

LIFTING THE VEIL: IMAGINATION AND THE KINGDOM OF GOD
LECTURE 5 OUTLINE

THE PROPHETIC IMAGINATION AND INTRODUCING BLAKE

“Reason is the natural organ of truth, but imagination is the organ of meaning.”

-C.S. Lewis

Introductory remarks

- Coleridge says, “The philosopher’s privilege is to distinguish but not divide.” We can speak of a poetic imagination, a moral imagination, and a prophetic imagination, but these three are one.
- The poetic imagination allows us to glimpse something of pure beauty and this stimulates the moral imagination. “The fact that we use the word ‘fair’ to mean both that which is beautiful and that which is just is not a coincidence.”
- Plato’s great triad: beauty, goodness, and truth—all these spring from the same source.
- If your poetic imagination begets the moral imagination and then you find yourself in the world of the prophetic imagination. The moral imagination is appalled when it looks at the world and dares to begin to imagine something better.
- “I would contend that imagining the kingdom (of God) itself is always a radical act of disobedience.”

Prophetic Imagination

- Phrase borrowed from Walter Brueggemann’s book, *Prophetic Imagination*
- Double sense of the word “prophetic”
 - Foretelling: seeing beyond
 - Speaking truth to power
- Apocalyptic vision: unveiling
- “Someone sees through something in order to see something better behind it and live from that better.”

Christ is constantly inviting us to imagine and so to encounter the Kingdom of God.

- He proclaims that it is at hand.
- Teaches us to pray that it comes.
- In every word and gesture, he shows us what the kingdom is since he himself bodies it forth.
- To imagine the Kingdom in the midst of the dark powers of this age, to imagine the Kingdom of God, is always a prophetic act, always a critique of the world and it is always a call to hope and therefore to action.

The Kingdom

It's a long way off, but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf. ¹

The distinct gift of poetry: the line.

- Three units of prose: phrase, sentence, paragraph.
- Poetry adds a fourth unit of syntax and meaning: the line.
 - Poetry is not meant to be chopped-up prose.
 - R. S. Thomas is master of the line.

Some things Biblical prophets use to body forth the invisible things of God, things pressed into service so that they may express for us the inexpressible:

- Vineyard
- Olive grove
- Wine press
- Wedding
- Feast
- Flowering branch of almond
- Tree planted by water

However, there is a bigger, more dramatic image:

- And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever (Isaiah 25:7.8a).

¹ R. S. Thomas, "The Kingdom," in *H'm* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

- This is the heart of prophecy, the image of unveiling, of revealing, of taking away the shroud, of lifting up the sheet.
- This is revelation of both the forces at work in the present, but also of what is coming.
- This unveiling in the life and work of Jesus
 - The Beattitudes heard in the context of an unveiling of the kingdom:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

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

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.²

The Beatitudes

I bless you, who have spelt your blessings out,
 And set this lovely lantern on a hill
 Lightening darkness and dispelling doubt
 By lifting for a little while the veil.
 For longing is the veil of satisfaction,
 And grief the veil of future happiness.
 I glimpse beneath the veil of persecution
 The coming kingdom's overflowing bliss.

Oh! make me pure of heart and help me see,
 Amongst the shadows and amidst the mourning,
 The promised Comforter, alive and free,
 The kingdom coming and the Son returning,
 That even in this pre-dawn dark I might

² Matthew 5:3-12 NRSV.

At once reveal and revel in your light.³

- The unveiling is also an awakening: if we can see it now, we can begin to live it now.
- Guite mentions the poem “The Bright Field” by R. S. Thomas in his concluding remarks to this section.
 - Listen to Guite [recite it here.](#)
 - [Read it here.](#)

Introducing Blake

- Milton is well known for two works:
 - The song “Jerusalem,” taken from the poem “Milton.” [Hear a performance of it here.](#)
 - The poem “Tiger, Tiger Burning Bright.” [Read it here.](#)
- Great visual artist as well
- Jerusalem and the Glastonbury Legend of Joseph of Arimathea

Jerusalem (from “Milton”)

And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?

And did the Countenance Divine
Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark satanic mills?

³ Malcolm Guite, “The Beatitudes,” in *Parable and Paradox* (London: Canterbury Press, 2016).

Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!

I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.⁴

And when the servant of the man of God was risen early, and gone forth, behold, an host compassed the city both with horses and chariots. And his servant said unto him, Alas, my master! how shall we do? And he answered, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. And Elisha prayed, and said, "Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see." And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.⁵

- What Blake is really asking is, "Can the Kingdom come here?"

⁴ The English Hymn "Jerusalem" is text taken from the preface to William Blake's poem "Milton," 1808, set to music by Sir Hubert Parry in 1916.

⁵ 2 Kings 6:15-17 King James Version (as used by William Blake).