

**“Blessed are the Persecuted”
Matthew 5:10 – 12; John 15:18 – 20**

Matthew 5:10 - 12:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“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.”

John 15:18 – 20:

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.

If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

Remember what I told you: ‘Servants are not greater than their master.’

If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.”

My early discipleship as a teen featured stories and teaching about persecution.

At the time— it was during the Cold War - Soviet Russia and China communist were the main culprits, and that Christians suffered terribly for the gospel, and we were to pray for them.

So we were warned to be ready to suffer for Jesus’ sake; that following Him is not always easy or popular.

This was coupled with end times expectancy that things were going to get really tough before they got better, and who knows, you may have to make the ultimate sacrifice for Christ one day.

The worst that I experienced was being made fun of and being somewhat ostracised.

I didn’t have much problem with that because that’s what I read in Scripture.

As a definition, Christian persecution is any hostility experienced as a result of proclaiming the name of Jesus.

The Greek word Jesus uses means to pursue, to harass, to oppress, to squeeze, and to crush.

It can range from social vilification to rejection and isolation from families, friends and communities.

According to Jesus own words it's not limited to extreme acts – “Blessed are you when people *insult* you, *persecute* you and *falsely say all kinds of evil against you* because of me.”

It can mean being denied access to basic needs like water, food and health care.

Some face violent abuse, imprisonment and even death.

This was true for the first Christians.

Rome commanded *everyone* to worship the Emperor as one of its many gods.

Christians were asked to bow before an idol and offer incense to Caesar and confess, “Caesar is Lord”.

You didn't even have to believe in what you were doing but it was a way of showing that you cared about the welfare of Roman Empire and the emperor.

Not to do so was an act of treason.

Some Christians performed this act; the majority did not and faced imprisonment and death.

Christians also had a value system that was absolutely at odds with Roman culture.

Followers of Jesus taught that all people were created in the image of the One True High God and that Jesus had *died* for all people.

By saying all people had value included not only slaves and lepers but the unborn and very young.

You see, across the Roman world, Infanticide was a common practice

that happened in plain sight. Babies, newborns were abandoned on the sides of roads or rubbish dumps by their parents to die an awful death through starvation and exposure. Girls especially were treated ruthlessly. Again, no one gave it much thought or challenged the practice. In fact it was celebrated as being a virtue for the good of the state.

Slaves in particular heard that they were valued and loved. They gained a new dignity. Though it was deeply embedded in the economic system of the Roman Empire, the seeds of slavery's demise sown.

Christians also had a sexual ethic that was considered strange and unworkable – faithful marriage between one man and one woman. Roman culture was one where there were very few sexual boundaries especially if you were a Roman male. Being faithful to one's spouse was not even considered possible.

Christians did not only repudiate abuse, exploitation and coercion, they held fast to male-female marriage and exclusivity to one spouse.

The Roman world was cruel and tribal. Kindness was not a virtue; the powerful preyed on the feeble.

The weak and downtrodden were scorned *but* Christians cared for all people.

This exasperated the Emperor, Julian, who wrote, "How apparent to everyone it is, and how shameful, that our own people lack support from us, when no Jew has ever to beg, and the impious Galileans [Christians] support not only their own poor, but ours as well."¹

Most of all these Christians proclaimed the message that Jesus Christ is the true King who died that rebels may be forgiven and peace with God. That Jesus' rule is the true remedy to sin and chaos of the world and he says to all people, everywhere, "Come follow me".

And it is a reality today.

Yet there is a strange silence within churches.
We rarely hear it talked about.

¹ Quoted in "Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind", 121.

It's almost as if in some circles there's an embarrassment about it.
Or people will say, "It's not really that bad".
It's something that happens over there, out of mind, out of sight.
But it is real.

So here are some numbers:

✝ 80% of religious persecution in the world is of Christian believers.

✝ In 2021 Christians were targeted in 150 countries (a rise from 125 in 2015).

✝ Today 365 million Christians live in places where they experience high levels of persecution for the sole reason that they follow Jesus.

✝ 1 in 7 Christians are persecuted worldwide.
1 in 5 Christians are persecuted in Africa.
2 in 5 Christians are persecuted in Asia.²

These are figures provided by Open Doors.

Open Doors was founded by Brother Andrew to support persecuted Christians and provide awareness and prayer.

Open Doors also provides a World Watch List each year, highlighting the top 50 places for the persecution of Christians.

They use 6 measures:

Violence and the degree of pressure exerted against the practice of their faith in private, family, community, national and church spheres of life.

So, from what you know,

"What are the worst countries in the world in terms of persecution?"

What do you think?

Tell the person next to you.

² World Watch List 2024 · Serving Persecuted Christians Worldwide
<https://www.opendoors.org/en-US/persecution/countries/>

10. Afghanistan
9. Iran
8. Sudan
7. Pakistan
6. Nigeria

10. Afghanistan
9. Iran
8. Sudan
7. Pakistan
6. Nigeria
5. Yemen
4. Eritrea
3. Libya
2. Somalia
1. North Korea

But why?

Why does it happen?

Jesus said,

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of *righteousness*.”

To be righteous is living a life pleasing to God through what Jesus has achieved for us.

It's righteousness of character and conduct in the power of the Holy Spirit.

It's saying “I want to do what King Jesus commands and asks of me.

I want to stand up for truth. I want to stand for the things Jesus stands for”
... and people may hate you for it.

