

## 4 LIVING WITH DRIVING PASSION

**Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.**

MATTHEW 5:6

### Fine dining

As I get older, I find myself genuinely enjoying the finer things of life. This week I went with my son on a tour of the Fuller's Brewery at Chiswick, and loved learning about the brewing process and sampling the results! Last summer, on a trip to Cape Town, Ruth and I went on a tour of the vineyards of Stellenbosch and sampled some of the most delicious South African wines. In relation to food, I have developed a love of international cuisine, and was delighted to be treated on my birthday by my family to a mouth-watering curry in Veeraswamy, England's oldest and most famous Indian restaurant, in Regent Street, honoured in the Michelin Guide of 2017. Formal dinners at St Edmund Hall, where I work as a chaplain, are always a treat too!

Food and drink are a big feature of modern Western culture, and fine dining and fine wines are seen by many as the ultimate experience of fine living. Programmes about cooking, including the ones that add in an element of competition (*MasterChef* and *The Great British Bake Off*, for example), are watched by millions, ourselves included. Alcohol is used as one of the primary ways to relax after a busy day

at work or at weekends, and binge drinking is still a major public order problem for the police in towns and city centres across Europe. Fast-food outlets are always heaving with young people, but there is increasing alarm about the long-term health implications of what some would call 'junk food'.

So, again, all this suggests a need for a healthy balance. On the one hand, we should appreciate the richness and variety of God's good creation (Genesis 1:26-30) and receive with thanksgiving God's good gifts, enjoying the fruits of the harvest (Psalm 65:9-13; 67:6-7). Harvest festivals under both old and new covenants are the expressed annual opportunity to recognise God's generosity. Delicious food and fine wines are gifts to be enjoyed, and God has declared all food 'clean' (Acts 10:9-15; Romans 14:14). Yet we should note that the same passage in Romans has a cautionary word about wrong attitudes to food and drink – and note the mention of 'righteousness': 'For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (v. 17). So if fine dining becomes the high point of our lives, we have simply missed the point! The inhabitants of Jerusalem in Isaiah 22 had made this mistake when the prophet warned of invasion and called the people to weeping and repentance. They flippantly replied: 'Let us eat and drink... for tomorrow we die' and indulged in joyful revelry, with the eating of meat and the drinking of wine (v. 13).

Worse than that, there is a sin of gluttony, which one dictionary defines as 'a limitless appetite for food and drink and overindulgence to the point where one is no longer eating just to live, but rather living to eat',<sup>47</sup> which we can recognise in many Western cultures. This is not the only thing Paul is talking about in Philippians 3 when he is describing 'enemies of the cross of Christ', but it certainly includes people who are gluttons: 'Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things' (v. 19).

Another important reason for balance and restraint, which should speak to Christians with sensitive consciences, is the world's poor: the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates that about 795 million people of the 7.3 billion people in the world, or one in nine, were suffering from chronic undernourishment in 2014–2016.<sup>48</sup> Almost all the hungry people, 780 million, live in developing countries, representing 12.9 per cent, or one in eight, of the population of developing countries, with 11 million people undernourished in developed countries. This causes godly restraint and compassion, ensuring that we are not only mindful of the millions who go to bed hungry every night, but that we pray for them and do what we can to alleviate their suffering, motivated by the love of Christ himself. Otherwise, 1 John 3:17 ('if anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?') becomes a description of us and asks questions about the reality of our Christian faith.

So is there an alternative – something that is more noble and satisfying for us to desire as the driving passion of our lives? Jesus offers us the answer in the fourth beatitude: 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled' (Matthew 5:6).

### Personal and public righteousness

'Righteousness' is one of those magnificent Bible words that means different things in different contexts, so it is important to understand the setting in order to tease open the meaning of any usage. When speaking about God, it is a description of his perfect holiness, faithfulness and justice: 'The Lord is righteous in all his ways and faithful in all he does' (Psalm 145:17). When referring to God's people, the 'righteous' are those who have been made 'right with God' through the free gift of salvation, received by faith in God's Messiah, Jesus Christ (Romans 1:17; 3:21–26; 2 Corinthians 5:21). Jesus would have had both of these meanings in mind when he used the word in the fourth beatitude.

