

**The Bible - The Stranger Things:  
"Blessed are the Persecuted"  
Matthew 5:10 – 12**

By way of introduction this morning I want to ask, what are the marks or distinctives of church?

In other words, what makes a church, church?

You might talk about the theology of the church:

The Bible is the Word of God and the supreme authority in life and practice.

Jesus is the unique, decisive and distinctive revelation of God and the only way to God the Father.

Salvation from sin and death is by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus' death on the cross, dying in our place for our sins.

But that's not the end of the story: Jesus has risen!

He has risen bodily and physically from the dead and can never die again!

And because of this God has given His Holy Spirit to be in us and with us, giving us eternal life, transforming lives, giving supernatural gifts and empowering for witness.

And the Church – local and global – is absolutely central to God's plans and purposes on planet Earth.

You might describe the church's activities.

We gather. We gather to worship God in song, in prayer, in conversations and community. We hear the Bible being preached. We share communion.

We encourage one another. We reach out to others. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are active.

Or you describe the kind of people in the church.

Prayerful. Encouraging. Humorous. Kind. Caring. Odd. Different.

Or you might talk about the Biblical descriptions:

The people of God, the Body of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit.

All of those are good.

They're great descriptors of what the Church is about.

One is missing though, almost always without exception if you ask people.

It's found in our readings this morning.

So in your Bible's turn with me to Matthew chapter 5 verse 10:

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say  
all kinds of evil against you because of me.

Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the  
same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

And then John 15 verse 20:

"Remember what I told you: 'Servants are not greater than their master.'  
If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also."

That's our text this morning.

My early years as a Christian were during of the era known as the Cold  
War, a time when the Soviet Union began to disintegrate and communism  
collapsed. And more and more stories began to immerge of the horrors of  
living under Marxist socialism, especially from Christians.

The rumours were true; the Church faithful to Jesus was an enemy of the  
state and suffered persecution.

And here Jesus talks plainly about its reality and it's commonness.

The Greek word Jesus uses means to pursue, to harass, to oppress, to squeeze,  
and to crush.

Jesus says it's real and you are *blessed* if you are persecuted.

"Blessed are those who are harassed and oppressed...  
Blessed are those who are crushed..."

That seems so strange to us. It's so bizarre.

We've been looking at the stranger things in Scripture over the past few weeks –  
in some ways this might be the strangest and most difficult to get our heads  
around.

It's so out of step with our cultural emphasis of pursuing pleasure and self-  
expression.

So we have to ask,

**What does Jesus say we are persecuted for?**

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of *righteousness*.”

There is important distinction that needs to be made here.

You know, sometimes Christians act like a self-righteous prigs (P-R-I-G-S), they're obnoxious and overly harsh – they're jerks.

All sorts of stuff spews of their mouths and they get push back, so they say, “Stop persecuting me!”

No, you're not being persecuted – stop being a clown.

Jesus is not defending the idea of Christians acting like idiots and being mean-spirited.

Jesus is talking about being persecuted because of righteousness.

“Righteousness” is having right standing or being in right relationship with God. This right relationship with God comes through trusting Jesus.

As a consequence a change comes over our lives.

You want to live in such a way that pleases God.

It's righteousness of character and conduct in the power of the Holy Spirit.

It's saying “I want to do what King Jesus commands and asks of me.

I want to stand up for truth. I want to stand for the things Jesus stands for”... and people persecute you for it.

So when persecution is encountered it's on account of loyalty to him and his standards of truth and righteousness.

Jesus calls us to have our allegiance - our loyalty, our faithfulness, our love - to be centred on him above all others.

But because of that people find Jesus and ways and standards distasteful.

The Early Christians for example were considered a threat to the established order.

Rome commanded *everyone* to worship the Emperor as one of its many gods. Christians were asked to bow before an idol and offer incense to Caesar and confess, “Caesar is Lord”.

You didn't even have to believe in what you were doing but it was a way of showing that you cared about the welfare of Roman Empire and the emperor.

*Not* to do so was an act of treason.

