

26<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, November 9, 2008, Liturgical Year "A"

**ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY**

The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

Scripture: Mt. 5:10-12

***"Blessed Are the Persecuted" (part 1)***

**THE PERSECUTED CHURCH**

Awhile back I was asked by the St. Bartholomew's prayer group for the persecuted church to devote a Sunday on the subject of persecution and the Persecuted Church. Well, I believe this topic is so important that I've decided to devote two Sundays to it. Some years ago, there was an article in the Wall Street Journal highlighting the fact that Christians are the most persecuted group in the world. And I believe it.

Think about it for a moment. Who's the world's favorite target? The Bible believing Christian – whether it be in Hollywood, the news media, or on the university campus, whether it is from fundamentalist Moslems and Hindus, communists and Marxists, even the Nazis – Bible believing Christians have been ridiculed, laughed at, harassed, beaten, tortured and murdered for their faith. Just a couple weeks ago, Gayle Williams, a young British woman, working for the Christian based aid ministry, Serve Afghanistan, was gunned down by two members of the Taliban. Why? They said, "For spreading Christian propaganda."

The Lord Jesus Christ is coming back, and one of the marks of the last days will be the persecution of the saints of God, the children of God. In fact the Bible tells us in **2 Timothy 3:12**: "*All who live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*" There's no ifs, ands, or buts about that. Now, you can rub shoulders with this world. You can compromise with this world. You can go along with this world and not receive any persecution. But live godly in Christ Jesus and you will eventually be persecuted.

**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

Now if we are going to understand the reality of persecution in this life of ours, we need to be able to answer four primary questions. First, what is persecution? Second, why is there persecution? Third, what does persecution accomplish? And finally, what should our response be to persecution in our own lives in the lives of our brothers and sisters overseas? I would like to address the first two questions today.

Of course, if we are going to find the answer to those questions we need to go to the Bible, the Word of God, and specifically to what our Lord said. Please turn with me to **Mt. 5:10-12**: Jesus said, "*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*"

Now recall these words are within the context of the beatitudes the blessings of the Christian life. Jesus says if you are persecuted, you will be blessed. But the world looks at such words and says, "You've got to be kidding, that's crazy." In fact, the world would say that for the other beatitudes. Let's look at them briefly since they actually set us the last beatitude we read concerning persecution.

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit."* The world would tell us, "blessed are the rich in spirit!" not the

poor in spirit. Forget humility before God, live large. Jesus said "***blessed are they that mourn.***" Who in America wants to mourn? Everyone wants to party, and until the stock market collapse of a few weeks ago – it was shop till you drop. "***Blessed are the meek.***" Humility is laughed at today. Today we're told, "be number one," assert yourself. The world says don't be a meek man, but rather be a mighty man, a muscle man, a macho man, be a money man. But whatever you do, don't be a meek man. The world thinks that meekness is weakness and the world's attitude and motto is winner take all.

You see if the first seven beatitudes are evident in your life, then number eight is guaranteed. You will be persecuted. Notice how Jesus spends the most time on the last beatitude – three verses to be exact. Why? It's the culmination of a holy life. It's the confirmation of a holy life.

Now if you're not living by the first seven, you're not going to get number eight. But if you'll take the first seven, if you'll take these beatitudes and you will begin to put them into practice, the eighth is guaranteed. We will see why in a minute. And we will see by the end of this series, why Jesus says not only will we be blessed but we are to rejoice and be exceedingly glad.

### **WHAT IS PERSECUTION?**

But first, I want to answer the question, *What is persecution?* The word "persecute" literally means *to pursue, to come after*. Over time and throughout the world, people come after Christians in many ways, we're the bud of jokes, we're ostracized socially, past by for promotions, looked down upon as socially inappropriate, it may mean loss of a job, prison time, being beaten, abused, or even killed. These are all different forms of persecution.

Knowing what is persecution also means recognizing what it is not. It is not punishment. We must be very careful to be able to know the difference between persecution and punishment. In fact, some Christians confuse persecution with punishment. What's the difference? We are punished by good people when we do evil. We are persecuted by evil people when we do good. The Apostle Peter makes this distinction in **1 Peter 4:14**: "***If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed. Because the Spirit of glory which is the Spirit of God is resting on you.*** But now listen to **1 Peter 4:15**: "***But let none of you suffer as a murderer or as a thief or as a criminal, or even as a mischief maker.***"

The truth is there are some people who think they are being persecuted when they are really only receiving the punishment that they ought to receive. But if we know what persecution is, why does it happen?

