**Matthew 5.10-16**

**2 Timothy 3.10-17**

**The cost of living differently**

We have been listening to the Beatitudes in their well-constructed Greek (which suggests Jesus delivered them in that language), but now after the last beatitude that talks of the blessing that comes to those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, Jesus gets personal and talks directly to his disciples. Our Bible translation put verses 11 and 12 at the end of the Beatitudes rather than joining them as they should with vv. 13-15 because we have here three sayings that have the same personal application with an introductory ‘you are’. So, our being salt and light in the world is set in the context of persecution.

There is one other thing we need to note. In English we no longer differentiate between a singular and a plural ‘you’. Because we live in a very individualised society when we come across a ‘you’ we tend to want to interpret it as personal. Jesus here is saying you (plural) so that the words are addressed to the community of disciples rather than individuals. That I believe is important so that we don’t either take too great a burden upon ourselves or think of our individual role too highly. The words are spoken to us as part of a fellowship of the people of Christ – his church.

1. **Persecution** **is normal for the Christian church and to be expected**

Persecution is not a subject we very often think about as a personal issue in the UK. It is what happens to Christians elsewhere. We have the privilege to live in a society that for over 1000 years has been influenced by the Christian faith and it only recently that trends in society have begun to question Christian teaching or values. We don’t tend to think about martyrdom in Britain as a previous generation did when Foxe’s `Book of Martyrs was in every household alongside the Bible.

But worldwide the twentieth century possibly had the largest number of people killed for being Christian than in any previous century. Here are some charts that present some of the facts of what happened and what is happening now. The greatest number of people killed were Russians under Communism as that revolution sought to destroy religion. Most of these people are not killed because they are individually asked about their faith, but because they are part of a community that has been identified with Jesus. The amazing thing is that 100 years after the Russian revolution Orthodox Christianity is again dominant in the country.

But in so much of the world Christians are persecuted by governments as well as subjected to personal attacks. Reading this passage is a call to us to pray for those of our brothers and sisters who are persecuted.

Many of them would speak about the blessings that come from persecution. First, they count it a privilege to suffer for Christ Jesus as he suffered for us. Secondly it does direct their attention to the values of the Kingdom of God over against the kingdoms of this world. So, it has a refining effect on our lives and behaviour. It also makes it very clear that following Jesus is not a choice that we make lightly. Therefore, we prize more strongly what we gain from the sacrifice of Christ, which in turn makes us love him more and want to live in obedience to his word.

1. **It is the persecuted community that is called to be salt and light in the world**

Right from the beginning of the sermon Jesus calls his community to be different from the world around with different values, behaviour, and expectations. The persecution happens because of righteousness and because of Jesus. It is those two elements that we can take forward into the call to be salt and light.

The two metaphors stand together but have slightly different emphases. Salt has a preservative use and gives flavour. It was important in the ancient world. Roman soldiers were given salt and somehow our word salary is related to that although it is disputed that they were paid in salt. There is something abrasive about salt. When you rub salt into a wound it makes it more painful but begins the healing process.

The Christian church should be something abrasive in society. We question its values. We have a different prime loyalty. It may be that some of our views and values are regarded as wrong and subversive of society. In China Christians have been valued when they have helped in disasters or cared for the outcasts of society, but they are persecuted when they assert that King Jesus is more important than the Communist party. Christian social action is often appreciated, but when we emphasise that it is in the name of Jesus or that mankind is sinful and in need of a Saviour, then we are regarded with hostility. One of the greatest Christian values is fast disappearing from British society and that is that there is forgiveness for past sin. We might say that a search for justice is a Christian concern but the way in which we search for someone to blame in any issue where we or others are victims but do not recognise that people may be genuinely repentant of what they have done in the past and therefore should be shown mercy and forgiven. The Biblical concept that God is the final judge, and he is the one who will deal with unrepentant sinners has been replaced by a desire for vengeance. We are salt in society when we live by Christian values and challenge society’s.

1. **We are the light of the world because Jesus is the light of the world**

If salt has the dual aspect of being both a preservative and nan irritant, light also has a dual purpose of removing darkness and revealing what is hidden. Our light is derived light. We are the moon to Jesus’ sun. John’s Gospel does not call the disciples the light of the world any more than it refers to them as sons of God (using children instead), because of his desire to focus all attention on Jesus. We are never to be those pointing to ourselves, but always to him. The extensive use of light to talk about Jesus in that Gospel helps us to better understand what it means for the disciples to be the light of the world. He is the one who overcomes the darkness. His light shows us the truth about God but also the truth about ourselves. John 3 says that people refuse to come to the light because their deeds are evil.

1 John 1 helps us as well. If we are in fellowship with God who is light then we will be walking in the light and we not only have fellowship with God but also with one another. The East African Revival which began in 1929 made much of this verse when it urged the Christians to be an open community where people did not hide their sins but confessed them; where any offence against another was immediately confessed and forgiveness sought from the brother or sister and both to stand in the light of Christ to know his forgiveness.

Jesus urges his followers to be like a city set on a hill and his hearers’ thoughts would immediately go to Jerusalem and the calling to Israel to be a light to the nations. The message is not to be a candle burning in our own small corner but a communal very visible light blazing out.

Here is the call to be such a community. A community that is not afraid to talk about Jesus. A community where openness and forgiveness is prominent. A community that is so conscious of God’s holy presence that it hates sin but loving the sinner that (s)he might turn from sin to the forgiveness that is in Jesus. A community that is ready to suffer abuse and attacks from others because it is different from the sinful world around. A community that is a foretaste of humanity in the new heaven and new earth where righteousness is the norm. This is what we are called to.