

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

So as we draw to the end of our sermon series on the Beatitudes, we come to this verse about those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness.

Earlier in the series, I talked about how Jesus doesn't just teach us things, he does them: he lives them.

This certainly applies to today's Beatitude.

The first reading is one of the passages of Isaiah known as the Suffering Servant passages. It's a curious paradox we find over and over again in Scripture: how the good person, the holy person, is persecuted, but afterwards people come to realise that that person was righteous, and that they show the way to salvation.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, his followers looked back to such places in earlier Scriptures, and saw them as pointing to God's greatest act of salvation, in Jesus, the ultimate persecuted righteous one. Jesus lived out this Beatitude in his death and resurrection.

In today's second reading, Timothy writes 'all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.' Certainly, that would have been the experience of many of early Christians. Many of the earliest Christian writings reflect that, so we read a lot of strongly-worded responses to persecutions.

But most of the time for many of us that is not our experience, and even when it is, I would suggest that the

focus here should still not be on the idea of persecution, but on the idea of righteousness.

If you focus on 'persecution', it can be a temptation to assume that if you're persecuted by definition you are getting things right, and that can mean being unable to see when what seems like 'persecution' *isn't* actually about righteousness, but about something else, and something actually needs to be set right. And conversely, it can also be a temptation to assume that if as a Christian you're *not* being persecuted you aren't being holy enough, so you need to do things which set people's backs up more – and that might have nothing to do with real righteousness either.

So let's focus on this 'righteousness'.

What is 'righteousness'?

As a word it can sound rather unappealing.

It can sound rather 'holier-than-thou'.

It can sound spiritually self-seeking and narcissistic – it can sound as though it's all about our own individual perfection, perhaps even cutting ourselves off from anything that might detract from our own personal holiness, and certainly telling other people what they need to do to be as good as us.

That isn't righteousness.

If we think back over our sermon series, perhaps that gives us a vision of what 'righteousness' might mean – God's righteousness, not ours.

We've heard about those who mourn, who will be comforted.

We've heard about the poor in spirit and the meek – the opposite of the proud and haughty and powerful.

We've heard about the merciful, and the peacemakers, and the pure in heart who see God.

These are the things to concentrate on, if you want to hunger and thirst after righteousness: comforting the afflicted, being merciful, pursuing peace, renouncing pride; following what Jesus teaches us about God, and how we should respond to God and each other. And as we hear in today's gospel, this light of Christ that we have, that comes from putting all this at the centre of our lives, is not something to hide away, but something that must shine before others, 'so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven'.

It's not true that this will always lead to persecution. Often people recognise and respond to this true righteousness, and show deep respect for it. This doesn't make it a failure – it doesn't negate the righteousness – although it can carry with it its own temptations.

But history, Scripture, news from round the world, and our own experiences do show clearly that often this *does* lead to negative reactions. It's strange but true that this kind of simple righteousness is a deep challenge in some situations. In situations where violence and intolerance and oppression and abuse are the norm, those who try to do differently will be persecuted. Jesus in the Beatitudes gives encouragement and strength and reassurance to those who *do* suffer

persecution for righteousness' sake. And what he says should also remind us to treat other people with understanding and compassion and respect: just because the world rejects and persecutes certain people doesn't mean they are in the wrong and to be shunned and suspected by us as well. They may well be amongst the righteousness whose cause is known to God and who possess the kingdom. If we take time to find out more, to listen, to allow them to touch our lives, we may well learn a lot more about God than we expect.

So whether our experience of living as Christians has been smooth or challenging, let us remember to focus on that ideal of true Christian righteousness. If following Jesus' righteousness is a delightful and easy path, there's no reason not to delight in it and be at our ease. But when it is more challenging, let us pray for the grace not to lose that delight, and hold firm to Jesus' promise of the kingdom.

Amen.