

No Offense

In the name of him whose coming is at hand, dear friends in Christ: As I've been studying the Scripture readings for this Advent season, I've stumbled upon a connection I hadn't noticed before; namely, that we're dealing with a bunch of jailbirds. Two weeks back we had the prophet Jeremiah in prison. Last week and this we've got Paul the Apostle writing from his jail cell in Rome. And in this week's Gospel it's John the Baptizer who finds himself behind bars. One might get the impression that our Christian faith was founded and formed largely by men who were convicted criminals. And that would be correct. These three are just a few of the forefathers of our faith who did hard time. And of course the one man most responsible for the faith we confess was also a convict. He would have done jail time too, I suppose, but as you know he was spared that because they executed him right after his trial.

Yes, it's fair to say that our Christian faith has a shady past. It's peppered with criminals – all of whom were convicted of pretty much the same crime. What was that? Just this: their words offended people. Somebody was seriously upset with what they had to say. And that's not surprising. They spoke God's Word. And in a world in rebellion against God, speaking God's Word is going to offend. If those in power can, they're going to make it a crime. Thus Jeremiah was put in prison for calling the people of Judah to repent of their idolatry and return to the Lord or face his frightful judgment; Paul was jailed for preaching Jesus as Lord and Savior; and John the Baptizer was consigned to a dungeon for speaking out against King Herod for his adultery with his brother's wife.

The amazing thing in John's case was that it took as long as it did for somebody to lock him up. I mean John offended everyone. He was fearless in proclaiming God's Law. And he didn't care whose toes he stomped on or whose feelings got hurt: high born and low, rich and poor, young and old, men and women – he even went after the religious elite, the near perfectly law abiding Pharisees, the scribes, the scholars, and the priests, the whole lot of them; he railed against the sins of all. No one was spared his scathing attacks.

Last week we heard him as he pointed a boney finger at the crowds who flocked to see him. "You brood of vipers", he called them. That is to say, "You spawn of the devil! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? The axe of the Lord's judgment is in full swing, and *you* are the fruitless tree it's aiming at. You're about to be chopped down and thrown in the fire." We heard too how he'd tailor his message depending on whom he was talking to. The result was that listening to John for a few moments was like being forced to stare at an X-ray of your soul: every fault, stain, and blemish of the deadly disease of sin revealed. Not very pretty to look at. Small wonder he offended people.

Even baptism, his method for dealing with the sins of those who repented, was meant to offend. No place in the Old Testament does God prescribe baptism. Instead, among the Jews of John's day, it was a procedure by which Gentiles who came to trust in the Lord were initiated into the faith. Baptism was for Gentiles, not for Jews. And you know what the Jews thought of Gentiles: they were lower than dogs, the very scum of the earth. Even the most wicked of Jews thought himself a thousand times better than the most virtuous Gentile. So for a Jew to submit to baptism was an admission that they were essentially the same as a Gentile; that though they were Abraham's offspring, because of the way they'd been living – their behavior an offense to

the Lord, stinking up his nostrils – they had to come to the Lord as if they were not; like the prodigal telling his father, “I’m not worthy to be called your son.”

The thing to see is that we need to hear John’s offensive preaching too. He’s not just talking to the people who lived 2000 years ago; he’s speaking to us. Though we hold the Christian faith and call ourselves the children of God, we sure haven’t been living like it. Our behavior too – both in the evil we commit daily in our thoughts, words, and actions, and in the good that we are commanded to do but don’t – all of it is an offense to Almighty God. And for it we deserve his eternal wrath and condemnation. What ought to offend you is not John’s preaching because it’s true; no, what should offend you is what John makes you see in yourself: your lying, your selfishness, your excuse making, your lack of love, your impatience, your unrighteous anger, your grudge holding, and everything else that makes you unworthy to be called a child of God. Seeing that is what prepares you to receive the King who comes. Seeing that is what makes you hunger and thirst for a righteousness that is not your own but that God imputes to you by faith for the sake of the Son he gave for the life of the world. In your Advent preparation to receive the King, let John do his offensive work on you.

But be careful that you don’t become offended like John was. Yes, that’s right: he who was jailed for offending Herod became himself offended by Jesus. Why? From John’s perspective, Jesus wasn’t doing things right. John had proclaimed the Lord’s axe about to fall. He thought Jesus was the one who would be swinging it. He thought Jesus was going to clean things up and set things straight. John expected him to call down fire from heaven on all those who refused to repent. What’s more, John knew from the prophets that the coming Christ would set the captives free. Well, he thought, I’m a captive. I’ve been jailed by wicked people for doing what God called me to do. If Jesus is the Christ, why hasn’t he overthrown the oppressors and set me free?