But 'righteousness' can also mean the forming of a righteous character through the sanctifying work of the Spirit. This has to be in Jesus' mind because the rest of the sermon on the mount will give many examples of a deeper righteousness of the heart, over against the public and superficial righteousness of the Pharisees on the one hand (Matthew 5:20; 6:1), and the unrighteous and ungodly behaviour of the gentiles/pagans on the other (Matthew 5:47; 6:7, 32). Jesus' examples cover many practical aspects of Christian living: angry and lustful thoughts, marital unfaithfulness and divorce, prayer and fasting, justice and forgiveness, giving and generosity, attitude to money and possessions, and so on. In all of these ways, we must 'seek first the kingdom of God and *his righteousness*' (Matthew 6:33, *my italics*). The followers of Jesus are to be different from the outwardly religious and the openly pagan by reflecting the beauty and holiness of their heavenly Father (Matthew 5:48). 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness' means pursuing this kind of godly character and life, in the way that Jesus did: 'My food... is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work' (John 4:34).

And yet 'righteousness' also includes the aspect of 'putting the world to rights' in the way that God intended, vindicating God's name among the nations: 'The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations' (Psalm 98:2). This must also have been in Jesus' mind because, as we have seen, Isaiah 61 forms the backdrop to the beatitudes. In Isaiah 61:3, the exiles who are poor, broken-hearted and mourning in captivity are longing for vindication: the throwing off of ungodly rule and the establishment of God's justice. They will be comforted with joy and gladness and become 'oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord, for the display of his splendour'. Those who hunger and thirst for this have a driving passion for God and his ways – nothing matters more than restoring the honour and glory of God in the communities and nations where they live. Therefore, pursuing righteousness is all about longing for the vindication of God's name and God's people on earth: 'Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' (Matthew 6:10), as Jesus taught us to pray.

God's servants are to hunger and thirst for the restoring of the honour of God in all the earth, so that he is known and loved and human life is conformed to his will. This naturally involves a social righteousness, whereby Christ's followers must work towards freedom from oppression, injustice, discrimination and poverty, in line with the ministry of the Messiah in Isaiah 61:1-3. This is not an 'add-on' to the church's mission; this is an integral aspect of the messianic kingdom because God is redeeming the whole world. Nothing is outside the scope of this redeeming work: schools, prisons, banks, shops, councils, parliament, law firms, leisure centres, hotels, homeless centres, builders' firms, hospitals, pubs, the internet and social media – all are places where we are to hunger and thirst for righteousness, and where we will be seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness (Matthew 6:33).

Jesus is calling his people to hunger and thirst for personal and public righteousness. In fact, it wouldn't be appropriate for us to have one without the other. If we hungered for change in our world, but neglected to allow that change to take place in our own lives, we could be accused of double standards and hypocrisy. But if we longed for a personal righteousness but ignored the social and political outworking of the gospel in the communities and places where we live, we could be rightly accused of an irrelevant and self-indulgent piety. So our calling is to hold these two aspects of Christian discipleship together: pursuing the glory of God in both our private lives and the public square.

### Hungry and thirsty for God's glory

The Christian MP William Wilberforce and his small group of Christian activists and social reformers, known as the Clapham Sect because they all met at Holy Trinity Church, Clapham Common, are a good example of people who had hunger and thirst for righteousness, in both their personal and public lives. They engaged together in a range of social causes for the transforming of 19th-century British

society, including prison reform, prevention of cruel sports, the alleviation of poverty, illiteracy and child abuse, and the suspension of the game laws and the lottery. They also supported several mission and Bible societies, financed Hannah More's schools and pamphlets, and published their own journal, *The Christian Observer*.