So when persecution is encountered it's on account of loyalty to him and his standards of truth and righteousness.

Jesus calls us to have our allegiance - our loyalty, our faithfulness, our love - to be centred on him above all others.

Now at this point there is an important distinction that needs to be made here.

You know, sometimes Christians act like a self-righteous prigs (P-R-I-G-S), they're obnoxious and overly harsh – they're jerks. All sorts of stuff spews of their mouths and they get push back, so they say, "Stop persecuting me!"

No, you're not being persecuted – stop being a clown. Jesus is not defending the idea of Christians acting like idiots and being mean-spirited.

Persecution is a clash between two conflicting value-systems – between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world.

Although most Christians are simply trying to live out their faith in Christ in peace and live ordinary lives, they are seen as a threat.

In parts of India the reasons are both religious and linked to identity.

Although religious equality enshrined in law in many parts of India it's believed that only Hindus are true Indians.

Christians, Muslims and other religious minorities have 'foreign' roots and must be expelled.

Hindu extremists use extreme violence in some parts of the country.

Some states have introduced anti-conversion laws.

Christians increasingly experience social exclusion in their communities, discrimination in the workplace, and have false accusations and rumours spread about them.

In places such as China and North Korea Christianity is a perceived as an enemy to the supreme power of the state.

Since the state holds a utopian vision of how the world should be that is often at odds with loyalty to Jesus, arrests, abductions, arbitrary fines, close surveillance, denials of licenses, the burning of churches and physical and mental abuse are common.

For example, between 2021-22 Chinese officials closed almost 7,000 churches

Could it happen here?

What do you think?

Well, yes!

The first believers in the Book of Acts underwent a time of persecution. The church throughout the last two thousand years has experienced times and places of great persecution.

Why should we be any different?

Currently one of the biggest challenges in the West is whether the Christian faith is good for the world, where opponents say that it is actually the opposite: Christianity negative, regressive, harmful and even dangerous, lacking tolerance and inclusion.

Disagreement isn't persecution; debate over the truth of Christian faith isn't persecution.

Asking tough questions of the Christian faith isn't necessarily persecution either.

We in the West encounter what has been called 'soft persecution'.

In December 2019 street preacher David McConnell was arrested in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, UK for "a hate-related public order offence" and held in police custody for around six hours, simply for sharing the Gospel. Passers-by had falsely accused him of making hateful and deliberately offensive remarks. Thankfully McConnell was released without charge, and West Yorkshire Police admitted that they had acted unlawfully.

Nurse Caroline Petrie faced the sack after offering to pray for a sick patient. The patient complained to nurse Petrie's bosses saying that although she was not offended this kind of behaviour could easily offend others.

A foster carer was told that she would be struck off the carer list for allowing a Muslim girl in her care to convert to Christianity.

In 2015, the Catholic Archbishop of Hobart issued a pamphlet explaining to the parents of children in Catholic schools the Catholic church's historic, orthodox, biblical understanding of marriage (which is also upheld by all churches for over 2000 years). In presenting its view it gently and pastorally challenged same-sex marriage.

Almost immediately a complaint was laid against the Archbishop accusing him of discrimination. The anti-discrimination commissioner agreed he had a case to answer but thankfully the case was dropped before it could go further.³

So here's the thing: for many in our world loyalty to Jesus and his words looks like hate.

So what's our response to that this morning?

If you are persecuted Jesus says you're blessed.

You're blessed because you are in good company.

We stand in a long tradition of faithful men and women – the prophets and martyrs – who too were persecuted for their trust in God.

We in the West are terrified of dying, and that includes many Christians. And yet our brothers and sisters in Christ in other parts of the world face it on an almost daily basis.

Are we to be masochists? No.

Jesus did say, "When you are persecute in one place, flee to another."⁴

There were many times when people like Paul was escaped from great danger.⁵

We are to value life, yes, but not fear death.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said that, "Suffering... is the badge of true discipleship."

John Stott called it a certificate of Christian authenticity.

³ The pamphlet "Don't Mess With Marriage" is freely available here https://www.sydneycatholic.org/pdf/dmm-booklet_web.pdf

⁴ Matthew 10:23

⁵ See for example Acts 9:23 -25; 13:50 – 51; 14:5 – 7;

You're blessed because says something about our lives and to whom we belong.

The persecuted are blessed because theirs is the kingdom and are like their master.

Persecution marks us out as belonging to the King Jesus.

You are His.

It's a token of genuineness.

And as King He will have the final say-so over your life.

Alongside this there are many organisations that advocate for the persecuted church.

Open Doors, Voice of the Martyrs and Barnabas Aid all have areas they work effectively in.

You may want to access their material and find ways you can help.

For example, in one church I was involved in a woman was so shocked by what she heard, particularly personal stories, they she formed a letter writing group associated with the Voice of the Martyrs. They would pray and write physical letters to governments around and saw their prayers answered and letters answered (and her own faith grew and grew).

These groups partner with the church worldwide to help believers who were suffering through creating awareness, material aid, government advocacy and prayer.

And most of all Hebrews chapter 13:3:

“Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.”

In the context of the letter, it is those who are imprisoned for their faith.

We are call to remember, pray for and even advocate for those who persecuted for their faith.

And that's what we're going to do as we close this morning.

For more information:

Open Doors <https://www.opendoors.org.nz>

Voice of the Martyrs <https://www.vom.org.nz>

Barnabas Fund <https://barnabasfund.org/nz/>