

Persecuted? Blessed?

Our text today is Gospel according to Matthew, Chapter 5, verses 10-12, wherein we hear Jesus speak the eighth of His famous Beatitudes.

Since all eight are inter-related let us once again read Matthew, Chapter 5, verses 1-12.

“Blessed” are the persecuted? “Fortunate” are those who are insulted? Congratulations? Right-on? “You lucky bums”?

In each of the other studies in this series in Jesus’ Beatitudes, I have read the text, and then prayed something like “Lord Jesus thank you for enabling Matthew the tax-collector to remember YOUR words and to write them down accurately for our sake. Will you now help us understand Your words: And more than understand; will you help us actually live into the reality Your words are describing?” I am not so sure I want to pray this relative to the eighth Beatitude! Who wants to “live into the reality” of being persecuted? We already have enough challenge just making ends meet. I gladly want Jesus to help me live into “hunger and thirst for righteousness” into being merciful, into being a peace-maker. But ‘persecuted’.

Helmet Thielecke, a great theologian – preacher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, writes of the eighth Beatitude: “What a ghastly prospect! It makes one ask in all seriousness how Jesus could ever have gained disciples with an appeal like that. And then does it not sound like sheer mockery for Him to go on and say, in the face of the tortures of body and soul to which they were actually exposed, “Rejoice and be glad!” If that is not mockery (and surely it cannot be that) then there must be some great mystery here which we do not see.” (Life Can Begin Again, 1958: England 1963)

“Lord Jesus thank you for enabling Matthew the tax-collector to remember Your words and write them down accurately for our sake. Will You now help us understand Your words? And more than understand” will You help us to live into the reality Your words are describing. We pray this in Your name and for the greater fame of Your name.”

Before we wrestle with the eighth Beatitude, I want to make a number of preliminary observations. First, it is a ‘double’ . For some reason Jesus repeats and re-states this one. Is it because it is the one He knows we would rather not hear? Or is it because this is the one Jesus Himself felt the most?

Second, in repeating the Beatitude, Jesus makes a shift in pronouns. he moves from the third person – “they’, to the second person “you”. No longer is the subject a theoretical “they”. The subject is now “you”. “You men and women who sit before Me on the mountain stop.”

Third, Jesus brings Himself into the picture for the first time: “On account of Me.” he has been there in the other seven as we have seen . But in the eighth Beatitude He makes it explicit:” On account of Me.” It is as though Jesus is saying, “I am the problem you will find yourselves in a difficult place because of Me.”

An fourth, note carefully the reason for the persecution. Jesus is not blessing those who get persecuted for being obnoxious in peace-making. Jesus is not blessing those who get persecuted for being tactless, insensitive in their witness in the world. Jesus is not congratulating those who are persecuted for being dogmatically dogmatic or narrow-mindedly narrow-minded. Jesus is not congratulating the thrill-seeking confrontationist, or those with a "victim complex".

Jesus is blessing those Who find themselves in trouble, "because of righteousness" and "because of me." "For the sake of right-mindedness." and "on account of Me."

Right-related-ness and Me. they go together. Right-relatedness and Jesus. For right-relatedness is most clearly manifest in Jesus; Jesus is righteousness personified. Which is why the "hunger and thirst for righteousness" which He blesses in the fourth Beatitude turns out to be hunger and thirst for Him. Which is why the hunger and thirst for Him always issues in hunger and thirst for right-relatedness. Jesus is blessing those Who experience opposition and reproach because their craving to see relationship work and because of their relationship with Him. Rejoice! And be exceedingly glad! According to Luke, Jesus adds "and legs for you."

Right!?

I want to ask the question we have asked of all other Beatitudes? The "why" question. why is being persecuted something Jesus congratulates?

I have been urging that the qualities Jesus blesses are not natural human qualities. we do not produce them. Rather, they are the product of Jesus' Gospel. He comes into our lives with His evangel, His Good News. His news of the nearness and in-breaking of the Kingdom of God. And when He and His news get hold of us we become poor in spirit, we begin to mourn, we become meek/ gentle, we hunger and thirst in anew way, we become pure in heart, we begin to make peace. And we get persecuted. Oh, He also uses us to win others to Him! But sometimes, we get persecuted.

So, I want to ask "why?". why is being persecuted a mark of being evangelized by Jesus? It is a theoretical matter. For even as we sit and stand in this building today, believers all over the world are expressing persecution, some in really painful ways. Missiologists tell us that at least 25% of the global Christian family is forcefully "underground". According to David Barnett, editor of the "World Christian Encyclopedia", if we total up the number of Christians martyred for their faith in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it works out to an average of 300,000 a year. It is estimated that right now over 200 million Christians in 60 countries are denied basic human rights because of their allegiance to Jesus.