And the reports John was getting about what Jesus was doing befuddled him. Recall that John was a complete ascetic: rough clothing, always fasting and praying, never a drop of wine or fermented drink; the man ate bugs. His life was a living picture of the soul oppressed by the guilt of sin. What does he hear about Jesus? He welcomes sinners. He goes to lavish feasts with them. Word is that he provided wine for a party – a lot of it, for people who had already drunk too much. He wanders around through Galilee preaching and teaching in synagogues, but doesn’t seem to be doing much else. The time for talk is over, thought John; now it’s time to act. Where’s the fire and fury I proclaimed? When is the wrath of God going to fall?

To John it didn’t add up. What he heard about Jesus offended him. Because he wasn’t doing what John expected, he began to doubt that Jesus was the Christ – so much so that he sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus point blank, “Are you really the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

Now, I know it bothers some people to think that John could have had his faith in Jesus shaken. After all, isn’t this the guy who pointed at Jesus and said, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”? Isn’t he the one who was reluctant to baptize Jesus telling him, you should be baptizing me?” Isn’t he the one who saw the Spirit of God descend on Jesus like a dove, and heard the voice of the Father say from heaven, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased”? He was absolutely certain that Jesus was the Christ then. How could he doubt it now?

It's really not that difficult. In this fallen world, unbelief is the natural state of humankind. It's only by a supernatural gift of God that *anyone* believes. And when that belief is put to the test, that is, when trials, troubles, and hardships come, when Satan tempts to sin or to doubt – when we are offended because the Lord isn't doing things the way we think he should – that faith can fail. And if it can happen to John, the greatest of those born of women, then it can happen to any one of us.

And it does. I mean, how many have received the gift of faith in Holy Baptism and subsequently fallen from it? How many have stood before the altar of God at Confirmation, boldly confessing their faith in Jesus and fully intending to suffer all, even death, rather than depart from it, and then later denied him? And no one put them in prison or held a gun to their head. They simply wandered off. They thought they could go it alone. They thought they didn't need Jesus.

Or maybe they were offended by him. They thought that they would be rescued from a temptation to which they are susceptible, that over time they'd lose the inclination toward a particular sin; but no. It didn't work out that way. They found they still had to fight it daily. And eventually they stopped fighting. They gave up. And they blamed Jesus for letting them down. "He wasn't who I thought he was."

We saw another example this last week. In response to a series of mass shootings, a number of our political leaders – and several candidates who want to become our political leaders – made comments to the effect that people should pray for the victims and their families. They were chastised by members of the press who said, essentially, that praying is a waste of time. "God isn't fixing this", they sneered. "And you're a fool for thinking that there's a God out there who is able to." It's safe to assume that at least some of them were believers once upon a time; but that the presence of evil in the world convinced them otherwise. "A good God could never let bad things happen. A God like that offends me."

And so it is with us. When things don't go like we want or expect them to, we get offended by the Lord. We ask, "Why did he let this happen?" "Why did I get this illness?" "Why am I not getting better?" "Why did I lose my job?" "Why did my loved one have to die?"

But think about what we're really saying at times like those. The root of each question is "Why aren't you, O God, doing what I think is best?" In other words, "Why aren't you letting me be God?" Yes, that's right: it's full blown idolatry of the self. It's the original sin: wanting to be God. And *that's* what you ought to find offensive. When you find yourself offended by God the real problem not him, it's you: your self-idolatry and your unbelief.

And Jesus knows it. Fortunately for us he's not what John expected: all hellfire, wrath, and judgment. Instead he deals with us like he dealt with John: as weak sinners who need their faith in him strengthened. He does it by proclaiming God's Word. "Go tell John what you see and hear: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news preached to them." John knows that these also are things the prophets foretold the Christ would do when he came. So what Jesus is saying to John is this: I am fulfilling my ministry. I'm doing what the Father sent me to do. But I'm doing it my timetable, not yours. Trust me. I've got this covered. You are blessed if you are not offended by me.

It's fair to surmise that John understood this as a call to repent of his sin of being offended by Jesus and doubting his saving work. It's equally fair to surmise that John *did* repent

and that strengthened by Christ's Word his faith held fast to end, when Herod had him executed.

John had jumped the gun, so to speak. He expected Jesus to execute God's judgment right away, and was offended when he didn't. He probably would have been even more offended if he had lived to see exactly how that judgment would play out when the time came. For when Jesus brought God's judgment to the world, he brought it first on himself. Then all those who believed in him were offended. When he was suffering on the cross, they all thought he was doing things wrong. And when they put him in the tomb, they had all stopped believing that he was the Christ. And in their unbelief and idolatry, they were all an offense to God. And so are we when we doubt and try to play God.

But that is precisely why Jesus went to the cross: to bear our offenses, to receive God's righteous wrath and punishment for the sins of the whole world. And as he did for John, as he did for the disciples on the day of this resurrection, he does also for us. He speaks his Word to call us to repent and to strengthen our faith in him. He assures us that he *is* our Savior and that for his sake we are forgiven. He calls us blessed when we are not offended by him. And he has promised that when he comes again in glory to execute the final judgment, we will stand before the throne of his grace with no offense.

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!