

“BLESSED ARE YOU WHEN PEOPLE REVILE YOU...”

By Rev. Victor Kim

Matthew 5:11, James 1:1-4

(11-15-20)

The Beatitude for this morning is a long one. **“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account...”** It’s similar to an earlier Beatitude which we read two weeks ago, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” They’re similar, but there are some differences. Note that in today’s Beatitude the focus shifts from blessed are those, to blessed are you. There’s a sense that this is even more personal than the Beatitudes have already been. And secondly, in our Beatitude this morning those who are reviled and those who are persecuted, those who have all kinds of evil uttered falsely against them endure these things not only for righteousness’ sake but because of Jesus specifically, on my account, says Jesus.

This poses the key question for this week in my mind. **What is it about Jesus that would make people respond so harshly, so horribly to him, to those who would follow him, those who would seek to be his disciples?** How do you think Jesus is perceived today by our culture, our society? I suppose 2000 years of Christian history has coloured and shaped our culture’s reception of Jesus today. Our present understanding of Jesus is formed by a long history the Christian faith, of understanding Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah. For most of the past 2000 years this understanding of Jesus has been unquestioned and welcomed, at least publicly. Much of western civilization, and to a great extent, the entire world, has been founded on cultures that have either confessed Jesus as the Son of God or as a holy figure, a prophet, a religious leader. But I would say to you that our present culture’s regard for Jesus is changing, especially here in the western world. I will have more to say on that later.

But let’s go back to the time of Jesus himself, to the time of our text in the gospel of Matthew. Remember, Jesus is at the beginning of his ministry, he’s a young man, possibly in his early 30’s. He is a Jew, living among Jews in an occupied part of the world known as Palestine. He is a son, a brother, a friend, and apart from a handful of select people, very few would have known of his divine origin and even then, we have little understanding of how those who did know, Mary and Joseph for instance, processed what they had seen and heard and experienced. As an adult, Jesus began to teach and preach, heal and perform miracles. He called to himself a group of people who became his disciples. In this, Jesus was not unlike many others of his time, rabbis who had followers, disciples, who taught about God and about how to live faithfully. That doesn’t sound all that bad. He could have been a Presbyterian minister!

So what was it about him that would lead Jesus to say that those who followed him would be reviled and persecuted and that all kinds of evil would be uttered against them falsely on his account? Remember, as we read the text in context, we keep in mind that as Jesus spoke the

Beatitudes and the rest of his Sermon on the Mount, there was no 2000 years of Christian history, there were no paintings of Jesus in churches and art galleries all around the world, he was just another rabbi, just another interesting young man with interesting ideas. But it was those very ideas that got Jesus into a whole lot of trouble. **If Jesus was just another rabbi, just another teacher or healer, nobody would have paid him much attention back then and no one would remember him today.** If Jesus' teachings were all about how to be good observant Jews, how it was important to go to the temple and offer your sacrifices and give to the treasury, if he was all about just keeping the law, **I can't imagine why anyone would revile or persecute or utter evil against those who followed him.**

But of course Jesus wasn't just another rabbi and he didn't call his disciples to follow him so that they could just follow the laws and be good, observant, religious people. Jesus made the powerful people of his time very angry. He made the religious leaders of his time furious; enough that the leaders plotted to kill him. He called into question the practices of his religion, he challenged the conventions of his time and culture, he broke down the barriers of his society about who was acceptable and who was not. **He preached repentance, but not only a personal repentance as if the only thing that mattered was whether we would be saved, but he preached a corporate repentance, he called his society, his culture, his people, to a different vision of what God's kingdom was to be like, what God has intended all along and how his current culture had become so broken and corrupted in the injustice, oppression, greed and exploitation that had come to define so much of their reality.**

He called out the hypocrisy in the leaders of his day, the priests and the pharisees. He overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple, he hung out with sinners, tax collectors, people of questionable moral character. He spoke with Gentiles, Samaritans, he touched lepers, healed people of demons, he welcomed people who others shunned. **Then finally, he claimed to be the Son of God, the Messiah himself. He pronounced forgiveness of people's sins and when he was challenged that only God could do that, he said that he and the Father were one! Blasphemy!**

I think that 2000 years of Christian history and a world so shaped by that Christian history and understanding has led us to forget or not understand in the first place the revolutionary nature of Jesus, his ministry and his claims. He was not gentle Jesus, meek and mild. Unlike our paintings, he didn't hang around with sheep, but he told parables about sheep, but really about people. Jesus, in his context, was a very controversial figure. He got the people of his own hometown so mad at him at a church service that they were going to throw him off a cliff. Would you want to follow someone who was so controversial, so provocative and scandalous? Would you give up your life and livelihood to become a disciple of someone who did and said such shocking things? What about that time he went for dinner at the home of a well-known tax collector? When he started touching lepers, wouldn't that have made you uncomfortable?