In Luke's Gospel Jesus adds the line: "Woe to you when all people speak well of you, for in the same way they used to treat the false prophets." (16:26)

Yikes! Which has made a number of you now ask in your small groups this past week, "if a person or community claims to belong to Jesus and His Kingdom but is not persecuted, does it mean the person or community is not really living faithfully?"

Why is being persecuted a mark of those who have turned around and embraced Jesus and His Gospel? For one basic reason. The reason Jesus gave that night before handing Himself over to death, when He gathered the first band of disciples together around a table in an Upper Room somewhere downtown Jerusalem.

“If the world” – by this term “world” is meant “human society organizing itself without God”. “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated Me first”. John chapter 15:18 “Remember the words I spoke to you. No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you.”

Simple as that. If the old order of things, if human society organizing itself without God can not handle the Master it will not be able to handle the Master’s servants. If the old order of things can not tolerate the Righteous One it will not be able to tolerate those who seek to follow Him and reflect His righteousness.

Thus the rest of the New Testament tells us that persecution – of one sort or another – is inevitable for the followers of the Persecuted-One. the Apostle Paul had to encourage his colleague Timothy – who tended to be a bit timid – “indeed, all who desire to live godly lives in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (2 Timothy 3:12) Anyone want out of the Gospel? How about just settling for “Christianity late?”

The question therefore becomes “why was Jesus persecuted?” “How lovely on the mountain”, says the prophet Isaiah, “are the feet of Him who brings good news”. ( 52:7) good news of God’s Shalom.

Why, oh why, would anyone want to insult or hurt a Man Who brings good news , who brings Shalom: Why would anyone want to get rid of a Man Who heals the sick, who sets free those possessed by evil, who forgives sinners and welcomes the imperfect into His family? Clearly Jesus was not persecuted for being obnoxious, or for being tact-less or insensitive in the way He lived and spoke His good news. He is not a ‘pushy evangelist’ running around shoving His Gospel down people’s throats. he did at one point issue a series of “woes”. “Woe to you hypocrites” (Matthew 23) against the entrenched leadership of the religious establishment. But that was long after the establishment had hardened its heart against Him, long after they had resolved to eliminate Him. What was Jesus – the most beautiful human being who ever lived – persecuted?

As I see it, for three reasons. he experienced opposition and scorn simply by being, doing and speaking. Jesus experienced insult and harm by simply being righteous, by simply doing righteousness and by simply speaking righteously.

First, Jesus got into trouble by simply being; by simply being righteous. Righteousness, especially perfect righteousness, is experienced by us unrighteous either as blessing or as threat. It all depends on whether we unrighteous are willing to acknowledge our unrighteousness and want help to be righteous. Because we do not on our own like to face our own unrighteousness, righteousness, especially perfect righteousness is usually experienced as a threat. Oh, at first it is welcomed! Even celebrated! But not for long. For the presence, the mere presence of righteous, justice, goodness, especially absolute goodness, calls for change. Righteousness need not say a word. It need only enter

the room and 'be there'. Without speaking a word, the presence of righteousness exposes the rottenness. And we either open up the Goodness or we will feel we need to get rid of it.

Jesus of Nazareth is Goodness-incarnate. He is light and in Him there is no darkness at all. Bless His Name! His mere "being there" exposes attitudes and actions of darkness. And we either open up to the light, turn around and let the light heal us or we need to get rid of the light. If the world- human society organizing itself with God – hated Goodness Himself, what will the world do with those who seek and reflect His Goodness? When he imparts His righteousness to us, we begin to change: we are not made perfect, but we do begin to change. We slowly but surely become non-conformists. As Flannery O'Connor once said: 'You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd.'

"Hagios" in the Biblical term: saints, holy-ness. Not in the sense of perfect, but in the sense of set-apart, other-than, different, marching to the beat of a different drummer. Jesus is 'different', wonderfully different! But different non the less. he is not "of" the world; "in" it all the way but not "of" it in any way. His mere Presence, His radiant goodness, can, therefore, be experienced as a threat. That is the first reason He is persecuted. Simply by being righteous.

