

Matthew 5:10-12 A new understanding of commitment

Introduction

Victoria Wastenev has worked for many years in hospitals as an occupational therapist. She had a good professional track record. A female Muslim colleague whom she viewed as a friend and who regularly exchanged text messages with her that indicated this fact; this woman had come to Victoria for sympathy when she was struggling with some issues and had accepted an offer of prayer. One a couple of occasions Vanessa invited her to outreach events at her church, as any Christian might do, and gave her a loan of a Christian book but ended up on a disciplinary hearing at her hospital [East London Hospitals Trust], at which she was found guilty of professional misconduct [Daily Mail 18 January 2015]. Felix was a social work student at the University of Sheffield. He was noted as a friendly caring individual who had demonstrated his professional skills working amongst a range of people including those who self-identified as gay or lesbian. Felix Ngole some time ago posted a message on his private Facebook page that declared that he believed as Christian that marriage was intended by God to be between a man and a woman. Another student at the university reported him to the university authorities who charged him with inappropriate conduct and at a disciplinary hearing he was expelled from his course as someone unsuitable for the social work profession, because although no-one had been discriminated against in this case, someone might be in the future [Daily Telegraph 27 February 2016]. On the same subject a few months ago Oxford University offered a public apology for renting rooms in one of its colleges to a Christian organization that was known for holding traditional views on marriage. These are just three of a growing number of cases in recent months where Christians have suffered clear discrimination for their faith from increasingly intolerant secular authorities in the United Kingdom. A decade or two ago no one could have imagined that any of these or similar cases would have been brought. This is the world in which we live today, and although we live in a more tolerant part of the UK at present it may not be this way for too much longer. We must be grateful for our blessings but realize that our experience is probably untypical of our brothers and sisters in Christ around the world. It is in this context today that we hear these words of Jesus who said: ¹⁰*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* ¹¹*Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.* ¹²*Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matthew 5:10-12).*

1. **The reasons for persecution** *Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness...* (Matthew 5:10a)

For a few years I had the privilege of serving on a human rights commission of the Baptist World Alliance and heard first-hand reports of the suffering of brothers and sisters in Christ from other parts of the world. The extent of the trauma some have experienced especially in Northern Nigeria where the evil acts of Boko Haram have been terrifying many communities for a considerable number of years is beyond comprehension. This extreme terror has come about because of the growth of the Christian Church in Northern Nigeria. The only way to stop it has been by mass terror that has been made possible with the support of corrupt officials and possibly by some in the army who are helping them. However, this is not typical for the vast majority of Christians, thankfully. However Paul did write these words to Timothy in II Timothy

3:10-12: ¹⁰ You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, ¹¹ persecutions, sufferings – what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them.¹² In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted... When we look over the centuries of human history this has been the case. This is why Paul and Barnabas repeatedly reminded the newly planted Christian Churches of what lay ahead for them. For example, in return visits to the congregations in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, Luke wrote in Acts 14:22 that their purpose involved: *strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. 'We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,' they said.* Paul was actually worried that the Thessalonian Christians might not persevere, so severe were the trials they had experienced, although he was later delighted they had stood firm. Yet I Thessalonians 3:2-5 showed how serious the situation was that they were facing. *We sent Timothy, who is our brother and co-worker in God's service in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, ³ so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. For you know quite well that we are destined for them. ⁴ In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. ⁵ For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the tempter had tempted you and that our labours might have been in vain.* There is a consistent pattern here in the apostolic message.

