

These passages follow hard on the heels of the Beatitudes which we looked at last week through the double sense of the word Makarios – being translated as either Blessed or Happy and one being sometimes more appropriately used than the other. Much the same can be said of ‘salt’ and ‘light’ – like all metaphors, like all language, there’s an abundance of ambiguity in their use – we can have too much salt or not enough, too much light or not enough. And perhaps Paul is recognising something of this ambiguity or ambivalence in his disclaiming of rhetoric and the arguments of philosophy in his speech to the Corinthians – a rhetorical and philosophical move in itself and a claim perhaps closer to the understanding of Makarios as Blessed rather than Happy.

This is what I think I mean: it’s an argument against theorising rather than ‘walking the talk’, against the ‘telescopic philanthropy’ which Dickens parodies in Bleak House - raising lots of money with lots of talk for the needy abroad while ignoring the needy at home, one’s immediate neighbour, and we can have all sorts of telescopic actions which distance ourselves from the actual reality of ‘doing good’ - spinning marvellous schemes of what we intend to do, or what could be done (usually by others) or what should be done (if only we had a change of government or priests or whoever it is who wields power). But this is to disempower ourselves as agents of God’s mercy and an expression perhaps of our fear of grace, of allowing God to occupy the driving seat – for the other implication of Makarios is not of joy manufactured by ourselves (evidenced sometimes through telescopic worship) but of being blessed by God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves – the action of the Holy Spirit and the whole conundrum of who makes the first step. What I have in mind there is the wonderful witness of Anne Sieben, an American engineer who walks the world without food or money or even a home to return to but relies entirely on faith – faith which she explains in this manner: she is travelling in winter from Kyiv in Ukraine to Patras in Greece

*‘Five countries in five months, five languages and five alphabets is what she remembers . ‘Up to that point I was really more Catholic in a cultural sense, but as I was doing this pilgrimage the penny dropped. I really only got it when I was in the coldest areas meeting lovely warm people in the spirit of St Andrew. Got what? The idea that nothing was in my control. Nothing, I just have to rely on the unknown. If you think of it that way there are so many unknowns, but then uncertainty is the condition of faith. (Tablet interview 28/1/23)*

Faith then becomes an action, something we do only to discover that it’s something done to us- a graced event. What we are being called to do is to go along with the action of the Holy Spirit – to the point where words may or may not be needed. In this sense faith speaks for itself.

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