

In the Screwtape letters, Screwtape, an experienced demon, writes to his nephew, a trainee demon, giving advice. Wormwood's human has just become a Christian, and here is a part of Screwtape's advice on prayer:

*It is no doubt impossible to prevent his praying for his mother, but we have means of rendering the prayers innocuous. Make sure that they are always very 'spiritual', that he is always concerned with the state of her soul and never with her rheumatism. Two advantages will follow. In the first place, his attention will be kept on what he regards as her sins, by which, with a little guidance from you, he can be induced to mean any of her actions which are inconvenient or irritating to himself. ...In the second place, since his ideas about her soul will be very crude and often erroneous, he will, in some degree, be praying for an imaginary person, and it will be your task to make that imaginary person less and less like the real mother – the sharp tongued old lady at the breakfast table.*

When we attempt to become Christians, we feel that ought to be holy, but are often not quite sure what that might entail. The temptation is to divorce ourselves from the world, from what is going on around us. If we are suffering, to place all our hope on some future reward. If we are happy, to feel guilty about it. When we are praying to pray for people to convert rather than any alleviation of their distress. On All Saints Sunday, the image of the perfect Christian is inevitably coloured by our understanding of the Saints. Sadly all our prejudices about holiness are reinforced by the pictures we have seen of Saints on the walls of churches in Italy, dying in grotesque ways for their faith. They don't really demonstrate a sense of joyful discipleship.

So it is interesting today to have as the gospel reading the beatitudes. Jesus has withdrawn to the mountainside with his disciples. The crowds may follow, but it is to the disciples that Jesus is speaking. Until very recently these men had been part of the crowd. Their lives followed a set pattern. They went out to work, to fish or collect taxes, and that provided them and their family with food and if they were lucky, enough for sitting with their friends over a drink, buying the things they needed for their trade or for their home. Nothing special, they were not by any standards rich, but they had enough to get by. They were not going to starve. They had a roof over their heads. They knew what the next day would bring.

And then they met Jesus and everything changed. They dropped their work, their family, their security. They would never be quite sure where the next meal was coming from, or whether they would find a bed for the night, whether they would be welcomed or run out of town.

Even after spending time with Jesus, their view of how the world worked was probably still fixed in their mind. They would have observed, as we can now, that those who have money and power can have whatever they want, and often do whatever they want. Their rich neighbours farmed the best land, owned the best boats, travelled and bought silks and spices. They owned slaves, and all their concern was for their property. It was as though the earth belonged to them. We see it today. Islands unspoilt for generations become tourist sites. Forests are destroyed to create ranches. Icy wastes are explored for minerals and oil. Only the rich and powerful can do this. And those that have no wealth, or have no power, long to be a part of this elite, able to participate in claiming the rewards of the earth. Why else would the lottery be so popular.

Jesus tells the disciples that the earth does not belong to the rich. They may take it, exploit it, abuse it, but it does not belong to them. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. In the end, when humans have done their worst, the earth will remain, and only those that can live in harmony with it will be able to survive. Jesus is not promising individuals some future pie in the sky, he is stating a reality about discipleship and about holiness.

In the incarnation, Jesus shows God's solidarity with humanity. He suffers with them, experiencing every pain, physical and emotional. He is alongside us every step of the way. But it is more than just solidarity, he is also there to lead us forward to a new kingdom, to the life that is eternal, to be aware of the presence of God, here, now and always.

To be a disciple is to show that solidarity with others. To mourn with those who mourn, to work for justice and peace on behalf of those who are oppressed, to forgive as God forgives us. When we do this, when we enter into the work of Christ, we become a part of that wonderful relationship that is the Trinity, open to Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And in that relationship is to be found mercy, and comfort, and forgiveness and peace and joy.

To be a Saint we need first to become disciples. To be a disciple, we need to show our solidarity with the meek, the powerless, the suffering. We do this not because we want to feel pain, or are in any sense masochistic, we do it because it is the way to be with Christ, it is the only way to be with Christ, and it is being with Christ that provides a peace and joy that is greater than any suffering.

We are not called to withdraw from the world, we are called to enter into it more fully. Amen.