This pattern is in line with what Jesus declared was the case in the history of the Jewish people over the centuries. In a challenging message to Jewish religious leaders of His day, Jesus said these words recorded in Matthew 23:35: *And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.* This was a kind of inclusive 'A to Z' of hardship for the sake of honouring the Lord to which He pointed in that country's past history. We remember also the words of the first Christian martyr Stephen in Acts 7:52-53 who told a hostile audience the following unpleasant truth. *Was there ever a prophet your ancestors did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered Him – ⁵³ you who have received the law that was given through angels but have not obeyed it.'* The list of great heroes of the faith recorded in Hebrews chapter eleven certainly gives the impression that many of them had an exceedingly hard time in living faithful lives for the Lord. *There were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection. ³⁶ Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were put to death by stoning; they were sawn in two; they were killed by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and ill-treated – ³⁸ the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground.³⁹ These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised, ⁴⁰ since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect (Hebrews 11:35b-40).* We must, therefore, have a very thankful spirit and be appreciative of how fortunate we are to have the measure of freedom we experience in this community, at this time in history.

In the passage under consideration Jesus gives two reasons why this persecution may occur: *because of righteousness* (5:10); and *because of Me* (5:11); it is important to be very careful to distinguish between difficulties caused by other issues. Someone might, for example, cheat us in a financial deal not because of our faith but simply because they wanted to take advantage of other people for material gain; there are a whole host of different motivations that cause people to think and act the way they do, so we ought to be careful not to jump too quickly to conclusions about why someone acts in the way they do in a particular context. The apostle Peter

writing to young congregations in Turkey who were facing serious persecution, while acknowledging this, he warned them to be careful about their lives in general so as not to risk punishment for doing actual wrong. In I Peter 4:14-16 he wrote: ¹⁴ *If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.* ¹⁵ *If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler.* ¹⁶ *However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name.* Minorities, especially those viewed as under suspicion in any cultural context, have their failings magnified as an excuse for further discrimination. Persecuting authorities do not need any excuse for their actions, but any kind of wrongdoing by the subjects of their attention can sometimes create a veneer of credibility to their actions. The Turkish Government on 14 April 2016 ‘in response’ to suicide bombings by some members of a Sunni Muslim Kurdish militia have attacked the provinces from which they come with extreme violence. However, they have also used it as an excuse to attack the small Christian minority in that region as well, though they had no involvement in the violence. The Turkish government has seized control of six church buildings in the Diyarbakir area of south eastern Turkey. Amongst those taken include a 1,700-year-old church that predates Islam, another that was built as recently as 2003, and a 400-year-old Surp Giragos Church which is the largest Armenian Church in the Middle East [Barnabas Fund website 14.4.16].

(a) because of righteousness (5:10); This is always important to keep at the forefront of our minds. There is the inevitable *offence of the cross* (Galatians 5:11), as Paul describes it, when people don’t react well to being informed that human beings are all sinful and in need of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross to reconcile them with a holy God. We can express it in the most loving and gracious way, but there will be some individuals that will find it offensive. If we seek to witness in an abrasive and offensive manner or use work time for evangelistic activities, when our employer is expecting us to engage in agreed duties at that time, and for which we are getting paid, no wonder that criticism may be leveled at a Christian behaving in this way! However, what we need to realize is that we may live in a Christ-like way and still attract unwanted negative attention. At such times we must remember Paul’s words in Philippians 3:10-11: *I want to know Christ – yes, to know the power of His resurrection and participation in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death,* ¹¹ *and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.* If a Christian is living in the right way their life choices will conflict with individuals who make other choices. Some years ago I told the story of a senior public sector manager in England called David who came into post in an organisation where there had been serious mismanagement of timesheets to generate extra income for a number of employees. He declined to participate in this practice. As a result he was given quite a beating outside his work premises by a group of men who almost certainly had been a part of that malpractice. We are delighted that there are many people who may not share our faith but who share our convictions about good work practices and personal integrity, but inevitably there will be some who take a very different perspective. At the Last Supper Jesus warned His disciples of this problem: *If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated Me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you* (John 15:18-19). People who have a problem with us living the right way usually also have a second problem with the One whom we follow!

