

## Beatitudes 8: PERSECUTION IS A BLESSING?

Acts 5:17-42, Matthew 5:10-12 [MW17-28]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai + Wellsford, Sunday 10 September 2017

A 21-year-old is hired by a hardware store. He shows up for his first day of work at 8am sharp. The boss welcomes him, then hands him a broom. "First, sweep out the store. Then I'll show you where the window cleaning equipment is." "Sir," the young man protests. "You can't be serious. I'm a University graduate; I have a BA with Honours." "Oh, sorry," says the manager, pointing to the broom. "No problem. I can show you how that thing works."

When you complete a course of study, a training programme, apprenticeship or similar

- what do you get, what would you expect to get upon its completion ... ???
- certificate, diploma, badge ...
- hold that thought

Jesus has been teaching people about how to live as his followers

- we have been considering this very carefully over the past seven weeks as we have looked at the section we call "The Beatitudes"
- at the end of all this, what does Jesus promise ... certainly not any kind of reward oh no, in fact exactly the opposite: trouble, in a big way!
- but even more than that, Jesus is expecting people to be happy about it hold that thought too

So far it didn't really seem to make sense, at least not to me

- yes these darn beatitudes clash with our normal thinking and turn things upside down and inside out but this one seemed to go way, way beyond that
- then as I was reading Matthew 5:10-12 again I remembered the first Youth Pastor we had when I was Vicar of Taradale

One Tuesday morning we arrived at the church to find a dead possum

- carefully arranged in our driveway and graffiti on the gateposts
- similar things went on all that week and the parish secretary and I were getting pretty upset about this
- but Kathryn, our Youth Pastor, she was happy she said this was great, with a huge smile, and she meant it
- we must be on the right track, doing what we are supposed to be doing for God otherwise we wouldn't have this reaction
- please file that thought away with those other two

John Stott in this week's Bible study says persecution is: simply the clash between two irreconcilable value systems

Remember that although we are living in this world

- we are also citizens of the kingdom of God one is kind of 'superimposed' over the other or perhaps it is that God's kingdom shines through
- what that means is there will inevitably be differences and difficulties because we are not in step with this world
- we are in step with God's world

The first Christians found this out very early on, and there are echoes and similarities today

Christians found that their business interests sometimes conflicted with loyalty to Christ

- for example a man might be a stone mason, no worries there until his firm receives a contract to build a temple to a pagan god
- or a tailor or seamstress could find themselves being asked to produce robes for heathen priests

Then there was the matter of social life

- often feasts and parties were held in the temple of a particular god even an ordinary meal in someone's home was problematic it usually began with an offering to the gods, much as we say grace
- family life could be severely disrupted when one member became a Christian while others did not
- a wife might become a follower while her husband refused a son or daughter may be at odds with their family by becoming a follower of Jesus so that often the door was shut forever on the one who had accepted Christ

Then in the wider, over-arching official world, the source of programmed persecution

- it was all political, centering on just who is in charge was it the Emperor or was it someone else?
- Rome said it could not be anyone else: only the Emperor those who did not acknowledge this were dealt with quickly and harshly and that is just what happened to these early followers of Jesus
- I guess you're all aware of the lions, torture, burning at the stake ...

The way to show that you were not a threat to the Roman Empire

- was to make the yearly sacrifice to the Emperor it was on the face of it very reasonable:
- burn a pinch of incense to the godhead of Caesar and say "Caesar is Lord" once a person did this, then within the bounds of public order and decency they were free to worship whoever or whatever they liked
- when they had done this a person received a certificate to prove it Christians of course refused to do this, saying only Jesus Christ is Lord so what did they get: not a certificate but trouble, by the cartload

Christians would not compromise and so no matter how fine a citizen they may be

- they were automatically outlaws because the vast Empire of Rome could not afford pockets of disloyalty which just what every Christian congregation appeared to be

Barclay notes:

The only crime of a Christian was that they set Christ above Caesar; and for that supreme loyalty the Christians died in their thousands, and faced torture for the sake of the lonely supremacy of Jesus Christ.