Second, Jesus got in trouble by simply doing, by simply doing righteousness. he was not merely present. he acted in ways that rocked the boat. "Rocked the boat" is putting it mildly. He disturbed the status quo. More to the point – He subverted the status quo. Not that Jesus went around as some kind of rabble-rouser. Indeed, he shied away from public events and public attractions. he simply went around living His Gospel, doing right-relatedness. Doing righteousness in an unrighteous world always rocks the boat. Jesus' announcement of the nearness of the Kingdom of God and Jesus' full embodiment of the different values of the Kingdom automatically challenged everything out of synch with the Kingdom. His doing righteous set up a clashing of Kingdoms, or "Kingdoms in conflict" as Charles Colson puts it. Mortimer Arias of Bolivia puts it this way: "the coming of the Kingdom means a permanent confrontation of worlds. The Kingdom is a question mark in the midst of the established ideas and answer developed by people and societies." (Announcing the Reign of God, 46)

Jesus began to disturb things by always bringing the "wrong people" to the party! "This man welcomes tax-collectors and sinners and eats with them" was the charge against Him. (Luke 15:2) It was said in great disgust. Jesus' way with people upset the religious establishment's whole concept of righteousness! they taught that people had to shape up before being allowed to "come home" to the Father. Jesus taught that all people had to do was "come home"; the shaping up would come later. The religious establishment could not handle Jesus' revelation of God's righteousness. That is, they could not handle grace. As J??? E???? once said: "grace is odious." Grace says "you are not making it on your own." Grace says "you will never make it on your own." Grace says "you need Me." Grace subverts our pride – find desire to be able to sing, "I did it my way."

Jesus disturbed things in another way. He violated many of the rules, human rules; rules made to supposedly bring about righteousness. For example, Jesus knowingly violated many of the Sabbath rules. he did not violate the Sabbath; He did not violate God's good commandment. he questioned and subverted many of the human-made rules and regulations developed around God's

commandment. Why? because the human rules and regulations were unrighteous<sup>1</sup> They had nothing to do with right-related-ness, especially right-related-ness with God. The rules oppressed people's spirits and drove them further away from His Father's heart! It is a fact of history: Jesus of Nazareth was crucified because of the way He acted on the Sabbath. Jesus rocked the boat in yet another way. He caused the Kingdom to be manifested! He actually did Kingdom "stuff". For example, Jesus encountered a man near the Sea of Galilee who had been demon-ized, held captive by a legion of evil spirits. Jesus orders the spirits to release the man. The spirits beg Jesus to let them go into a herd of pigs. Jesus grants the request and the herd of pigs rushes down a steep bank with the sea "about 2,000 of the" says Mark, and were drowned. (Mark 5:13) The people of the town rejoiced, right? A human being has been set free and they rejoiced, right? No. They were angry. and begged Jesus to leave their town. Why? Because simply by doing righteousness Jesus was upsetting their value system.

If the world systems – secular or religious – could not handle Jesus doing His Gospel, what will they do with His disciples doing His Gospel? Look at what happened to the apostle Paul. he did not set out to disturb the status quo. All he did was set out to announce Jesus' good news. Let me say that again; Paul did not set out to subvert anything; All he set out to do was announce Jesus' Gospel.

For example. In the city of Ephesus, a city of about 225,000 people at the time, Paul found himself in the middle of a riot. And had to leave the city. Why? Because he tried to start a riot? Not at all! All he did was announce the Gospel, and people responded. They turned around embraced Jesus as Saviour and began to follow Him as Master. Why then the riot? Well many of the Ephesians practiced magical arts. As an expression of their new life in Jesus, they came together and burned all their occult books. And many of the Ephesians were ardent devotees of the goddess Artemis, or Diana. Before coming to Jesus they used to buy statues of Diana. After coming to Jesus they no longer needed the statues. And here is the reason for the riot. the Ephesians economy was built around the worship of Diana. The silversmiths who made the statues were losing money big time. So a certain Demetrius incited other merchants into a riot against Paul. All Paul did was righteous. All Paul did was announce the good news which brought people into right-related-ness with God. He did not intend to disturb the status quo. It just happened. As it always does. The Gospel always messes with idols. And, therefore, slowly but surely messes with a way of life built in idols.

As many of you know, I had the privilege of serving as the pastor of Union Church in Manila from 1985 to 1989. When we arrived in the Philippines in the fall of 1985, things were very tense. People who spoke out against the dictatorship ways of Ferdinand Marcos were 'disappearing'. Some whose bodies turned up floating in the river that goes through the city. You could feel the tension everywhere. Soon after I began preaching at Union Church, a group of pastors and priests had a 'welcome' lunch for me. They wanted to encourage me. they reminded me that I would never know who was in the sanctuary on any given Sunday. So I needed to be very careful with what I said. their advise to me was "just preach the Gospel." Good advice! What else was I going to do but 'just stick to preaching the Gospel." The implication was "and you will then be safe in Manila". be safe? Just stick to preaching the Gospel and you will be safe? What gospel are you referring to? Not Jesus' Gospel. Jesus' Gospel is "the Kingdom of God is invading the city". How can you just stick to preaching the Gospel and think you will be safe? As long as we keep the "Kingdom stuff" in the

private, personal realm, we can avoid conflict. As long as we silently apuise to the idols of our time we can avoid getting caught in the crunch as Kingdoms collide. But once we let the Kingdom “out of teh bag”, so to speak, things begin to happen. Jesus was persecuted because simply by doing his Gospel of the Kingdom. He was turning things upside- down. So that they could be right-side-up!

