

27th Sunday After Pentecost, November 16, 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 2)

THE PERSECUTED CHURCH

We are doing a two part series on the persecution. For those of you who were not here last week, last Sunday was the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church. And as such I considered it appropriate to address the reality of persecution in our world. Jesus warned us that we would be persecuted. He said on the night before He died in **Jn. 15: 19: “The servant is not greater than his Lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you.”** St. Paul wrote in **2 Timothy 3:12: “All who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.”**

And so in looking at the reality of persecution, we began to answer four 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?

We answered the first two last week. What is persecution? Persecution is any type of abuse you receive for being a Christian or for standing up for what is right. It can take many forms. It is different from punishment, however. We are punished by good people when we do evil. We are persecuted by evil people when we do good.

The second question – “Why is there persecution?” To answer that question we looked at Jesus’ words in **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.”**

We are persecuted for two reasons: For righteousness sake and for Jesus’ sake. In other words, the life we live (what we do) and the Lord we love – (who we represent). There is good and evil in this world, and to stand for good and to stand for the Lord means that we will get resistance from the devil and those who are under his influence. Recall we talked about why the devil hates Jesus – **1 Jn. 3:8: “The Son of God was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the works of the devil.”** And why does the world hate Jesus? Jesus told us in **Jn. 7:7: Jesus said “I testify that its works are evil.”** There you have it. Now notice what Paul says in **Ephesians 6:12: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood but against the rulers, the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.”**

It’s very easy to lose sight of this truth. We get so accustomed to this natural world of ours that we lose sight of its spiritual realities. But life is more than what we can just see, hear, taste, touch and smell. Life is about the supernatural realm. And so persecution flows from evil within this realm. And the only way we will overcome it is with spiritual good. And spiritual good flows only from the Spirit of God. So again why persecution? It is epitome of the battle between good and evil. Satan will not go down with a fight and anything good in this world requires effort – it requires commitment, endurance, discipline and courage. And such things can only flow from being grounded in the Lord Jesus Christ.

WHAT DOES PERSECUTION ACCOMPLISH?

But why does God allow persecution? What is its purpose? **First of all, it reveals what is in the heart of man.** It demonstrates that our very nature is sinful. But not only that there is evil in our world, and there is a devil, but that at the core of evil is opposition to the things of God and to His Son Jesus Christ. Why else is there such hatred towards those who claim the name of Jesus? And why have the Jews been so persecuted as well? Did you know the devil hates the Jews? Do you know why? Jesus was born a Jew. The Bible says that “*Salvation is of the Jews*” and that Christ is coming back to His people, the Jews. Satan does not want any Jews left for them to recognize their Messiah.

Second, persecution confronts us with what is most important in life. Life is not first about pleasing ourselves and having material possessions. Life is about having a living relationship with the Lord God and serving Him. And it will be persecution that will force us to make choices. In other words, will we stand for the Lord and what is right, or will we succumb to the world’s ways and desires? I am reminded of the testimony of a Christian brother from Laos, named Khamsay. As reported on page 2 of the June 2008 edition of the Christian magazine *Voice of the Martyrs* (go to www.persecution.com to order a free subscription), Khamsay shares of his recent experience:

“The police threw me in jail for three days. They decided to beat me up. They took a piece of wood and hit me on my shoulders, then my head, then my legs. They threw me on the floor and hit me with their shoe soles on my head. In prison, I met so many Khmu people. I shared with them and eight people became Christians. The nonChristians in the prison then told the police that I was talking about Christ in prison. They took me out and beat me up again until I fainted. They then took me out to the hospital, and they thought I was going to die. They decided to talk to me in my hospital bed. They asked me, “Khamsay, now are you willing to give up your faith or not? The head of the village was there and told me to quit this silly religion if you wanted to live. If I said, yes, then they would inform the court to overrule my prison term. I told them on my hospital bed, “I can’t quit because I am already in Him, I am part of His family, and why would I want to break off from Him? My head was, and still is, throbbing with pain, and I think my skull is fractured. They told me when they dropped me off (released me), that if I still kept evangelizing, I would go to jail again. One month later, a high ranking official came to me and wanted to accept Christ. When he accepted, the officials of the district knew, and it got worse, as they found out I led 18 families to Christ. I was in prison again for six months.”

There was a man who wasn’t afraid to stand up for Jesus. Who recognized what is most important in life – living and proclaiming the message of Christ.

What else does persecution accomplish? **Third, it calls people to repentance.** Do you know how many people have come to Christ because of the witness of those who have been persecuted and martyred for the faith? Great revivals often followed times of Christian persecution throughout history. Why? Persecution brings people face to face with their own evil and the reality that there is something more important that transcends this life of ours. That’s why eight people, a high ranking official, and eighteen families came to Christ as a result of Khamsay’s persecution.

Fourth, the reality of persecution confirms what Jesus said is true. As noted earlier, Jesus said, “*If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you.*” Jesus warned that the world would hate Him and those who follow Him. Persecution validates the Gospel message and the Word of God.

