

Talks on the Beatitudes

Alexander Schmemmann

Translated by Inga Leonova



“Blessed are the peacemakers”

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matt. 5:9)—thus says the seventh Beatitude. What does it express, what does it point to in the teaching about being human that is given to us in the Sermon on the Mount?

First of all—what is *peacemaking*? The enemies of religion and Christ very often point to the contradiction between this commandment of Christ and His other words, “I have not come to bring peace to the world but a sword” (Matt. 10:34). They refer to Christians participating in wars, and blame them for supporting various causes that result in war. What can be said to this? Let us emphasize, first of all, that the criticism of Christianity by the propagandists of “scientific atheism” is astonishingly superficial. When they speak of peacemaking, they understand peace solely as an absence of war between nations and states. But war is, after all, only the conclusion—albeit the most terrible and tragic—of the condition of division and animosity which has become an essential quality of men, and manifests itself not just on the battlefield but also in the everyday life of mankind. Christianity begins by condemning precisely this tragic condition that has turned our life into a constant struggle, and poisoned it with fear and hatred. Therefore Christian peacemaking has nothing in common with hysterical and hypocritical screams about “world peace.”

One might not believe in God, not know theology, and still see the strange duality of a human being. On the one hand, everything in him is designed and arranged for communicating with those like him, everything is conducive to love and friendship, solidarity and collaboration, that is, to peace in the deepest and most authentic meaning of this word. A person does not simply depend on another person physically and morally, but only in communion with the other does he gain that sense of meaningfulness and fullness of life that he himself calls happiness. Truly friendship, love, and creativity are incomprehensible outside of human communication and interaction. The very physical makeup of a man makes him a being created for love, harmony and accord. Yet on the other hand—and here lies before us the tragic paradox of a human being—everything “peaceful” in him invariably crashes into a certain terrible force, inwardly confronting him with another. And then friendship turns into suspicion and enmity, collaboration into competition, love into hatred. We all know from personal experience how hard it is to achieve peace, and how easy to destroy it, how the ties of friendship are torn, how love breaks down. Man’s nature demands peace, but his life conduct constantly opposes it. Why?

The materialistic worldview that is presented by its preachers as the most advanced teaching about a human be-

ing not only does not give an answer to this question, but does not see the question itself. It reduces all human divisions to economics and the distribution of earthly goods, while the overcoming of those divisions is reduced to struggle, including armed struggle. Therefore calls for “world peace” smack of a terrible hypocrisy on the lips of the representatives of a materialistic worldview that does not, in essence, recognize peace. There cannot be true peacemaking where there is no person to be reconciled to, to reconnect with, where there is no one with whom harmony, accord, and love can be reconstructed. This is because, from the point of view of materialism, there is no peace in the very nature of man; there are only animal needs, the satisfaction of which does not pacify but only affords a sense of satiety.

The Christian approach to man sees in division and strife a tragically irrational disparity with respect to his true nature and calling. The cult of natural demands to which, in essence, all materialistic anthropology is reduced is seen by Christianity as a sinful perversion of the original concept of a human being. Division and strife came about precisely because man had become satisfied with minimalistic self-valuation, had accepted a caricature of himself. Therefore the central place of peacemaking is in restoration of the true person and true humanity. Peacemakers will be called the sons of God because reconciliation is the transcendence of the boundaries of one’s “I,” the recognition of one’s brother in another, the reconstruction of life as the unity of love, the regaining of paradise lost. Everyone must remember from one’s childhood how dark and meaningless life would become when peace in the household was disturbed, when by committing a transgression we would distance ourselves from mother and father. The sun suddenly stopped shin-

ing, the toys were no longer enjoyable, and the entire world became a dark, sad prison... And then there would be reconciliation and the return of light and joy. Christianity blesses peacemaking, seeing it as the way to man’s recovery of his own essence. A true peacemaker is the one who not only reconciles the adversaries, but brings the joyfully life-giving power of brotherhood and love into daily life, into its very fabric.

Having learned this, we begin to also understand which sword Christ was talking about, which division he had brought into our life. In a certain very deep way, Christianity really declares war on every denial of true peace, on every teaching and ideology not founded on love and brotherhood, on every reduction and perversion of the human image. Peacemaking is not a sentimental rhetoric, but a sober and courageous guarding of the divine teaching about man, the struggle within and without oneself for the liberation of man from sinful division.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake”

The Gospel Beatitudes of the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers are followed by that of persecution for righteousness’ sake. *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, says Christ, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (Matt. 5:10).

Nowadays these words sound like a terrible dissonance, given that complete and unconditional obedience is declared the greatest quality, the utmost virtue of man, and that every doubt in official, flat, and petty ideology is considered a crime. How important it is to remember that this Beatitude, about those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, is included by Christ in the Beatitudes that reveal the fundamental teaching about man. Doesn’t this mean

that the principle of spiritual freedom, each person's calling to be faithful to the highest and absolute truth even if this faithfulness results in persecution—that is, casting off by society, loneliness and suffering—is the indispensable element of human nature?

I repeat: this principle is not just violated in our days. Violations of norms have existed always and everywhere. No, it is openly derided. One does not have to go far for examples: For instance, recently a Leningrad court tried the poet Joseph Brodsky.¹ He was tried as a vagrant because he subsisted on a pauper's income, possessing a single suit, and found the entire joy and meaning of his life in writing poetry. The transcript of that trial is a truly horrifying document.

