

## Blessed are . . . (4)

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Almighty God,  
you have knit together your elect  
in one communion and fellowship  
in the mystical body of your Son Christ our Lord:  
grant us grace so to follow the blessed saints  
in all virtuous and godly living  
that we come to those inexpressible joys  
that you have prepared for those who love you.

My text today is Matthew's 5 verses 10 and 11: **'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you on my account'**

Today is Christ the King and with the day dedicated to Jesus, the Son of God, who has completed his ministry on earth by coming again in glory to judge the living and the dead, I bring this series on what is a saint to an end by turning to consider the final two Beatitudes.

Let me state the obvious: these two make uncomfortable reading. They state what may await Christians who stand up for and stand out for what is right: for the standards set out for right behaviour, right relationships, right living. All

Christians are, in one sense, apostles, messengers sent out into to the world to tell the world what it might not want to hear: where people are wrong and what folk should be doing. We all have an obligation to share our faith with others. If the news is unwelcome, then it is easier to shoot the messenger than to listen to and act on what he has to say.

There is a well documented history of how Christians have been persecuted. Our own St Bartholomew was martyred for daring to bring the gospel to the Armenians. His death was not pleasant and our stained glass window, dedicated to his memory by the Pierpoint family, graphically reminds us of the horror he suffered for the truth. Our recent icon of our patron saint symbolically conveys that same fate in the knife that Bartholomew is holding up in his left hand.

Sadly persecution of Christians has also been actively pursued by other Christians. One sad consequence of the Reformation was to give Christians greater scope to fight other Christians who did not interpret the truth of our Scriptures as they did. Again the St Bartholomew's Day massacre of French Protestants by French Catholics in Paris on 24<sup>th</sup> August 1572 is a sobering example of how our faith can be used for evil as well as for good.

Now In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the persecution of Christians tends to be from secular sources. We have the phenomenon of political correctness where doctors and nurses face disciplinary measures, even risk being sacked for offering to pray for their patients. Personally, I'd prefer someone who looks after my health to pray for me rather than someone who is supposed to look after my money to prey on

me. We also have the phenomenon of militant atheists in the mould of Professor Richard Dawkins who are zealous in their pursuit to root out a spiritual dimension to life. Deaf to the word of God, blind to the presence of God, they seek to muffle the truth of our experience.

Personally, we are unlikely to suffer martyrdom on account of what we believe but we can well be smiled at, mocked and scorned, regarded as somehow sad folk who are sadly deluded. But whatever the expression of the attack on us takes, one thing is certain that what we have to offer may not be well received. The hand that tries to feed them risks being bitten.

It is fitting on the day we remember Christ the King to note that Jesus was first enthroned on earth on the cross and the two folk who were privileged to be placed on his right and left hand were not James and John but two thieves who suffered the agonies of being crucified alongside him.

If that is how they treated the master whom we follow, why should we his servants expect to be treated any better ?

I have spoken in the name of the Father, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

*Preached at the Eucharist  
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