Third, Jesus got in trouble by simply speaking by simply speaking righteous. By simply righteous about Himself. For example, He would walk up to people- like fishermen and tax-collectors – and say, “Follow Me”. “Follow Me”. It is not an invitation. It is not, “say, would you like to follow Me?” It is a command. “Here, behind Me”. It is like receiving a note from a stranger you just met which reads, “be at the party tonight”. What? Who is this guy who thinks He can just walk into anyone’s life and orders a change of agenda? And there are these claims He makes about Himself. especially the “I am” claims. “I am the light of the world; follow Me and you will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life”. “I am the Door” enter by Me. “I am the true vine apart form Me you can do nothing”. “I am the Resurrection and the Life; if you believe in Me even if you die yet still you live.” He says those loaded words matter-of-factly; no fanfare, no hype. He just says them. “I am the Bread of Life, Vancouver, you need Me more than you need your next meal. Whoa dude.

“I am the Way, The Truth , the Life.” Not a way, a truth, a life. “I am the” Jesus, if you would just say ‘a’ you would not get Yourself in trouble. To which He says, “What am I supposed to do deny Who I am?” “Who are You Jesus?” the authorities as in white-hot anger. “Before Abraham was, I AM”. And John tells us they took up stones to throw at Jesus(5:50).

The way Jesus speaks about Himself subverts our fundamental pre-suppositions about God, about ourselves, about life itself. And sometimes it is too much to handle. If some people cannot handle Jesus speaking about Himself so outrageously, what are they to do with those to repeat His outrageous claim? And who seek to live out the implications of His claims?

Peter and Jesus were going to the temple one day to pray. On the steps lay a crippled man, begging. He put out his hand hoping for money. Peter says, “Silver and gold we do not have; but what we do have we give to you in the Name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene – walk! (Acts 3:6)

And to man He does. And the city rejoiced right? Some did! But the authorities – religious authorities – did not. They haul Peter and John in for interrogation. They ask, “ by what power or name did this happen?” (Acts 4:7) Peter responds, “by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene.”

Now if Peter has just left it at that he might have been set free. But he did not leave it at that. For he could not leave it at that. So he goes on to say: “and there is salvation in no one else”.(Acts 4:12) “for there is no other name under heaven that has been given by which we must be saved”.

No other name. No other name. That is what got him in trouble: what the theologians call “the scandal of particularity”. The claim that life is found in Jesus and only Jesus. Many of you personally and perfectly know what Peter and John faced. Just say, “Jesus is one of many healers”, just say in this “age of tolerance”, “Jesus is one of many lords”, and we are welcomed at the Feast of Pluralism.

But say what Peter said; that is, muster up the courage, and echo the way Jesus spoke of Himself, and say, "there is no other healer but Jesus", "there is no other lord but Jesus," and we will be asked to leave the Feast or worse.

We will be accused of being intolerant.

But the fact is it has nothing to do with intolerance. It has everything to do with righteousness. It has everything to do with faithfulness to a relationship with Jesus. He made the chains not we. What are we supposed to do? Water them down? Give into the spirit of the age, and deny Who he is? We cannot. We can be kind and respectful, meek, gentle but we cannot be unfaithful to Who he claims to be.

Blessed? Right-on? Congratulations are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Blessed! In-synch are you when people insult you, and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely on account of Me. Rejoice! And be glad! Rejoice and be glad? I know how I feel when only mildly criticized! I know how I feel when only snickered at because of what I say about Jesus. Rejoice and be glad?

Why Lord? Because "you have a great reward in heaven". OK And because you are not alone. You join a long line of others "for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." OK. That Helps. And because "yours is the Kingdom". What? "Yours is the Kingdom of heaven" Not, "yours will be the Kingdom" But "Yours is the kingdom." Is. Now.

Jesus is putting everything in perspective. It is because God's glorious Kingdom is already breaking into one's life, that he or she is treated the way Jesus was treated. It is because Jesus' Gospel is already taken hold that we are getting caught in the crunch.

With that perspective I just might be able to keep my cool. And maybe even be able to bless the persecutor.

Mortimer Arias sums it up for me:

"the arrival of the kingdom produces a crisis. It is like a sword that draws a dividing line and cuts through the most intimate and sacred relationships and loyalties, and subordinates any former value or commitment. The Kingdom is universal, and is, in fact, the paramount subverter of human orders. The proclaimer of this kingdom could not expect any other treatment than the one reserved for the subversion in human history." (42,43)