

## **Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

“Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has left household or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and the sake of the Gospel, who will not receive back a hundredfold now in this present age – households and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and fields, *with persecutions*, and in the age to come eternal life.” So, according to St Mark, Jesus answered the plea of Peter, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” The answer is striking because in the mix of this-worldly promises – just where we might feel uneasy that our Lord is preaching a kind of prosperity gospel – we are assured that there will be persecutions to boot: a thoroughly this-worldly promise.

The persecutions, however, are not just an add-on, another item in the list: it is not households and brothers and sisters... and persecutions, but all these things *with* persecutions. The common theme uniting the items of the list is family, the most immediate and intimate community of which we find ourselves a part. Even fields, the land a family owned, formed an essential part of the family unit in the worldview of ancient Israel: land could never really leave the possession of the family that owned it, although it might be sold away for a time – and in that case, it should ideally be given over to another family member. The natural family, this tight-knit, even sacred unit of society, is what the followers of Jesus must be prepared to leave behind – not to become individuals, solitary wanderers, but part of a greater family.

That new family is the Church, the family of the Lord's disciples, who do the will of his Father and so become as brothers, sisters and mothers to him. And one of the surest bonds of that family in this world is precisely persecution – very often persecution at the hands of those who have been left behind. We sometimes hear it said, that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church, for future generations. It might as well be said that it is the cement of the Church in every present generation. In part, this is a sociological phenomenon: groups form their identity by distinction from other groups, and the experience of persecution even in mild forms can contribute to that self-differentiation from outsiders. More powerfully, the martyrs bear an eschatological witness: they testify that this age does not have the last say, and that there is indeed an age to come and in it the promise of eternal life. The martyr cries out with the Psalmist, “In righteousness I shall behold your face; I shall take my fill when I awake of the vision of you.” By reminding us all of that common desire, the martyrs draw the Church into that unity of heart and soul which is a keynote of *Acts* – a unity of heart and soul which in those earliest times found external expression in the sharing of possessions and livelihood, making of the Church a single great household.

The martyrs are blessed not just because they go to behold the vision of God, but because they, like Christ, lay down their lives for their friends. Like all the beatitudes, this one speaks to us of a transformation that, by drawing us each closer to Christ, draws us closer into communion with one another also. ‘Blessed are *they*’: the promise is something we share, and we must learn to see the sharing as part of the gift.