But their greatest achievement was their leadership of the campaign to abolish slavery. In 1814, they managed to get one tenth of the population to sign anti-slavery petitions, which were delivered to the House of Commons. In 1818, Wilberforce wrote in his diary: 'In the scripture, no national crime is condemned so frequently and few so strongly as oppression and cruelty, and the not using our best endeavours to deliver our fellow-creatures from them.'<sup>49</sup> He needed resilience as well as passion, because anti-slavery bills were defeated in Parliament for eleven consecutive years before the act abolishing the slave trade was passed in 1807. The second reading of the Emancipation Act, bringing slavery to an end in the British Empire, was passed in 1833, and Wilberforce died three days later. The 19th-century historian W.E.H. Lecky said: 'The unwearied, unostentatious, and inglorious crusade of England against slavery may probably be regarded as among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages comprised in the history of nations.'<sup>50</sup>

In 1865 William and Catherine Booth, the founders of the Salvation Army, began their ministry to the poor and destitute of London's East End, bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to alcoholics, criminals and prostitutes. Their aim was to combine evangelism and social welfare to change the social landscape of England by eradicating poverty and lifting the urban poor out of moral decay, through setting up hostels for the homeless and ex-prisoners and farming communities where they could learn basic agricultural skills. Booth also provided a range of professional resources for the poor, including lawyers, clinics, schools and banks. He believed that if the state was failing to meet its social obligations then Christians must step up. He was a fighter for spiritual and social righteousness:

While women weep, as they do now, I'll fight. While little children go hungry, as they do now, I'll fight. While men go to prison, in and out, in and out, as they do now, I'll fight. While there is a drunkard left, while there is a poor lost girl upon the streets, while there remains one dark soul without the light of God, I'll fight - I'll fight to the very end!<sup>51</sup>

And he did. He died in 1912 and, in response to public demand, his body lay in state at Clapton and 150,000 people came to pay their respects to 'the world's best-loved man', whom the Mayor of South Shields described as 'the archbishop of the world'. 35,000 people attended his memorial service in August 1912, including Queen Alexandra and representatives of King George V and Queen Mary. The funeral took place the next day and the city of London stood still for nearly four hours. Bramwell Booth, who gave the address at the graveside, said: 'If you were to ask me, I think I could say that the happiest man I ever knew was the General. He was a glad spirit. He rose up on the crest of the stormy billows, and praised God, and laughed at the Devil's rage, and went on with his work with joy.'<sup>52</sup>

Jesus had promised this: 'Blessed [happy] are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled' (Matthew 5:6). William Booth's legacy was a movement that serves the world's poorest communities in 58 countries.

Among the many excellent Christian organisations that continue this tradition of social activism today (CAFOD, Christian Aid, Tearfund, Compassion, World Vision, etc.), let me mention CARE (Christian Action, Research and Education) as an example of one that works for a fairer and godlier society, pursuing righteousness in the way that Jesus invited us to do in the fourth beatitude. Their aims are to equip individuals and local churches for prayer and action, to have an impact in the political world, to provide research and briefings for parliamentarians, to train Christian graduates through a leadership programme and to support the vulnerable through advocacy. I am always struck by the range of vital causes they support and pray

about. In their prayer diaries, we are invited to pray for the millions of victims of human trafficking and agencies that support them; those caught up in domestic violence and addictive patterns of behaviour; children and young people who are affected by poverty; challenges faced by rural and farming communities; older and dependent people and those who care for them; the negotiations over Britain's exit from the European Union; schools, teachers and pupils; the millions caught up in conflicts and wars; the use of technology, robotics, social media and the internet; issues relating to abortion and euthanasia; and the political uncertainty in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Wilberforce would have been proud of them!