A resounding clash of value systems

- which although it does not always lead to violence and bloodshed still exists in our day

When this clash happens, then as now, we are told to rejoice: “Rejoice!”

- and even more than this to leap for joy  
the Greek words mean “leap exceedingly”, with over the top boundlessness
- it is like the joy of a climber who has reached the summit  
and who leaps for joy that the mountain path has been conquered
- John Stott says that we can rejoice because persecution is a token of genuineness  
a certificate of Christian authenticity  
(just an aside: it's the only kind of certificate we'll ever get!)
- it is like a seal of approval, a big tick  
and it is why Youth Pastor Kathryn was genuinely happy  
that we were having some problems

Our first reading from Acts showed the apostles putting this into practice

- this was very early in the life of the church  
even before Paul's hunting down of Christians and later conversion
- at this stage followers of Jesus were meeting publicly and attracting followers  
which stirred up the jealousy of the Jewish religious leaders
- the apostles were threatened, insulted, dragged before the elders and the council  
beaten, imprisoned, whipped ...  
... and what did they have to say about all this???

Acts 5:41 tells us very clearly:

*The apostles left the high council rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus.*

On a purely practical side, William Barclay notes that

- suffering persecution makes things easier for those who are to follow  
today we enjoy the blessing of liberty because in the past  
people were willing to buy it for us at the cost of blood, sweat and tears
- they made it easier for us, and by a steadfast and immovable witness for Christ  
we make it easier for those who are still to come
- it is also an encouraging truth that no person suffers persecution alone  
even if someone has to bear material loss, the failure of friends, slander  
loneliness and even the death of love, because of following Christ
- that person will not be left alone  
the promise is Christ will be nearer than at any other time

Also on a practical note, remaining true to Christian principles no matter what

- has nothing to do with being “religious”, self righteous, judgmental, holier than thou  
John Stott points out there is a huge difference between  
being persecuted for the sake of Christ
- and simply drawing fire for being obnoxious!

Jesus is definitely not telling his followers to seek out trouble, and thereby be blessed

- rather he says if you are living as I have taught you  
trouble will find you easy enough
- the real blessing in all this is that when you are being insulted, mistreated, slandered  
you will know you are on the path of life that Jesus calls you to
- it is like a 'badge of office'

The fact is that sometimes just by being who you are

- just by your very presence  
you will stir up trouble – without even doing anything
- it is fitting that this is the concluding beatitude  
because it seems to me that if you are putting your heart, mind, body and spirit  
into following the previous seven, there will inevitably be negative reactions
- for while it is not our role to find fault, criticise or condemn  
it may well be that our every action is a silent condemnation  
of the unchristian lives of others
- and we will not escape their animosity

I'd like to conclude our look at 'The Beatitudes' with these thoughtful words from Bible scholar for the ordinary person, William Barclay:

It is not likely that death awaits us because of our loyalty to the Christian faith. But insult awaits the one who insists on Christian honour. Mockery awaits those who practise Christian love and Christian forgiveness. Actual persecution may well await the Christian in industry who insists on doing an honest day's work. Christ still needs his witnesses; he needs those who are prepared, not so much to die for him, as to live for him.

Christ needs those who are prepared, not so much to *die* for him, as to *live* for him

- the Beatitudes it seems to me are about just this  
how to live for Christ

So, homework? Just kidding no “homework” this week ... with a small “but”

- the Beatitudes are Jesus' blueprint for life  
what's involved in *be-ing* a Christian  
how to relate to God and how to relate to each other
- so I encourage, implore, twist your arm ever so gently  
to read them and reflect on them at least once a year

And to really conclude, something for you all

- you might think it's just chocolate ... but it is something more as well  
we are not to attempt live these Beatitudes on our own  
in fact we cannot, it is impossible
- so, what is the first step? this will remind you  
a chocolate frog, F – R – O – G  
reminding you to Fully Rely On God

[hand out Chocolate Frogs]