

Lent Compline Talks 2018 St Mary's Kidlington

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The Beatitudes

9: Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And this passage goes on to elaborate: "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matthew 5:11).

The equivalent beatitude in Luke in the New English Bible is even more striking "How blest you are when men hate you, when they outlaw you and insult you, and ban your very name as infamous because of the Son of Man. On that day be glad and dance for joy; for assuredly you have a rich reward in heaven." And Luke continues with the anti-beatitude warning "But alas for you when all men speak well of you; just so did their fathers treat false prophets."

One of the outstanding qualities of Jesus was his sheer honesty. He left no-one in any doubt of the consequences if they chose to follow him. He said many times that those who follow Him will be persecuted. *"If they persecute me, they will persecute you"* (John 15:20). Stephen, Peter and Paul, nearly all of the Apostles, were martyred for their faith. John the Baptist was killed by Herod; in the Roman era, Nero coated Christians with pitch, set them alight and used them as torches in his gardens. Since then, successive governments and endless conflicts around the world have seen their share of martyrs; and the list goes on and on. In our own time, Bonhoeffer in the 2nd world war; Oscar Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, assassinated while saying Mass in 1980 for speaking out against government human rights violations. Today the troubles of the middle east continue the persecution. In 2014 the Islamic State marked remaining Christian homes in Mosul with the Arabic letter Noon (for Nazarene) and told residents that they had 24 hours to leave, convert to Islam, or die - the modern equivalent of the requirement of first century Christians publicly to acknowledge "Caesar is Lord" or be outlawed. To our undying shame, Christians slaughtered Muslims thinking they were doing God's will during the mediaeval crusades and various Christian groups have since killed one another in the name of a religious sect. The martyr's memorial in the centre of Oxford is a very poignant local reminder of that. So often the religious difference is just a cloak - what is really at stake is power, privilege and possessions - things for which we humans often have a great lust.

As we explored yesterday, being a peacemaker won't exclude us from conflict - indeed we should expect it - and certainly championing righteousness (which is really the same as pursuing everything that makes for a person's highest good) is more than likely to bring us into conflict with powerful vested interests. Here in UK we are unlikely to be thrown to the lions or killed, but there may well be persecution of some sort for following Christ and for speaking out against injustice. This may be at work, in our social life, and even within families. At work, remaining faithful to the gospel can cost people their jobs - whistle-blowers often are treated shamefully; in our social life we may well be mocked; and in a family there can be a great deal of personal hurt. Jesus shows us by his example that we, as his disciples, must endure and be willing to bear whatever the cost.

For most of us, I guess we have never in our lives had to make anything like a really life-threatening sacrifice for Jesus. It is only at the moment when following our faith is likely to involve really substantial personal cost that we shall know the sincerity of our faith. Here and now we can only pray that we shall not be found wanting if and when that challenge comes.

And now the reward “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. Our Lord promises those who suffer for the sake of righteousness will be rewarded with the Kingdom of Heaven! Again, we have to ask whether that promise applies only after death - or is it also a promise for the here and now? For those who have been quite literally martyred for their faith, we can only trust to our Lord’s promise that, after their death, they will be with him in eternity.

What about for us, here and now? Jesus’ message about the kingdom was not simply for after death. At the start of his preaching in Galilee Jesus says “The time has come, the kingdom of God is upon you” and, after a healing “then be sure that the kingdom has *already* come upon you”. For us, the ‘kingdom of heaven’ in our daily lives is surely that deep feeling of blessing that we have done the right thing at times when we have been tested, despite whatever we saw as the cost. In the words of the hymn, we must “live our lives courageously” both individually and as a church. Indeed, at the close of his commentary “Exploring the Beatitudes” Bishop Stephen asks us to consider how we as a church community can be more courageous. What would be different if we were a more courageous church? How can we support one another to be more courageous in the practice of our faith? This is the real challenge of the beatitudes for us not only this Lent but in the years to come - to bring the ‘kingdom of heaven’ a little closer to this world here and now.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”.

God of gentleness and love, draw near to us as we draw near to you. Dwell in every heart and conversation. Fashion us in the likeness of your Son, Jesus Christ. Help us to discern in the beatitudes what you are calling us to be and to do. Help us, by the Holy Spirit, to be a more contemplative, more compassionate and more courageous church.