

MATT 5.12: HAPPY ARE THE PERSECUTED!

[Chelmsford 27 November 2011 – First Sunday in Advent]

1. COME ON AND CELEBRATE!

A teacher once said to a class of small boys: “*Hands up those who want to go to heaven*”. All the boys put up their hands, except one. “*Don’t you want to go to heaven, George?*” she asked. “*No*”, replied the small boy, “*not if that lot’s going*”

I can sympathise with the sentiment. There are some people with whom I would not look forward to sharing an eternity, if they remained as they are.

But, as Paul reminded the church at Corinth, the Good News is that “**we shall all be changed**” (1 Cor 15.52) - and I believe that this change refers not simply to our outward form, but also to our inner heart and mind.

In the words of an old song I used to sing as a child

*“Heaven is a wonderful place
Full of glory and of grace”.*

Heaven will be all that we desire - and more.

For heaven is where God is, and what more can we ever desire?

Heaven is utterly desirable.

So we rightly pray in the words of St Anselm, the Italian born 11th century Archbishop of Canterbury: “*O my Saviour, and my God, let it come. May the hour come when my eyes are given the vision of what I already believe, and grasp what I now hope for and greet from a distance. May my spirit embrace and kiss what now with my whole might I yearn for, and be altogether absorbed in the abyss of your love*”.

There is something wrong with our faith if death is something we dread - death is but the gateway to life with God himself. Heaven is something to look forward to.

Yes, on this 1st Sunday in Advent, when Christians traditionally think about ‘the last things’, let us remind ourselves that as Christian people we have a glorious hope. For this world is not the be all and end all. There is a new world coming, where right and not might will triumph; where “**there will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain**” (Rev 21.4).

No wonder Jesus said to his disciples here in the Sermon on the Mount: “**Be happy and glad, for a great reward is kept for you in heaven**” (5.12).

Actually, the GNB is rather tame.

Peterson gets nearer when he translates: “***Give a cheer, even***”.

Likewise JB Philips is on the right track: “***Be tremendously glad***”.

We are being urged here to “***rejoice***” (NRSV) - to “***exult***” (REB).

Indeed, according to Luke, Jesus said: “***Dance for joy***” (Lk 6.23).

Apparently the underlying Aramaic word covered both these meanings.

Perhaps in today’s context we might say, “*Sound the trumpets! Pop the champagne corks!*”

Here is something to celebrate well and truly.

Death is not the end - it is but the beginning of a new and fuller life.

For this reason a Christian funeral service is always a double-thanksgiving. We thank God not only for the life of a loved one, but also for the life which he/she now enjoys. Yes, in spite of the grief, there is also an element of celebration.

Rita Snowden expressed this element of the Christian hope when she wrote:

*“Shall I wear mourning for my solidier dead,
I - a believer? Give me red.
Or give me purple for the King
At whose high court my love is visiting.
Dress me in green for growth, for Life made new,
For skies his dear feet march, dress me in blue,
In white for his white soul; robe me in gold
For all the pride that his new rank shall hold.
In earth’s dim gardens blooms no hue too bright
To dress me for my love who walks in light!”*

Yes, even with tears in our eyes, we can **“be happy and be glad”**

2. HEAVEN MAKES THIS LIFE WORTHWHILE

But let’s return for a moment to the present.

For before Jesus talks of the joys of heaven, he speaks of the trials and tribulations of earth. Look at v11: **“Happy are you when people insult you and persecute you and tell all kinds of evil lies against you because you are my followers”**.

I find it significant that Jesus doesn’t say: *“Happy are you IF people insult you”*, but **“Happy are you WHEN people insult you”**.

Jesus clearly expected his followers to encounter opposition - he expected them to come up against difficulties, because they are his followers.

Here we have a reminder that following Jesus is no soft-option, it’s tough.

It is tough not least because it involves a new way of living.

As John Stott wrote in his book Christian Counter-Culture

"The culture of the world and the counter-culture of Christ are at logger-heads with each other The world judges the rich to be blessed, not the poor, whether in the material or in the spiritual sphere; the happy-go-lucky, not those who take evil so seriously they mourn; the strong and the brash, not the meek and the gentle; the full, not the hungry; those who mind their own business, not those meddle in other men's matters and occupy their time in do-goodery like 'showing mercy' and 'making peace'; those who attain their ends even if necessary by devious means, not the pure in heart who compromise their integrity; those who are secure and popular and live at ease, not those who have to suffer persecution".

Christians, if they live up to their calling are different - they go against the stream. If we obey the Apostle Paul and **"Don't let the world around us squeeze us into its**

own mould" [Rom 12.2 JBP], then inevitably we will encounter opposition: e.g.

- ◆ the fact we don't indulge in gossip, may appear stand-offish
- ◆ the fact that we don't sleep around before marriage, may appear odd
- ◆ the fact that we don't tread on others, may be seen as a sign of being weak - indeed, a lack of ruthless streak may block one's chances of promotion
- ◆ the fact that we refuse to join the masons may at times cause our business ventures to come to a premature end

A Christian lifestyle runs counter to the world's lifestyle - for instead of looking after the interests of 'No.1' we are called to seek first the Kingdom of heaven = to **be concerned above everything else.... with what God requires of you** (see Matt 6.33).

