

**Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven  
(Matthew 5:10)**

One of the more responsible jobs I had when I worked in the office at Plymouth Argyle Football Club

- Was to draft some pen-pictures of the players, these were finally approved by the club secretary
- I had often read the player pen-pictures in programmes for pen-pictures
- And often felt that they were not that good – they turned out to be more difficult to write than I thought

At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount we find the eight Beatitudes

- They are effectively a pen-picture of a Christian, a portrait of a disciple of Jesus, with the values of Jesus
- Such a person is ‘blessed’ – that is has the approval of God
- Not surprisingly these Beatitudes are in direct conflict with worldly standards and counter-values
- The world judges the self-confident to be blessed not those who are poor in spirit
- The world judges pleasure-seeking ‘beautiful people’ to be blessed not those who mourn or evil and sin
- The meek are not thought likely to inherit the earth but the proud, the powerful and the important
- Righteousness is not something for which there is a strong appetite to equate with hunger and thirst
- The merciful are not considered as blessed as self-centred people who are able to take care of themselves
- The world considers ‘adult’, ‘sophisticated’ and ‘broad-minded’ to be positives, not purity of heart
- In the world at large people who are competitive and aggressive seem more valued than peacemakers
- And when we get to the last of the eight Beatitudes, we find the effect of the previous seven
- People who are persecuted because of righteousness – when it is easier to be adaptable and popular
- Twentieth century Christian martyr, theologian, writer, musician and pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, wrote:
- “With every Beatitude the gulf is widened between the disciples and the people.”

The Sermon on the Mount is the greatest body of the teaching of Jesus that we have (Matthew 5-7)

- but on closer examination, however inspiring the Sermon on the Mount might be
- we cannot doubt that, by ordinary human standards, its teaching is impossible to achieve
- if we looked for a text on which Jesus was teaching in this Sermon on the Mount, where six times he says
- ‘you have heard that is was said but I say to you,’ (or similar) it would be hard to better his own words
- ‘A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another
- By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another’ (John 13:34-35)
- But if keeping the letter of the law in a limited understanding of the commandments was hard
- Keeping the spirit of the law as Jesus expounds it is harder still and at the climax of this passage he says
- ‘Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matthew 5:38) – how can we be like God?

The Sermon on the Mount was addressed to disciples, those who had responded to the message of the Kingdom

- Part of that response was repentance (3:2, 4:17) which deals with the wrong in our lives
- The Sermon on the Mount is about both the forgiveness of sins and the transformation of lives
- It opens with ‘the Beatitudes’, a name that comes from the Latin *beatus* (blessed, still the best translation)
- ‘happy’ has been devalued and cheapened in modern usage and, in any event, the focus tends to be inside
- Whereas the focus of the Beatitudes is how we stand before God whose blessing rests on unlikely people
- So much so that the usual order of things is turned upside down or, more accurately, the right way up
- When we look at the Beatitudes individually some of them seem to be absurd
- (e.g. the meek seem the least likely sort of people to inherit the earth), instead we must view them together
- In the Beatitudes, a progression in Christian experience is being described, the eight and last of them is:
- Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

## I WHY SHOULD A CHRISTIAN BE PERSECUTED?

It is no accident that Jesus passes from peacemaking to persecution

- We have to accept that facing opposition for being a disciple of Jesus is normal
- ‘Righteousness’ is nothing other than ‘proper conduct before God’ – the world is not interested in this
- Interestingly enough, the reward of the persecuted (in the eighth Beatitude)
- Is the same as the reward of the poor in spirit (in the first Beatitude) – the kingdom of heaven
- The periphrasis (roundabout way of saying something) ‘kingdom of heaven’ is popular in Matthew
- (the other Gospel-writers more readily use the expression, ‘kingdom of God’)
- Because, probably writing for a Jewish readership, Matthew is careful to respect the holy name of God
- The great Jewish hope was that the Messiah would come and inaugurate the eternal kingdom
- Preaching the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven (in the Jewish idiom) was the ministry of Jesus
- In Jewish thought there were two ages, the present age and the age to come, which was the kingdom
- Hope for the kingdom of God burned intensely in the Jewish heart, more so after the terrible exile
- And they were waiting for God to intervene directly into human history
- The popular expectation was for a militaristic leader to come and lead an uprising, overcoming Rome
- But Jesus announced that the kingdom was for the spiritually poor, those who mourned over sin
- the meek, the spiritually hungry/thirsty, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers
- this was a war not against the Romans but against the powers of evil, of selfishness of sin, even of death
- this kingdom would not be inaugurated with a great fanfare but by the new birth of new disciples
- subjects of the kingdom, living in faith and humility – Jesus proclaimed God’s kingly rule
- therefore, because we are on the frontline of a war, we must expect at least persecution

