

# Sermon - Easter 6A

The Text: 1 Peter 3:13-22

**If you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed.**

From the pen of St Peter, the Holy Spirit echoes the words of our Lord who said in the beatitudes, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account" (Mt 5:10, 11).

These words run contrary to what we normally think to receive a blessing means. They go against logic. Suffering is not a blessing; it's a curse. Insults and persecution are not good for us; they harm us.

But we know these words are true, because Jesus has said them. So, with a second thought we can see how some good can come out of hardship, that we can learn a helpful lesson along the way. We can agree with these words when the sun is shining and our life with Jesus is cruising along. It is another thing to hold onto this truth of blessing coming out of suffering in the greyness of everyday life, where God's Word is not welcome and the name of Jesus is heard only to curse. When you are looked down or made fun of for believing the Bible. Or when the media portrays Jesus and his church negatively. All this is because you want to take Jesus seriously, and live a God pleasing life according to His word. Our society prides itself on freedom of speech and individuality, except if you follow Jesus. This irritates the enemies of God and they want to put an end to it.

The temptation is for us to change what we believe, to fit in with the world and avoid suffering for our faith. We want to make the message of Jesus more palatable to the world. We might even call it a mission strategy: meet an unbeliever half way with a modified Jesus then, when it feels safe, lead them to whole Christ. But when you change the Gospel so that it appeals to the world's standards, you are left with a Jesus who is not a Saviour.

Standing with Jesus means there are people who will not be friendly to us. Jesus is offensive to many because He says He is the truth and the only way to God. Such absolute statements are unpleasant to the ears of those who believe that there is no ultimate truth, and therefore all beliefs are valid.

And so, there is a cost to following Jesus: we must give up our love for this world. This should not be a hard price to pay, for the reward of faith is greater than anything the world can give. The world cannot compete with forgiveness, peace with God and eternal life. But our flesh desires this world and so we are divided within ourselves. We know the depth of God's love for us and we desire heaven, yet the fallen flesh craves to be with this world.

We are torn. We are part of the struggle between righteousness and unrighteousness, between the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of God, between darkness and light. If we side with the world—modify the Ten Commandments, compromise God's Word to fit human thinking, count Jesus as one god among many—then the comfort of the Gospel is lost. We would have lots of friends in the world, but make God our enemy again.

But we are not in this battle on our own. We are not orphans. The Lord is with us and fights for us. He has sent the promised Helper; the Spirit of truth. He lives in you. We are not believers without a Messiah in our midst. Jesus is with us. We can say with the psalmist, The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? (Ps. 118:6).

We have no need to fear the attacks of this world. We are on God's side. Nothing can snatch us away from Him. He is God almighty. He is our Father in heaven, who delivers us from evil. We strive to live in His presence every day. We keep the commands of Jesus, both the Ten Commandments and His command to love one another. We endeavour to be a faithful witness of God's grace to our neighbour. We strive to fulfil our vocations to the people God has given us to love.

These are the good and right works of God, pleasing to Him and of benefit to our neighbour. Such good works are also a blessing to society, keeping it strong and healthy. But the world disagrees. Sometimes, it disagrees with a cold shoulder, a sarcastic remark, a hurtful joke, the loss of friends. For other believers, the world disagrees by cutting off heads.

When persecuted it is not easy to say that "I am blessed." It doesn't feel right, but don't think you have to *feel* blessed, in order to be blessed. The promises of the Lord are not dependent on our feelings. God's promises hinge on His Word and His steadfast love.

Being blessed is knowing that God's kingdom belongs to you; given as a free gift. You belong to Christ, and along with Him we are the rejected and abused ones. Our blessedness is in the heavenly inheritance that is ours through baptism. You have been brought into a kingdom where everything is forgiven and forgiveness is offered in abundance.

You are a child of God. You don't have to prove yourself to God to earn a place in His heart. You already dwell there by the merits of Christ. You don't fight evil by your own powers or stand on your own resisting attacks or fight abuse with abuse. God is with you to give you so many blessings that there is enough left over to bless others, to bless the persecutors.

All this is not just human ideas. Peter wrote this letter to believers who were in the midst of persecutions. Peter himself knew what violence against the Gospel looked and felt like. Just think of the crimes committed against fellow believers today and we can imagine what it was like for those Peter wrote his letters to.

Yet, in the face of great suffering, listen to the calmness in Peter's words. The Spirit penned these words through the hand of a man who knew the presence of the Helper, the Comforter of troubled souls. And the same Spirit dwelled in those he wrote to. They had the Word of God. They had Jesus' words to share with one another. They

took the Word seriously, not just when the sun was shining, but more importantly, when the storm clouds robbed them of warmth and light. They knew the Word of God could stand the test, for He who is called 'The Word' had stood the test of persecution and suffering, and was raised in triumph by His Father to new and lasting life.

Suffering opens our eyes to these realities: our place in God's kingdom, the power of the Gospel, the certainty of God's promises, the Spirit's preaching of Christ crucified and raised again. The righteous are blessed when they suffer because Jesus shines brighter and run to Him from all the false paths we have wandered down. Suffering gets us on our knees asking for forgiveness, pleading for strength, praying for the lost who mistreat us. Suffering kindles our love for Jesus and His words, which shine brightest in dark places.

It is God given faith that allows us to stand when attacked for being a disciple of Jesus. We love Him because He first loved us suffering once for sins, the righteous for then unrighteous, so that He might bring us to God.

As horrible as suffering is for the righteous, the Christian knows that somehow it fits into God's will. If we suffer for doing the wrong things, we know we deserve it. If we suffer for doing good, for taking our faith seriously, then we know it is God's will that we don't abandon Him but use the faith He gives to trust Him through it all, knowing that if the Father raised the Son from the grave for remaining faithful unto death, then we too, being children of God will be gathered up by Jesus, who will bring us to God for healing and rest.

This is the hope of all the Church since Easter. Ever since Jesus left the tomb alive, believers have a hope in their own resurrection that is unshakeable, irrefutable and unending.

Glory be to our gracious Triune God. His love never ends. He upholds us as we struggle with so many challenges to our faith and our life, all because we follow Jesus, trust in our heavenly Father and walk in the ways of the Spirit. You can trust Jesus and His Word because He has stood the test and delivered so many, and He will save you too. Amen.

Sermon based on a devotion by Bo Giertz in 'To Live with Christ' p. 710, 711