Professor N.T. Wright, previously Bishop of Durham, encourages us in this in his book *Surprised by Hope*, which explains the meaning of the resurrection of Christ for the whole world and the church's mission. He draws our attention to 1 Corinthians 15:58, the conclusion of the great chapter on the resurrection of the body, and suggests that the final verse comes as a surprise. It doesn't say, 'Sit back, relax, chill; your future hope is secure and heaven awaits you', as we might expect. It says, 'Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.' Doesn't it seem strange that our *future* hope results in *present* service for the glory of God: what's the point if the Lord is coming back and there will be a new heaven and earth? Paul's answer is because 'our labour is not in vain'. N.T. Wright writes:

What you do with your body in the present matters... Painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring for the needy, loving your neighbour as yourself - all these things will last into God's future. They are not simply ways of making the present life... a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it behind altogether... They are part of what we may call 'building for God's Kingdom'.<sup>53</sup>

Do you have a hunger and thirst for God's glory and honour? Are you seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness? Will you fight for social and spiritual transformation? If so, then Jesus promises satisfaction for the whole of eternity, when 'the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea' (Habakkuk 2:14). Can anything be more satisfying than this?

### Personal reflection

#### Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied

- Do I hunger and thirst for holiness, or am I at times satisfied with mediocrity and lukewarmness?
- Does the physical hunger of millions of people lead me to question my continual search for comfort or my middle-class lifestyle?
- Do I realise how much I and the world in which I live resemble the rich man who feasted daily?

### Prayerful response

#### A fourfold Franciscan blessing<sup>54</sup>

May God bless you with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half-truths and superficial relationships, so that you may seek truth boldly and love deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy anger at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people, so that you may tirelessly work for justice, freedom and peace among all people.

May God bless you with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation or the loss of all that they

cherish, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them and transform their pain into joy.

May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you really can make a difference in this world, so that you are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

And the blessing of God the supreme majesty and our Creator, Jesus Christ the incarnate Word who is our brother and Saviour, and the Holy Spirit, our advocate and guide, be with you and remain with you, this day and for evermore. Amen

### Discussion questions for small groups

#### Hungering and thirsting for righteousness

##### Starter (15 mins)

- When were you last really hungry and thirsty?
- What did it feel like and how did it focus the mind?
- What did it feel like to finally have a good meal?

##### Main course (60 mins)

- What do you find yourself chasing after in life? Are you drawn towards the pleasures of luxurious living and fine dining? Are these appetites wrong and displeasing to God?
- Put into your own words what you think Jesus meant by this 'hungering and thirsting for righteousness'. How does this relate to Matthew 6:33?
- Is personal holiness something that you seek after and pursue, as Paul encourages Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:11? How might you increase your appetite to grow in your spiritual life? Is this your work or the Spirit's work (Colossians 1:28-29; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18; Ephesians 5:15-18)?
- Can you share an example of where you have pursued an issue of social righteousness?

- Were you fulfilled in this service, filled with joy and wonder at what God was doing through you? Did you see change and blessing?
- Which figures in church history inspire you to pursue social change in the name of Christ, and why?

#### Dessert (15 mins)

- Invite the Lord to search you and try you, as requested by the psalmist in Psalm 139:23.
- Ask the Lord to increase your desire to be holy, like Christ.
- Commit to God those areas of social injustice that God has put on your heart.

## 5

### LIVING WITH HEALING GRACE

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

MATTHEW 5:7

#### Obsessed with revenge

It would not be an exaggeration to say that modern culture is obsessed with the theme of revenge. True, it has always been there, as Homer's *Iliad* illustrates with its multiple revenge motif: the core of the story is Menelaus seeking revenge against Paris for stealing his wife, Helen, along with Achilles hunting Hector down for killing Patroclus. Shakespeare used the revenge narrative in a number of his plays: in *Hamlet* it is those who are remedying a perceived wrong, in *Othello* betrayal is the motive, and in *The Merchant of Venice* it is harmed feelings. Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo* explores the revenge of Edmond Dantès on the people responsible for his false imprisonment and has inspired no fewer than 30 films and television series. Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* has as its central theme the story of Jean Valjean being pursued by the vengeful Javert for petty infractions of the law, and the West End musical has broken box office records, as has the film. The thriller writer John Grisham has employed vengeance as one of his main motifs, including the revenge reaction to the rape of a daughter and domestic. Agatha Christie's murder mysteries between 1920 and 1976 often employ revenge as the main motive for the killing. Modern fiction uses the revenge motif too, so the recent thriller *Norma* by James Swallow