

A homily on the Beatitudes by St Gregory of Nyssa

The hope of seeing God

Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God. God's promise is so great that it passes the furthest limits of happiness. Given such a blessing, who could desire more, having already received all things by the fact of seeing God? Remember that in Scriptural usage 'seeing' means 'having.' *May you see the good things of Jerusalem* means 'may you find them.' *Let the ungodly be taken away and not see the glory of the Lord* means, in the prophet's words, 'not share in the glory of the Lord.'

So whoever 'sees God' receives, in this act of seeing, possession of everything that is good: incorruptible life without end, blessedness that cannot fail, a kingdom without end, happiness without limit, true light, the true voice of the Spirit, glory never before reached, perpetual rejoicing, and all else that is good.

The promise of this Beatitude gives us the right to hope for these great things. All this sight of God is conditional on having a pure heart – and thinking of this, my mind is once more teetering on a dizzy peak. What if purity of heart is one of those unattainable things that are simply beyond our human nature? If, on the one hand, it is by purity of heart that God can be seen, and if, on the other hand, Moses and Paul did not see God and said that he could never be seen, it follows logically that purity of heart must be impossible, so that in pronouncing this Beatitude, the Word is putting forward something that simply cannot be.

How can we benefit from knowing the means by which God can be seen, if that means is impossible for us?

Suppose, for instance, that someone told us it was good to find oneself in heaven because there one would see things that cannot be seen in this world. Now if he also told us how a journey to heaven might be undertaken, there might be some use in telling us about its delights. But as long as the journey is impossible, what use is it to think about the happiness that might lie at the end of it? We would simply suffer and be sad at the thought of the things that await us somewhere where we cannot go.

Does the Lord really encourage us to do something that is beyond our nature and our powers to accomplish? Surely not. Look at the birds: God has not created them without wings. Look at sea creatures: God has not designed them as land animals. Wherever we look, the law of each creature's being does not demand that it should do something that it is beyond its own nature to do.

Let us reflect on this and realize that we should not despair of the purity of heart that the Beatitude speaks of. John, Paul and Moses did not, in the end, lack the sublime blessing of seeing God. Paul said *There is laid up for me a crown of justice, which the Lord, the just judge, will render to me*; John lay on Jesus' breast; and Moses heard God say to him, *I have known you above all*. It is certain that those who said that the contemplation of God was beyond human power were themselves blessed. But blessedness comes from the contemplation of God, and seeing God is something that comes to those who are pure of heart. It follows logically that purity of heart cannot be an unattainable thing.

So if some, with Paul, truly say that the contemplation of God is beyond human power, yet the Lord himself contradicts them by promising the sight of God to those who are pure of heart.