Some Christians performed this act; the majority did not and faced imprisonment and death.

Christians also had a value system that was absolutely at odds with Roman culture.

Followers of Jesus taught that all people were created in the image of the One True High God and that Jesus had *died* for all people.

By saying all people had value included not only slaves and lepers but the unborn and very young.

You see, across the Roman world, Infanticide was a common practice that happened in plain sight. Babies, newborns were abandoned on the sides of roads or rubbish dumps by their parents to die an awful death through starvation and exposure. Girls especially were treated ruthlessly.

Again, no one gave it much thought or challenged the practice. In fact it was celebrated as being a virtue for the good of the state.

Slaves in particular heard that they were valued and loved.

Christians also had a sexual ethic that was considered strange and unworkable – faithful marriage between one man and one woman.

Roman culture was one where there were very few sexual boundaries especially if you were a Roman male. Being faithful to one's spouse was not even considered possible.

Christians did not only repudiate abuse, exploitation and coercion, they held fast to marriage and exclusivity to one spouse.

The Roman world was cruel and tribal. Kindness was not a virtue; the powerful preyed on the feeble.

The weak and downtrodden were scorned but Christians cared for all people.

This exasperated the Emperor, Julian, who wrote, "How apparent to everyone it is, and how shameful, that our own people lack support from us, when no Jew has ever to beg, and the impious Galileans [Christians] support not only their own poor, but ours as well."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in "Dominion: The Making of the Western Mind", 121.

Most of all these Christians proclaimed the message the Jesus Christ is the true King who died that rebels may be forgiven and peace with God. That Jesus' rule is the true remedy to sin and chaos of the world and he says to all people, everywhere, "Come follow me".

As a result of their faithfulness to Jesus – confessing Him as King and holding fast to His teachings – followers of Jesus were persecuted for it.

We know that this persecution is not just an historical occurrence.

We know that Christians aren't the only group persecuted for their religion in the world today.

But I want you to hold up your hand.  
Your finger represents those who are persecuted for their religious faith in the world today.  
Fold your thumb in.  
These four fingers represent persecuted Christians. Christians make up four fifths of all those persecuted for the religious beliefs in our world today – 360 million believers.

However, that's over there somewhere.

But **Could it happen here?**  
What do you think?  
Tell the person next to you.

Show of hands?

I think "YES!"

And that surprises us!!!  
Why does it surprise us???

Part of the reason, is that for so long now we have lived in what is called Christendom.

Christians values dominated the landscape and were part of the culture.

Moral values all agreed with us.

The politics all agreed with us.

- We still get one third of our offerings back from the government.  
You give to St Paul's and you'll get money given to you by the government!

- It was not that long ago that Bible in Schools was a regular feature of the schooling landscape.
- I'm not that old and I can remember when stores were closed on Sundays. (By the way, what year did Sunday trading become legal? 1989, so not that long ago).

There was no pressure and these values were seen as good for society.

That time has gone.

It's over.

We are now in a post-Christian culture.

Where once there was acceptance, there is rejection.

Where once there was embrace, is suspicion.

Where once Christian values were seen to be good for society, they are now often portrayed as harmful.

So in our current context where is the pressure going to come from?

Let's be honest – you already know them so we might as well name them.

These are areas where there is real genuine pressure.

One, anything about sexual ethics, gender or marriage.

Any time we talk about this topic, anytime we talk about it in the context of church, there is tension and a trajectory of persecution.

There is massive pressure to not only accept the Rainbow community but to celebrate and affirm it.

And just to be clear; the Rainbow community is made up of people made in the image of God and whom Jesus died for.

So they should be treated with respect.

However, respect is one thing; to praise, affirm and celebrate is another.

And the pressure is real.

Another is the *exclusivity* of Christianity.

It's considered extremely offensive and narrow-minded by our culture.

Instead we're told, "No, Reece. We're all climbing up different sides of the same mountain. All roads lead to God."

Yet the Bible is clear.

It's a fundamental Christian belief that the forgiveness of sins and being reconciled to God come through Jesus *alone*.