(b) because of Me (5:11) ¹¹ *Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.* In John 15:20-21 Jesus said: *Remember what I told you: “A servant is not greater than his master.” If they persecuted Me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed My teaching, they will obey yours also.* ²¹ *They will treat you this way because of My name, for they do not know the one who sent Me.* There are clearly two sides to this statement from Jesus.

Looking at it positively, there are blessings and friendships that will come our way because we are followers of Jesus. There are brothers and sisters in Christ that will warmly welcome us into their church families when we move to town or their country. Acts of kindness that we had done nothing to deserve will be experienced, for which we praise God. It is always important to remember our blessings! Yet, there will be difficulties and challenges that may cross our path as well, because we are followers of Jesus. However, in our local context we are currently very fortunate to have good relations with other community groups and with our City Council for which we thank the Lord. We must never take our blessings for granted!

2. **The response to persecution** ...*for theirs is the kingdom of heaven...* ¹²*Rejoice and be glad...*
(Matthew 5:10b, 12a)

How do we react to such an experience when it comes our way for the sake of righteousness or for Jesus' sake? There are three responses we ought to give to it.

(a) **We reign** ... *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 5:10b) that is we are not provoked into changing our course because someone disagrees with us. When Jesus told His disciples about His death and resurrection, Peter challenged Jesus to choose a different pathway. Matthew 16:22-24 records Jesus' response: *Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. 'Never, Lord!' he said. 'This shall never happen to You!'* ²³ *Jesus turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to Me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'*

²⁴ *Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me.* The pressure to change our convictions or our choices can come from within our families, from fellow believers as well as people with very different agenda in the wider community, but living God's way is the way to continue living. Jesus in speaking of *the kingdom of heaven* was not speaking of a literal physical kingdom but of individual people in whose lives God's values and principles hold sway; men and women, younger people or older ones who have said their 'yes' to following Jesus. At times it can take great courage to follow Jesus. In the town in Syria most recently liberated by the Syrian Government forces from IS, Al-Qaryatayn (April 2016), the bodies of thirty Christians were found who refused to deny or compromise their faith. We may never face such extreme choices but there will inevitably be smaller ones where a stand must be taken for our convictions. Sometimes we have to stop and reflect on our life circumstances and ask ourselves –should I continue to live the way I am doing or are there things that need to change now I am a follower of Jesus? Sometimes our answer will be 'no' there is nothing I currently need to change; on other occasions the Holy Spirit may invite us to reflect on something we can do better.

(b) **We rejoice** *Rejoice and be glad...* (Matthew 5:12) Is this possible or is it crazy to act this way? In Acts 5 there is an account of the first church leaders in Jerusalem being arrested for their faith and who were beaten before being released with a view to intimidate them from continuing to witness for the Lord. Acts 5:41-42 gives their response at that time: *The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.* ⁴² *Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.* In his first letter Peter gave this advice to Christians enduring serious opposition for their faith. *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.* ¹³ ***But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed.*** ¹⁴ *If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you...*

¹⁶ However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but **praise God that you bear that name** (I Peter 4:12-15,16). Sometimes serious persecution against the Christian Church enables believers who may previously have struggled to get on together to realize a bigger picture and value their brother or sister in Christ. It is often through adversity that our character is revealed or honed. What we learn through those times may be invaluable in other contexts. This was the experience of the Psalmist who wrote the wonderful Psalm 119. This lengthy poem about the magnificence of God's Word contains many significant insights that are helpful in a variety of pastoral settings. Listen to these reflections; he wrote: *Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I obey your word...It was good for me to be afflicted so that I might learn your decrees* (Psalm 119:67, 71). There are some things we can learn from books or some other form of teaching aid. However, there are plenty of other things that we can only properly grasp through experiencing them. All of us 'know' the difference between these two things although it is hard to express it in words. In the life of our Lord we admire His focus and dedication to the calling God the Father entrusted to Him. This is why the author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote these words in Hebrews 12:2-3: *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. **For the joy that was set before Him** He endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.* ³ *Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.* It is in the light of the example of Jesus in the face of the cross and all it involved that Peter wrote these words of challenge and encouragement in I Peter 1:6-9: ***In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.*** ⁷ *These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may result in praise, glory and honour when Jesus Christ is revealed.* ⁸ *Though you have not seen Him, you love Him; and even though you do not see Him now, you believe in Him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy,* ⁹ *for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls.* It is in the light of the bigger picture that we can make this response to present – day trials.