Fifth, it tells us that the way of true life and the way of true love involves sacrifice. Jesus said, “*If anyone wishes to be my disciple he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow Me.*” When

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Jesus said those words, He was saying that those who believe in Him must be willing to die for Him. You see true love involves being willing to sacrifice it all for another. Jesus said in **John 15:13**: "**Greater love has no one than this then one lay down his life for his friends.**" This love is from a higher plain, it is from heaven and not of this world. And it is most clearly seen in the words that Jesus said to His Father while He was in the Garden of Gethsemane, "**Not my will, but Your will be done.**"

WHAT SHOULD OUR RESPONSE BE TO PERSECUTION?

And that my friends, leads us to our final question, "What should our response be to such persecution?" How will we respond?

First, we need to remember who we are in Christ. Notice again what Jesus said, "**Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.**" You see we need to understand whom we represent and where we're headed. Ours is the Kingdom of Heaven. We represent the King of kings and Lord of lords, and we heaven is our home. Therefore, when we're persecuted, we should never come down to the level of our persecutors. We are members of God's Kingdom and we need to live like it. Ours is the Kingdom!

You see there are three levels of life. First of all there's the hellish level or the level of hell. That's the level that returns evil for good. That's what Jesus is talking about when he says we're persecuted for righteousness sake and for His sake. And for those who operate from this level, may God have mercy on their souls.

And then there's the human level. The human level returns good for good and evil for evil. Most people operate on that level They're not on the hellish level, they're on the human level.

But then, there's the heavenly level. The level of the kingdom that returns good for evil. That's the level we're called to get on. And that means when you're persecuted, you learn to return good for evil. That's what we're called to do.

Listen to the Lord's words in **Matthew 5:43-45**: "**You've heard that it has been said you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy, but I say to you love your enemies. Bless them that curse you. Do good to them that hate you and pray for them which despitefully use you and persecute you that you may be the children of your father which is in heaven.**"

You see we are no longer children of this world, we are children of the King of kings, and therefore we need to act like it, we need to act like our Father in heaven. And that means we don't get even. You say, "I'm going to get even." What good does that accomplish? Can it win a soul? Sure, it may make you feel good inside for a bit, but it won't win a person to Christ. When you get even, you basically are saying the other person doesn't matter. So don't get even but return good for evil. Remember who you are!

Second, rejoice in the Lord. Look in verse twelve. Jesus says, "**...rejoice and be exceeding glad.**" Do you know what the word we translate "rejoice" means? It literally means to leap and jump, to dance. You're so happy, you can't keep your feet on the ground. Why? Because you've been persecuted? You say that doesn't make sense. But you see when you are persecuted it means that people can finally see the difference, they have discovered that you are, in fact, a Christian.

Somebody has said if most people were arrested for being a Christian, there wouldn't be enough

evidence to convict them. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad because somehow they have identified you with the Lord and that ought to be a time of great joy.

Do you remember what happened to those early apostles who were persecuted? **Acts 5:41: "They departed from the presence of the counsel, rejoicing, that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name.** "Isn't that a great verse? Have you ever said "Oh, thank you Lord, thank you that I'm worthy to suffer shame for your name." So rejoice in the Lord. Our Lord has commanded that we rejoice and be exceeding glad.

And then the third thing, we should respond in love. Just respond in love. And it's so much easier to respond in love if you've done the first two things. Remember who you are and rejoice in the Lord .

The truth is, let's face it, the world needs love. Do you know what love is? Love is not giving people what they deserve, it's giving them what they need. Hatred should be directed to Satan not other people. The world needs love, it doesn't need what it deserves. Jesus said, "**Love you enemies, bless them that curse you. Do good to them that hate you.**" That's how lives are changed.

Do you remember who St. Paul was before he became the great Apostle? He was Saul, a zealous Pharisee who hated Christians. He thought he was doing God a service by persecuting Christians. And in Acts chapters 6 and 7, we read about Stephen, a deacon, a godly man who performed signs and wonders by the Holy Spirit and preached the gospel. Many of the Jewish religious leaders became upset. They brought Stephen before the Sanhedrin and interrogated him. His response that they repent and turn to Jesus as their Messiah, so infuriated them that they rushed Stephen and stoned him. Do you know who was nearby holding their cloaks? Saul. There's Saul over there holding the coats, looking on with approval, as young Stephen is being stoned, and here's Stephen over here, the stones are hitting him, he's falling to the earth but what is he doing? He prays and says "**Lord, do not hold this sin against them!**"

Later on as Saul is headed to Damascus to round up other Christians, a bright light shines around him and he hears a voice from heaven saying, "**Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?**" Saul responds, "**Who are you, Lord?**" To which the voice says, "**I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.**" Saul then lost his sight for three days. The Lord changed Saul's heart and gave him a new name, Paul, and St. Paul went on to become the greatest apostle of the Church.

Sometimes we wonder if the people who are persecuting us and others will change and be better because of our loving response. You don't know whether they'll be better or not if you return good for evil, I don't know either. But I do know one thing ... you'll be better. You'll be better. You see, we are not in this world to please other people. We're here to please Jesus Christ. And when we please Jesus, that's all that matters. Jesus said, "**Blessed are the persecuted, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.**" In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!"