

The Kingdom of Heaven

The promise of the first beatitude is repeated here in the last one. These people have gained what is more important than anything else and what nobody can take away from them! Here's some up-to-date information from the Bible League brochure –

“David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, in the 2003 Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission International Bulletin of Mission research estimate approximately 166,000 persons are being martyred every year. Compare this with 160,000 in 2000 and 34,400 at the beginning of the 20th Century. If this current trend were to continue, Barrett and Johnson estimate by 2025, an average 210,000 Christians would be martyred annually.

“According to David Barrett and Todd Johnson's estimation, at a steady rate over the last 20 centuries, and in all 238 countries, 70 million Christians have been martyred – killed, executed, murdered – for Christ.

“The World Evangelical Alliance, in the Geneva Report 2003, has described the progressive phases of persecution of Christians. Firstly, disinformation is spread especially through media, to falsely accuse the reputation of Christians. Secondly, Christians are discriminated against and relegated to a lower position legally, socially, politically and economically. Finally, the state, police or military, organised groups or representatives of other religions persecute Christians openly.

“Persecution is most severe in places where God's church is growing fastest”.

We noted at the beginning that the general idea seems to be, “Happy are those who fulfil the expectations of the present age – the world is at their feet!” Yet the Master Teacher says to us, “Blessed (happy) are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”.

Reflect:

- How do we move from a bland, insipid faith that is easily squeezed into the mould of current thinking to a faith that is alive with the truth and grace of God?
- In what new directions has the Lord been speaking to us through this study? What are we going to do about it?

Study 10 – Blessed are You Reading: Matthew 5.3-12; 6.1-8,16-18.

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Ten Studies on the Beatitudes

by Peter J Blackburn

9. ... *the Persecuted*

Reading: Hebrews 11.32-40; Matthew 5.11-12; 1 Peter 3.13-18

It is sometimes suggested that “everyone has his price” – inferring that everyone at some point will be willing to give up their deepest convictions. For some the “price” may be financial, for others torture. Consider these stories recently received in a brochure from the Bible League...

Tan (not his real name), a church planter in China was arrested then imprisoned. His crime? Preaching about Jesus Christ and giving out Bibles. After the difficult eleven-day incarceration he reported, “I was in touch with twenty-nine people, two of them condemned to death. These two men, with nine others, repented of their sin!”

Zana, a young Albanian girl, eager to encourage her friends to also repent and commit their lives to Jesus wrote, “Jesus is now my Lord and Saviour. Now life will have new meaning and purpose.”

But some would not accept her faith in Jesus. They threatened her. They raped her. They killed her.

A mob of Indians dragged Raj into a temple threw him down and placed his hand on an idol. “Vow you will not talk about Jesus anymore, or your hand will not leave this place”, they yelled. Raj trembled but responded, “Whether I have one hand or two, or none at all, I cannot stop talking about Jesus. Even if I die now, I will not disown him”.

Mostly, we aren't faced with that kind of pressure. We consider ourselves “persecuted” if someone pokes fun at us because we go to church instead of a day's fishing! Because the pressure isn't so direct, we may, perhaps, find it easier to “give in”.

The general idea seems to be, “Happy are those who fulfil the expectations of the present age – the world is at their feet!”

Yet the Master Teacher says to us, “Blessed (happy) are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5.10).

Reflect:

- “Because the pressure isn't so direct, we may, perhaps, find it easier to ‘give in’.” Is that really so? Why?

Persecution

Read: Hebrews 11.32-40.

Persecution has a long history in the Christian Church, going back, in fact, to Christ himself. It was also part of their heritage from the history of God's faithful people in Old Testament times.

What an amazing story of faith we have in Hebrews 11.32-40! The first group – “Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets...” – were examples of those whom we might describe as victorious by faith.

But there were others who were “tortured and refused to be released” – facing “jeers and flogging... chained and put in prison... stoned... sawed in two... put to death by the sword”.

“They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated – the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground”.

Read: Matthew 5.11-12.

Followers of Christ weren't promised peace in an earthly Paradise. Jesus went on to say after this eighth beatitude, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you”.

It may at first seem puzzling to us to hear Jesus saying, “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (10.34). Puzzling, that is, until we see that it is set against a background of his call for their absolute allegiance. Such people will refuse to fulfil the expectations of their age. Persecution in one form or another will inevitably follow.

Jesus wasn't calling them to be trouble-makers or to force acceptance of the gospel with the sword. He was simply describing the results of their allegiance in a world so sharply at variance with the gospel.

Reflect:

- Think again about Tan, Zana and Raj. Why is faith in the Lord Jesus more important to them than their own life and safety?
- How important is faith in the Lord Jesus for us? Do we have a “price”, or do we press on for the “prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3.14)?

Because of Righteousness

Read 1 Peter 3.13-18.

Of course, people are persecuted for many reasons. Even those who profess to follow Christ may suffer persecution because of some unacceptable personal trait, or because of their own poor judgment, stupidity or blundering. Jesus is not promising that such persecution will bring happiness. Peter writes about the blessing that comes when we suffer “for doing good”.

Jesus is even more specific – “because of righteousness”. He is speaking of the persecution that may come because a person is a Christian, because a person has come to be right with God by faith in Jesus Christ.

As in the fourth beatitude, “righteousness” speaks not simply of right living, but of rightness with God. So if a Christian is victimised because of a kind of Pharisaic pride in his own goodness, he is not the object of this beatitude which speaks rather of the person who knows his need of God's help, who knows he is only right with God because of the good news of God's redeeming love in Christ.

But why will such people be persecuted? why persecuted for this reason? It is because this gospel stands in judgment of this world, its standards and its ways. It is because these people have offered their final allegiance to one whose claims are absolute and cannot be ignored.

We sometimes think, “If we tell them about God's love, they will believe”. But it isn't so. We forget that Jesus “came to his own country, but his own people did not receive him” (Jn. 1.11, GNB). Those who heard his teaching rejected him on a cross!

It is still true, as it was in Paul's day: “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1.22-24).

In our world too, drunk with knowledge and power, the Christian, declaring fundamental human need, pointing to a solution which can come to us from God alone, is despised, considered a nuisance, and in some cases even a danger and a menace.

Reflect:

- What are some of the wrong reasons Christians are persecuted? When have we been persecuted for the right reasons? Why?