That is an essential Christian belief.  
Jesus teaches it. The New Testament teaches it.  
This is what the early church believed and proclaimed.  
As other spiritual beliefs are embraced in New Zealand, followers of Jesus  
will have to say there is a line I cannot cross.

And it's already happening in the church.  
What was accepted and believed in the church up until 60 years ago, we are now  
being asked to be compromise or be silent on or mumble.

We could talk about abortion and free speech as well,

### **So what's our response?**

For one, you're persecuted, you're in good company.

“Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the  
same way they persecuted the *prophets* who were before you.”

Jesus was persecuted, harassed, oppressed and crushed.  
The prophets were persecuted.  
Legend has it that Isaiah was sawn in half; the Gospels tell us that John the Baptist  
was beheaded.  
The prophets were persecuted, as were the Apostles.  
Paul wrote his final letter while in prison.  
The early church suffered as a persecuted people.  
The church down through the ages, in times and places, has suffered for Jesus  
name.

It also says something about our lives and to whom we belong.  
The persecuted are blessed because theirs is the kingdom and are like their  
master.  
Persecution marks us out as belonging to the King Jesus.  
You are His.  
It's a token of genuineness.  
And as King He will have the final say-so over your life.

That means our final fate is ultimately in his hands.  
In Scripture James is executed while Peter is rescued from prison by angel.  
Brother Yun – the Heavenly Man – was freed from a brutal work camp  
while many others died.  
Hundreds of thousands of Christians escape while millions more suffer.

It's also acknowledging we may lose everything on earth but inherit everything in the age to come.

Sometime it recognising that in this life things may not get better.  
That's the experience of millions today.

A few weeks back I told the story of Cyprian who was a bishop, a church leader in the 200's.

At the same time some Christians under his care had been exiled and condemned to the mines. In other words, it was a death sentence in those times, a slow lingering one. They were beaten and chained and fed very little.

*There was no possibility of escape or release.*

*There were no human rights groups petitioning for your freedom.*

*There were no government guidelines outlining your care.*

The mines were a prolonged form of killing.

So Cyprian sent what aid he could.

He also wrote to them and this is what he said: he said your hope is in the resurrection of our Lord Jesus because "the Lord shall change the body of our humiliation, that it may be fashioned like to the body of His brightness!"

And so these Christians in the mines wrote back to Cyprian and what did they say?

(I mean, I know what we would say: "Is that it??? Thanks for nothing.")

They said, "*Thank you so much. You have given us hope!*"

(Cyprian himself was imprisoned and soon beheaded for his faith.).

This world – the broken, rebellious, sinful aspects of this world – isn't all there is! Jesus will one day take the good of this world and magnify it 10 or a 100 fold. We anticipate that as tough as this life is, it won't last forever. When I talk to some of the people much older than me a common remark is, "Where have the years gone?"

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**Persecution is a mark of the church that is faithful to Jesus Christ.**

Jesus was emphatic: if they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.  
Paul in wrote to Timothy saying “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...”  
The first believers in the Book of Acts underwent of time of persecution.  
The church throughout the last two thousand years has experienced times and places of great persecution.

Why should we be any different?

Our cultural values are rapidly changing.  
Tolerance is quickly evaporating from society.  
As long as I’ve been alive, the Christian faith has been mocked and I’ve been made fun of for following Jesus.  
Now, now there is an edge to much more of it.  
Increasingly there is odd suggestion, here and there, that the Christian faith and Christians who believe the Bible, aren’t good for a civil society.

To be a follower of Jesus in the West will means, as it always has at times, having unpopular views.

So that will mean some soul-searching for the church in the days to come.

And if we’re honest, the idea of persecution creates discomfort.  
Nobody wants to be rejected.  
No one wants to lose friends or to be badly thought of by the wider community.  
No one wants to be excluded.  
And yet we have to take the Lord, our Master, our Kings, at His word.

So here’s my takeaway this morning: I think – and I say this as your pastor – each of us think has to get before the Lord - to be at peace with being out of step with our wider world.