

Blessed Are the Persecuted ...

“Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you
and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me.

Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.

Thus they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (MT 5:10-12)

The first seven Beatitudes put us in situations that are either desirable or at least tolerable. We want to be hungry for righteousness, merciful, clean of heart, and peacemakers. We can even live with being poor, meek, or mournful at times. But to be persecuted? Insulted? Slandered? Who wants to be part of that Beatitude?

Very few of us have ever been persecuted, nor are we likely to be. But for First Century Christians, persecution was a fact of life. This was especially true for the Jewish Christian community for whom Matthew’s Gospel was written. Jewish leaders held them to be heretics, apostates and traitors, and persecuted them to the point of death – recall the stoning of Stephen and Saul’s purpose in going to Damascus. And when the Jews contended with their Roman occupiers, the Romans persecuted the Christians as a Jewish sect. As Christianity expanded throughout the Empire and Christians refused to participate in emperor worship, the Romans went after them for that reason.

“Persecuted for the sake of righteousness” – that is, because they tried to maintain good relations with God by obeying His will – this was an all-too-familiar condition for the hearers of Matthew’s Gospel. This Beatitude gave them hope and encouragement in the face of their sufferings – they could rejoice in the heavenly reward promised to them, a joy that was in contrast to the earthly consequences of living their faith.

Verses 11 and 12 are not a ninth Beatitude, as some have suggested, but an expansion of verse 10. They explicitly identify Jesus with righteousness – He is the one who has replaced the Law as the standard for living according to God’s will. The early Christians were rejected by their fellow Jews just like God’s prophets were rejected by their contemporaries. By implication, then, these Christians were God’s new prophets, sent to proclaim his living Word to the community and the world.

How does all this apply to us today? We should resolve to live according to the Gospel, regardless of the consequences. We may be mocked or rejected, yet we must remain faithful. We must not shy away from living our religion “in the public square,” but fulfill our baptismal role to witness to the Risen Christ. We pray for all Christians – not just Catholics – who are persecuted today, e.g., in the Middle East or China or Africa. We pray also for those of other religions – Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists among them – who are persecuted because they try to follow God’s will as they know it, that is, for the sake of righteousness. As Pope Francis reminded us in his recent address to the U.S. Congress, we should welcome those who are refugees from persecution, as we would want to be welcomed. This Beatitude that those persecuted for righteousness will share in the kingdom of heaven extends to all people, of whatever faith, for God calls all to fulfillment in Himself.