(c) **We respond** *'You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbour and hate your enemy."* ⁴⁴ *But I tell you, **love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,*** ⁴⁵ *that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.* ⁴⁶ *If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?* ⁴⁷ *And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?* ⁴⁸ *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect* (Matthew 5:43-48). This kind of response can only come from someone secure in their identity in Christ. My identity is in who I am in Christ, not in how other people rate or value me. Our standing in Christ is not affected whether someone is praising you or me to the skies or cursing us till the air turns blue! This is a very important matter to grasp because if we can only survive on a constant diet of human praise then we are going to have real difficulties in times of serious opposition to our faith. However, our resilience is not about developing a hard skin so that criticism (valid or otherwise) from others simply bounces off us –that will help no-one! It is about ministering a gospel of amazing and undeserved grace to needy people out of a recognition that we ourselves are recipients of that same incredible blessing from God. We can so easily rush through the words of v45: *He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.* God doesn't have to do it that way, but He choose to! It is an outrageous generosity that goes beyond simple human categories of gratitude or reciprocity for good deeds done to or for us. This is the bit of this message that helps to us to see whether we have even begun to grasp the rest of it; or how you and I are getting on with living it in daily life.

3. **The rewards of persecution** ... because *great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you* (Matthew 5:12b).

(a) **In this life** There are blessings in living obedient lives as Christians in this life. In Matthew 6 Jesus spoke to His followers about entrusting their future to God. The One who provides for the birds of the air and the rest of creation will care for you and me. His concluding words in that section come in Matthew 6:33: *But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.* There are sincere Christians who misunderstand these words quite seriously by interpreting them and other passages of the Bible to mean that they can claim significant material wealth and sometimes perfect health as a perk for living for God. This prosperity gospel may advocated by some of the Pharisees, but never by Jesus. In response to a scribe, a wealthy religious lawyer, who wished to join Jesus' faith community and stay in those premises with Him, Jesus replied: *Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head* (Matthew 8:20). It is an inner peace and contentment of knowing that we are living the right way and honouring the King of Kings before whom one day we will stand to give an account of our lives here on earth. There are blessings of answers to prayers; ministry opportunities and friendships we could never have expected except through the Gospel. But we can never draw up a list of blessings and demand that we get at least 6/10 to be satisfied with God's goodness to us! It simply doesn't work that way. It is an implicit child-like trust in our heavenly Father who knows what is best for His children.

(b) **In the life after this life** because *great is your reward in heaven...*(Matthew 5:12) The motivation of our heavenly reward is an honourable one that was significant in the lives of many great saints from former era. In Hebrews 11:13-16a there is a summary passage that fits well here. *All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth.*¹⁴ *People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.*¹⁵ *If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.*¹⁶ ***Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one.*** To pick out an individual from the list of inspirational believers, the writer explained what kept Moses motivated to serve in his calling for decade after decade: *He chose to be ill-treated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.*²⁶ *He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward* (Hebrews 11:25-26). Paul wrote these words in II Corinthians 4:16-18: *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.*¹⁷ *For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.*¹⁸ *So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.* Do you have a sense of the eternal significance of what you are doing? It enables us to continue in evangelistic work or other forms of Christian service for years faithfully sowing the seed of the gospel knowing that the reward and blessings will come –even if in some cases it is after we have gone to our eternal reward. However, such people have grasped that we are part of something so much bigger as followers of Jesus. Have you grasped it? I hope each one of us has, for Jesus' sake, Amen