

HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH
AUGUST 28, 2022

**THE BEATITUDES, PART 8---“Blessed Are Those Who Are Persecuted
For Righteousness’ Sake” Matthew 5:10**

Some historians think 1933 was the worst year of the Communist persecution of our Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union. In July of that year, a soil scientist was doing some field research in the Irkutsk area in Siberia. Suddenly he heard the roar of several trucks coming down a very primitive road near him----he was blocked from being noticed by a row of trees. He stood behind a tree to see what was going on.

Armed guards led out of the trucks 60 men in tattered and torn black cassocks---priests and monks who had been in a concentration camp not too far way. A large ditch had already been dug and they were put in a line in front of the ditch, facing away from it. The commander of the guards called out to the 60 men---“You say you still believe in God. Today, you will get to make a final decision about that. My men will step up to you down the row one of you at a time. You will be asked, “Do you believe in God?” If you say no, you live and perhaps even get freed. If you say yes, you will be immediately shot.”

And so it began. One by one, all 60 said they still believed in God, and one by one, each was killed with a shot to the head---and their bodies fell into the mass grave. (Jennifer Wymot, *Keeping The Faith*, Texas A & M University Press, 2004, p. 135) The 60 of Irkutsk stayed faithful and received their heavenly reward that day.

This summer, instead of, as usual, preaching on the assigned scripture readings, I have been doing a series of sermons on the Beatitudes as taught to us by our Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 5. Today we are up to the last one. It’s the only long Beatitude, but you will get the meaning of it if I only read the first sentence-----from verse 10: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.”

What a great blessing the Lord promises here to us if we are persecuted for Him---to repeat the Beatitude: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” The 60 men at Irkutsk in July, 1933 and countless millions for 2000 years have found out this last Beatitude is true. They have been persecuted, even killed, and now they

have the blessing of the Kingdom of Heaven!

We Christians don't need to go seek out or provoke persecution. If we live in complete faithfulness to God, it will come. St. Paul tells us this clearly in I Timothy 3:12---"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus *will* be persecuted." It will come. And if we stay faithful and strong, then the blessing will come, too: the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is a hard thing to go through, but if we stay faithful, Christ will strengthen us just like He strengthened the 60 of Irkutsk in 1933.

But you may ask? Could there ever be harsh and systematic persecution of our Faith in America? Aren't we safe here? It's not like ancient Rome, or like the Moslem onslaught in the 600's, or like the Bolsheviks in Russia. After all, in America we have freedom of religion and tolerance.

But.....if you could somehow go back to Russia in, say, 1912, and speak to someone there.... That person would probably say---"Persecution of Orthodoxy in Russia? You have got to be kidding! We have our Orthodox Tsar! Churches on every corner, monasteries in every town! Our whole culture is Orthodox---it can't happen here!" And then 5 years later, in 1917, the impossible happened. Decades of persecution began. Millions of Orthodox suffered and were martyred.

But I think it is possible that if persecution happens here, it could happen differently than in Russia in the 20th century or in the Middle Ages in the Middle East. Maybe not a bullet in the head like at Irkutsk. Maybe a different, more subtle approach by Satan.....

Perhaps not violence but a gradual weakening of our churches and families by constant challenges to our beliefs and moral teachings. Such challenges are certainly getting stronger lately! What not very long ago we were sure was wrong----now we are told it is good! What not very long ago we sure was right---now we are told it is bad! Tradition moral teachings on so many things---the value of an unborn baby, who can get married to whom, that God made 2 genders, not 53 or whatever the current number is, etc., etc,----are being strongly challenged. No--- no bullets, no lions. But this constant pressure can lead to a hollowing out of the strength of our families and even of our Church---perhaps to the point that we start to fade away..... Maybe without any violence at all.

Of course, who knows? Maybe violence will be used, too. We can't predict and God isn't telling us!

So the darkness around us seems to be growing. But....so is the light, right at the same time. All around America, very recently (in the last two

years or so) there has been a wonderful surge of people coming into the Orthodox Church. Many visitors and seekers, many catechumens, many Chrismations and Baptisms. Mostly young adults---both singles and families. It's not happening in every parish, to be sure, but in many! More and more people are coming to know that the Orthodox Faith is true, that it won't change, that it will endure until the Lord returns. As Jesus Himself said---the gates of hell will not prevail against His Church.

Many that are coming in have realized that the modern world view, the change of moral beliefs, the “wokeism”---it's all darkness and sadness. And so they come to God and His holy Church.

At our recent Diocese conference and at the recent archdiocese Clergy Symposium, many priests reported this growth, new life, many converts..... God is at work. Yes, American society is growing darker, but the light of God's people is getting brighter!

Thank God, we have been blessed here at St. Matthew's to be partakers of what is going on. Many new people. And, not so usual before, so many young people. Which means lots of babies around, thank God!

If it is God's will and this all continues, a very, very old Church (2000 years old) may become a church of the young. How amazing would that be! But perhaps we shouldn't be totally surprised. After all, there is that fascinating passage in Isaiah 11:6. Now the book of Isaiah (as those who attend our North Bible Study can attest) is a hard to understand book and many passages may have levels of meaning. So no analyzing this little verse today! But maybe what the Holy Prophet wrote there is relevant to us today. St. Isaiah said, “And a child shall lead them.” And so just maybe it will be the youth who will be the core of God's people as we move into the future.

And so, as the world comes down harder against the things of God and God's people, God will especially bless His Church. No surprise here, for that's what Jesus told us in the final Beatitude—“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake...”. Persecution? Sure. But then the blessings will flow!

I will close with the story of a truly blessed person who reflected what Isaiah about a child leading.... And perhaps partly fulfilled that verse. She was very much a child and her name was Akylina. She lived in the 200's A.D. near Beirut, Lebanon, when Christianity was very illegal. She was a child prodigy---perhaps a genius. Even as a little girl, she knew the Bible well, she knew Orthodox beliefs well, and she could already speak well. So the little child went on the streets of Beirut and taught whoever would listen

about Jesus Christ. Of course, the crowds were huge because of her age. And many came to believe and she would direct them to the priests to become catechumens. Ulasianus, the Roman governor of the area, couldn't tolerate this for long. So even though she was just a girl, he had Akylina arrested. He tried to convince her to worship an idol----he would set her free if she would do it. She refused. Then he had the child tortured to try and force her to deny Christ. She refused and was beheaded, dying for Christ at age 12. St. Akylina was persecuted. And she was blessed that day, entering into the joys of God's kingdom, where she prays for us in our own struggles. Like the Holy Prophet Isaiah said, "And a child shall lead them." She is a good leader to have!

In whatever way persecution comes to us, violent or not, just in our own lives or large scale-----remember the little child St. Akylina. Be faithful like her. And like her, you will end up greatly blessed for as the Lord told us---- "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven."