parables describe.

In the Name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.