

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Aug 5th 2017

“Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.” - Matthew

When Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount including this beatitude about the reward for enduring persecution, Herod’s recent murder of John the Baptist must have been painfully in his mind and that of the crowd. Did Jesus fight back tears as he spoke these words? Did his audience?

Today’s juxtaposition of this beatitude with the gospel reading on John the Baptist haunts me because I can feel the personal impact that John’s murder must have had on Jesus. This beatitude suggests to me that Jesus had come to terms with the murder of his cousin by offering the Kingdom of heaven as a reward both to his listeners who might face persecution for following him and to future generations of persecuted people.

Suddenly John the Baptist seems terribly relevant to our time – not just a figure who was popular in grade school saint quizzes because of the gory pictures of his head being delivered to Herod. John was rough but fearless in fighting for righteousness. He was one of the first saints who inspired others to do the same.

In our era, I think, for example, of people like Archbishop Romero, the Jesuits and the nuns who were murdered in El Salvador for fighting for justice for the poor. They were as tough and zealous in their own ways as John the Baptist. They suffered the same fate and received (I assume) the same reward.

I hope all of us who think about John the Baptist and this Beatitude will gain both a new insight into the humanity of Jesus and have the courage to take just a few more risks in our own communities “for the sake of righteousness.” We may pay a modest price but Jesus has promised us the Kingdom heaven if we live this beatitude.

God bless all who are already doing so.

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