People will dislike us in part because we are different

They may also dislike us because the way we live attacks their consciences & is an unspoken condemnation of their own. As the debauched Athenian statesman, Alcibiades, said to the almost saintly Socrates, the great philosopher of that day: "*Socrates, I hate you; for when I am with you, I realise what I am*".

If this is not our experience, then maybe our faith is not worth opposing.

As Jesus said: "**How terrible for you when all people speak well of you; their ancestors said the very same things about the false prophets**" (Lk 6.26).

Are we vital/dangerous/distinctive enough to be opposed?

Opposition only comes to the person whose Christian witness is really effective.

GB Shaw once said: "*The finest compliment the world can pay to an author is to burn his books, because the world thereby shows that it regards these books as so dynamic and explosive that they cannot be allowed to affect the minds of men*".

Yes, opposition can be a compliment! It can be a sign that we are indeed followers of Jesus.

BUT, the point I wish to make is this: not that life can be tough when we follow Jesus, but rather that ***all the trials and tribulations we may encounter for the sake of Jesus pale into insignificance in comparison with the life that is to come.***

Cynics may say, as they do, that "*Heaven is the place where the donkey at last catches up with the carrot*" - but the truth is that heaven more than compensates for all the misunderstanding if not rejection that we may encounter in this life.

Yes, there is a day coming when justice will be done.

For this is a moral universe - our God is a holy God - and when God establishes his Kingdom for all to see, then he will indeed honour those who honoured him.

Therefore Jesus said: "**Happy are you when people insult you and persecute you and tell all kinds of evil lies against you because you are my followers. Be happy and glad, for a great reward is kept for you in heaven**" (Matt 5.11-12a)

3. HEAVEN IS ALWAYS BEYOND OUR DESERVING

It is vital that we do not develop a legalistic approach to heaven.

To say, e.g., that heaven more than compensates for all the difficulties of this life, may give the impression that God is like one of those lawyers who come on the scene following an accident: if someone is to blame, then you've got a claim.

But *none of us have a claim on heaven - for heaven is always beyond our deserving.*

If the truth be told, the language which Jesus uses here is misleading if not set against the wider context of his teaching.

For when Jesus says, "**Be happy and glad, for a great reward is kept for you in heaven**", he is not speaking of heaven as being something that we achieve by our own efforts achieve. The Christian faith has nothing to do with the Pharisaic concept of religion as being one of achievement.

Heaven is a gift of God's grace, and as such totally undeserved.

This is where Jesus differs from the Jews of his day

As far as the Pharisees were concerned, the driving force behind their action was their hope for reward from God.

Life was viewed as an accumulation of merits ('Brownie points') which were earned by fulfilling the commandments and by doing good works.

By contrast God rewards us beyond our deserving.

Heaven is not to be likened to an old-fashioned school prize-giving, where cups and prizes are awarded to the cream of the school.

The fact is that we have all fallen short of God's standards - there is nothing that we can do to make up for our sin.

Heaven is a gift of God's grace - it is a gift which is totally out of proportion to what we deserve.

Then why does Jesus speak of heaven as "**a great reward**"?

According to one commentator, "*When Jesus talks of merit he takes up the terminology of his time.... He is not concerned with the claim to a reward but with something quite different: the reality of the divine recompense... Merit has an eye to human achievement; recompense looks to God's faithfulness*" (Jeremias NTT 216,217) .

Another way of viewing the issue is to realise that there are rewards and rewards.

As CS Lewis once helpfully commented. "*There is the reward which has no natural connection with the things you do to earn it, and is quite foreign to the desires that ought to accompany these things. Money is not the natural reward of love; that is why we call a man mercenary if he married a woman for the sake of her money. But marriage is the proper reward for a real lover, and he is not mercenary for desiring it. A general who fights well in order to get a peerage is mercenary; a general who fights for victory is not, victory being the proper reward of battle as marriage is the proper reward of love. The proper rewards are not simply tacked on to the activity for which they are given, but are the activity itself in consummation*".

To which AM Hunter, a Scottish New Testament scholar, added: "*So it is with the Christian doctrine of reward. The rewards of Jesus... are simply the inevitable issue of goodness in a world ruled over by a good God*" (Design for Life).

Heaven is always beyond our deserving.

“It is by God’s grace that you have been saved through faith. It is not the result of your own efforts, but God’s gift, so that no one can boast about it” (Eph 2.8-9)

Or as Billy Graham, the great Baptist evangelist once said: *“I’m not going to heaven because I’ve preached to great crowds of people. I’m going to heaven because Christ died on that cross. None of us are going to heaven because we’re good.... We’re going to heaven because of what He did on the Cross”*

So let us **be happy and glad** - let us rejoice and exult - let us celebrate and dance - for there is a great reward kept in heaven for those who have put their trust in Jesus and are seeking to follow him.

And for those who have yet to begin the journey of faith, let me encourage you on this Advent Sunday to realize that there is more to life than this world.

There is a new world coming: make sure you have a place in that new world

Put your trust in Jesus, and discover the difference that Jesus makes to this world - and the next!

Yes, **happy** are all those who will enter **God’s Kingdom!**

Prayer of response: Lord Jesus, on this the day when your people look forward to celebrating your coming, I wish to put my trust in you as my Lord and Saviour. You came into this world – for me; you died on the Cross – for me; you rose from the dead – that I may have life; I believe you will welcome me to your heavenly home, that I might share life with you forever. Amen