Would you at least think about wearing a mask? And when he said to the pharisees and scribes and religious leaders of the people that they were hypocrites, like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth, wouldn't you have felt just a little bit uncomfortable?

No wonder Jesus said to those who would listen, to those who would seriously think about following him that people would revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on his account. **To follow Jesus in the context of his time was to invite persecution, it was to be reviled and ridiculed, it was to be exposed to whispers of scandal or more likely outright accusations of blasphemy and sacrilege.** A rabbi talking about revolution, challenging the power structures and religious foundations of his time, speaking truth to power, confronting the hypocrisy of the authorities, welcoming the outcast, the untouchables, sinners, claiming to be the very Son of God! **Do you get how incredibly disruptive Jesus would have been in his time? Do you get a sense of why all the people in power, politically, economically, religiously, would have wanted him silenced, even dead?**

2000 years of history, Christian history, can change a lot of things. Today, here in the west, here in Canada, how is Jesus perceived? **Is there anything revolutionary about Jesus for us today?** What is it about our society today, about our culture that Jesus threatens to overturn? Who are the powerful, what are the power structures that Jesus would confront today? And who are the outcast, the untouchables, the "sinners" that Jesus would welcome and that we would struggle with including in our circles? **In a way the Beatitudes of Jesus are a wake-up call for his church, for us. If following Jesus, if even confessing Jesus as the Son of God, only leads us to be considered good, polite, obedient citizens of our society and culture, aren't we missing something?** After all, Jesus didn't say, "Blessed are you when people applaud you and honour you and say all sorts of flattering things about you on my account."

Listen, I get it. I get it that nobody wants to be persecuted. None of us want to be reviled or have people utter all kinds of evil against us, who would? But if we as Christ's church and if we as those who say we want to be his disciples are serious about our faith, our discipleship, **maybe we need to think about moving a bit outside our comfort zones, just stretching our faith enough to make us just a bit vulnerable, you know, kind of keep you feeling alive!**

The Apostle James, writing to the early Christians scattered among the nations, to those who didn't have the benefit of 2000 years of Christian history to fall back upon regarding Jesus, he writes, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, **consider it nothing but joy because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.**

Eugene Peterson, in his Message translation puts it this way, **consider it a sheer gift, friends, when tests and challenges come at you from all sides.** You know that under pressure, your faith-life is forced into the open and shows its true colors. So don't try to get out of anything

prematurely. Let it do its work so you become mature and well-developed, not deficient in any way.

It's interesting isn't it, that scripture would call it a sheer gift to be tested and challenged, nothing but joy to be placed under pressure, to have our faith lives forced into the open.

And yet isn't there a truth here that is part of what Jesus called being blessed? There is a life that all of us are called to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. None of us have been excused or exempted from that calling, we are all called. It's a call to a life where following Jesus moves us out of the careful, secure, predictable, safe lives that we usually live. **You know what I'm talking about.** You know that feeling that comes when you, in faith, in discipleship to Jesus, do something out of the ordinary, when you serve someone you don't have to or wouldn't normally engage with, or when you speak out to defend those who polite company wouldn't consider defensible. You know what it's like in here, in our hearts, when we advocate for those who are neglected, forgotten, shunned, who have no voice, who have no power, who are forgotten. **There is a joy that comes when we move beyond the safety and predictability of a faith that is entirely routine and monotonous. It's a sheer gift to engage in a faith life that moves us out of the mundane, the colourless repetition of words and actions and into a discipleship that risks, that crosses boundaries, that seeks to make a change for the better in the world. This sheer gift, this joy, this is what Jesus called blessedness.** This is what Jesus means when he says that those whose faith, even today, puts us face to face against injustice, exploitation, oppression, racism, misogyny, legalism and upholding the status quo at all costs and who have to endure being reviled and persecuted and spoken of falsely are blessed. **We are blessed because that's the kind of faith that keeps us feeling alive, it's nothing but joy, a sheer gift.**

Jesus is still at it today my friends. Don't be fooled by the apathy or indifference of the world. I asked earlier, how is Jesus received today? For many, he's no one of any interest and for others, he's merely a historical figure or a good role model. **But we know better.** Jesus is the Son of the living God and he is still at work in our world today, calling his disciples to work with him in the unfolding of the kingdom of God in our midst. He's still calling for revolution, to up end systems of exploitation and injustice and to make sure that no one is forgotten or forsaken. **There are those moments, or maybe they're more than just moments for some of us, they're patterns or disciplines or just a way of life now, when we shed the security of a safe faith and speak and act in ways that reveal what we know in our hearts, what we know to be true. And when we live out our faith in those authentic ways, when we risk that security and safety for the sake of Jesus and his calling on our lives, there's honesty, peace and almost a relief in being able to truly be who Jesus calls us to be. And that feeling my friends is joy, it is a sheer gift; it is what Jesus means to be blessed.** May that sense of blessedness continue to grow in each of us as we endure in faith so that we may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.

Thanks be to God, Amen.