### **WHY PERSECUTION?**

Why is their persecution in the first place? Jesus tells us, "***Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness sake.***" Did you see it? That's the first reason. "***For righteousness sake.***" God is holy and just. He is a righteous God and if we are to be righteous that means that we'll do and stand for the things that are good and right in God's sight. And when you stand up for what is right, you are going to get opposition. Remember the god of this world is Satan and the world is under his influence, under his sway, he believes this world is his territory and he will not go down without a fight.

Now, it's interesting to know that the word "righteousness" comes from a Greek word, which means "*to divide.*" The reason that Christians are persecuted is that in a very real sense they are divisive. We cause division because we are different. You see to divide means to be different.

And as believers in Jesus, we are called to stand up and to stand out. And when we do so, the world will take notice. Jesus said, ***"You are the salt of the earth and you are the light of the world."*** Salt isn't just a preservative it is also an irritant. Salt is an irritant to the rot of sin in our world and light reveals the things of darkness. There are children of light, and there are children of darkness. We are alive in the Spirit, they are dead in their sins. We live by faith, they walk by sight. We understand them but they don't understand us. And therefore *they* say ***"Remove that salt and put out that light!"*** The world simply doesn't want to be reminded that there is a God and that we are accountable to God and that there is a right way and a wrong way.

Why else is there persecution? Jesus gives us the second reason. ***"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake,"*** that's the first reason. Now look if you will in verse eleven, ***"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account"*** That's the second reason. ***"On my account"*** or as the older English translations say, ***"For my sake."*** In other words, because we follow Jesus Christ. Therefore, we are persecuted for righteousness sake – *the life we live*, and for Christ's sake – *the Lord we love*.

Why are we persecuted for Christ's sake? You see the devil hates Jesus Christ. Why? **1 Jn. 3:8:** ***"The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil."*** The devil is the God of this world. What are the works of the devil? Drunkenness, drug abuse, and pornography. What are the works of the devil? Pride, racism, and greed. What are the works of the devil? Witchcraft, false religion, and idolatry. What are the works of the devil? War, genocide, abortion. Jesus Christ came to destroy such works.

But it's not just Satan who hates Jesus. Our world hates Jesus Christ. Does it hate the baby Jesus? No. A few people may. But by in large, the world, the party crowd, dances around the manger and loves to buy and give and receive gifts as the merchants make millions. They don't mind the baby Jesus. And the world doesn't hate the Jesus that healed the sick and fed the multitudes. That isn't why the world hates Jesus.

Do you know why the world hates Jesus? The same reason why the devil hates Jesus. Jesus said in **Jn. 7:7:** ***"The world hates Me because I testify against it that its works are evil."*** That my friends is why the world hates Jesus.

And Jesus Christ stands against such things but the world either stands for them or allows such things. And my dear friend, when you stand with the Lord Christ the world will hate you. You see I'm not talking about the baby Jesus, I'm not talking about the humble Jesus by the shores of Galilee, I'm talking about the Lord of heaven and earth. The Lord who is coming back to judge the living and the dead.

Listen to what Jesus Christ said to His disciples on the night before He died, ***"If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. because you do not belong to the world, but because I have chosen you out of the world. Therefore, the world hates you. Remember the Word that I said unto you. "The servant is not greater than his Lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will keep yours also."*** (John 15:19) My friends, the only reason that the world hates Jesus is because Jesus is not of the world.

You know as Christians, as God's children we like to talk about the Lord's glory, His grace, His peace, His love, but what about His suffering? In fact, the Apostle Paul wrote these words in **Philippians 3:10:** ***"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death."*** You see to love Christ means to suffer for Him as well. He suffered for

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us, we can do no less for Him.

Jesus said, *"I've chosen you out of the world."* Why is a true Christian persecuted? Number one, *"for righteousness sake."* He is different. And number two, *"for the Lord's sake,"* he is devoted. The life we live and the Lord we love, that's the reason for persecution. My dear friend the Bible says, *"Indeed, all that will live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."* Let us pray...