## II HOW SHOULD A CHRISTIAN REACT WHEN PERSECUTED?

There is a tendency to discriminate against or to persecute people who are different from you

- it is because Christians are different from the world at large that they should expect persecution
- if we are not experiencing any kind of persecution, we might need to ask ourselves, 'why not?'
- for the Christian is called not simply to be different but to be noticeably different
- It is because of the characteristics of the first seven Beatitudes that the we have the eighth
- And it because of the kingdom values that the world reacts with hostility

Being a compulsive extravert I love the telephone and phone calls even to strangers are normally a great delight

- Consequently, a quick call for online banking can easily become a friendly chat
- After all, a lot of people who work in call centres like the telephone and are also compulsive extraverts
- I have a set of saying that I hope will charm the receptionists on the other end of the line
- And when I recently said to a young woman in the Cardiff-based call centre of an insurance company
- It was my intention to be the nicest customer you had all day, she replied, 'you certainly are!'
- Unfortunately, I meet some church-goers who seem totally lacking in any kind of charm at all
- There is no blessedness and being objectionable and rude, being awkward, difficult, foolish or wrong
- Peter reminds us that we should not suffer as murderer, thief, criminal or meddler (1 Peter 4:15)
- And we need not forget to be nice, just because somehow we think people have to be horrible to us
- But there are times to stand for righteousness and because of this, we will be persecuted and in that case
- We should not sulk, or wallow in self-pity, or be depressed, or grin and bear it, but instead
- we should follow the example of Jesus, who did not retaliate or threaten but trusted God (1 Pet. 2:23)
- in fact Jesus tells his disciples, when they are persecuted because of righteousness, to rejoice

### III WHY SHOULD WE REJOICE?

As a child, I discovered that I could not always like my parents' friends

- it's something that I have needed to remember for while I have not always liked my children's friends
- I have realised that they have not always liked my friends either
- But what has been rather sad for me is that, even within the church, some people who have not liked me
- Have decided to take it out on my children – it ought not to happen but it does happen
- And we have to learn that if the world is at enmity with God, it will also persecute his children
- I don't expect that it has been a great joy to my children to know people have only been horrible to them
- Because they did not like me: but they soon learned that goes with the territory of being a minister's child

A Christian can rejoice, however, because persecution for Christ's sake confirms sonship

- In this a Christian should show the family characteristics, being unlike people who are not Christians
- Instead being people who are controlled and dominated by the will of Christ
- Whose minds are set on heaven and the life to come and not just engrossed with worldly concerns
- The popular definition of a Christian as a nice, rather weak, inoffensive person is not from the Bible
- Where a Christian is fundamentally different because of the Lordship of Jesus
- Reconciled with God and seeking to do his will, rejoicing that by faith in the death of Christ on the cross
- And believing in his triumphant resurrection, the Christian is counted as righteous, right with God
- The Christian, therefore, is no longer conformed to this world but is being transformed
- And his or her mind is set on the will of God, the Lordship of Christ, the power of the Holy Spirit
- And the values of the kingdom – does this sound like a recipe for being popular? No, but rejoice!

To be a follower of Jesus does not guarantee popularity and more than 'being Jesus' guaranteed popularity

- For while many people will claim to have a high regard for Jesus and his teachings, this is misleading
- For many people hated Jesus, tried to stone him and eventually betrayed and crucified him
- Jesus told his disciples, 'If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first' (John 15:18).
- If it was true of the prophets, if it was true of Jesus, if it was true of the apostles, according to tradition
- 10 of the faithful 11 disciples died a martyr's death, then we must not expect a different experience

The world at large is accepting, even indulgent of nominal church-going but not of taking it seriously

- Sunday morning attendance does not do any harm – but reading the Bible regularly is taking it too far
- Jesus says: if you are persecuted for being right before God or doing right for me you are truly blessed

I remember, a few years ago, being asked why Christians were always talking about world faiths and sexuality

- I replied, you can only bat the balls you are bowled (a reference, of course, to cricket)
- If as a believer you stress the uniqueness of Christ, his full deity as well as his full humanity
- And are therefore compelled to conclude that not all religious views are equally valid or
- If as a believer you seek to uphold the traditional views of Christian marriage
- And are therefore compelled to conclude that not everything being done in the name of equality is right
- Then you must expect unpopularity, even to the point of persecution and discrimination
- But it is not these two areas alone – just about every Christian doctrine will bring about the same result
- If you want to experience persecution, talk about the need for individual and personal repentance
- Talk about death, judgment and the future life, talk about inheritance depending not on good works
- But on the new birth through personal faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour
- You are bound to run into opposition – but rejoice for the kingdom of heaven is yours