Here a female judge asks Brodsky: "Tell the court why between jobs you didn't work, and led a parasitic life style."

BRODSKY: *I worked between jobs. I did what I do now: I wrote poems.*

JUDGE: *You wrote your so-called poems? And what was useful about your frequent job changes?*

BRODSKY: *I began working when I was 15 years old. Everything was interesting to me. I changed jobs because I wanted to learn more about life, about people.*

JUDGE: *What did you do for your motherland?*

BRODSKY: *I wrote poems. That is my work. I am convinced ... I believe that what I wrote will be useful to people not only now but in future generations.*

JUDGE: *Can one subsist on the income you are making?*

BRODSKY: *Yes. While in prison, I signed off every day that forty kopeks were spent on me. I made more than forty kopeks a day.*

JUDGE: *But one needs to buy clothes!*

BRODSKY: *I have one old suit. It is what it is, and I don't need another.*

And so this nightmarish dialogue continues to develop. Brodsky is accused of one thing only: that he preferred his poems and the truth that he was embodying in them to the compulsory doctrine declared to be the truth. And the dialogue is followed by the unavoidable sentence: five years in remote places with forced labor. Persecution for righteousness' sake. But what makes an impact in the transcript of the Brodsky trial is that he turns out to be the only truly blessed one. In this world of turpitude, betrayal, and malicious hooting only he knows what he lives for, only he has experienced real happiness, only he knows in the bottom of his heart that he is right. Those who insult, deride, and humiliate him, threatening him with irrelevant laws, present a miserable sight.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake ... In this world the old yet also the eternally new story constantly repeats itself, and it contains the entire meaning of Christianity. The Gospels are kept away from the people not because they contain "unscientific" notions of nature, but because they tell about the man who turned out to be stronger than the state, the party, brute force, and slander, the man who had rejected all power, all coercion, and still was more powerful than all. So much more powerful that when he was finally killed, he conquered the entire world by his life, by his teaching and example, and that a powerful state in our day is compelled to fight him with force.

The inclusion of the persecuted for righteousness' sake in the Beatitudes uncovers the meaning of Christianity as the teaching on the inalienable

¹ Joseph Alexandrovich Brodsky (1940–1996) was a Russian poet, interpreter, essayist. In February of 1964 he was arrested on charges of vagrancy. In March of the same year he was sentenced to five years in exile. The sentence was commuted after a year and a half due to pressure from world public opinion. From 1972 until his death he lived and worked in the USA. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1987.

freedom of man. Official antireligious propaganda especially insists that religion has always been one of the forms of enslavement of people, that it has ostensibly only taught humility and patience, non-resistance to evil, reconciliation with injustice. Thousands of books, brochures and articles are written on this subject. Yet if this statement contained even a modicum of truth, Christ's Sermon on the Mount could not have contained this beatitude: *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake*. These few words uncover the lie of all antireligious propaganda, just as it is uncovered by the entire history of Christianity beginning with Christ himself.

Even more important is that truth here is placed at the head of the entirety of human life and calling. During the Brodsky trial, the judge, the prosecutor, and the witnesses for the prosecution keep harping on "usefulness": what was Brodsky's "usefulness"? And it is this subjugation of everything to "usefulness"—utilitarianism—that is the root contradiction of the system which persecutes Brodsky and Christianity. Not usefulness but truth is the primary concern of man, and the meaning, the value of this truth are so great that for the sake of truth one has to be ready to endure exile and suffering. Christianity teaches that it is here, in the free search for and discovery of truth, that the divine dignity of man and his royal calling are contained.

And again it is clear that in this truth—and not in empty blabber about the

"unscientific character" of religion—is the source of hatred of Christianity by all those who have replaced truth and freedom with their small and pathetic "usefulness." If there exists a truth that can be loved, to which one can give oneself so fully as to be ready for exile, then everything that is being taught by official ideology, its reduction of the person to economics and materiality, is a terrible lie and slander. If Brodsky is right, with the millions of madmen, martyrs, and sufferers before him who preferred truth to usefulness, then even in that very usefulness there is no usefulness.

Thus in the Sermon on the Mount, in those Beatitudes, the image of a truly blessed man is slowly uncovered—blessed by that blessing, that joy about which the Gospel says, "and no one will take your joy from you" (John 16:22). It is a man who knows that his destiny is to seek and find the truth: not a small momentary truth about this and that, but the truth about life itself, its meaning and final purpose. It is a man who further knows that this truth cannot be found without freedom, without personal responsibility, without paying with the effort and blood of the heart. It is a man, finally, who knows that the way to this truth leads through loneliness, exile, suffering, and the cross. But by the cross joy comes into the world, and every effort of the consciousness, every standing for the truth and in the truth sooner or later prevails. That is the bottomless and joyful meaning of the eighth Beatitude. ✱



The Rt. Rev. Alexander Schmemmann was an Orthodox theologian who played a central role in founding the Orthodox Church in America. He was a graduate of St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris. He was Dean of St. Vladimir's Seminary from 1962 to 1983, and also taught at Columbia University, New York University, and Union Theological Seminary.

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