

Offensive Jesus

It never ceases to amaze me how different the Jesus of the gospels is from the Jesus of popular imagination.

The sugary sweet, all white, blonde hair, blue eyed Jesus of popular imagination is overrun by the actual Jesus – who couldn't care less if people are offended by what he says.

Who never seems worried about upsetting our preconceived notions.

So it's no surprise today, at the end of this long conversation about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, that nearly everyone who followed him up to this point says:

"Enough!"

Eat your flesh?

Drink your blood?

Can you get any more offensive?!

More off-putting?!

Which is, with Jesus, nothing new.

After all, Jesus is constantly calling the big shots of his day "hypocrites" and "whitewashed tombs."

Nor does he limit his insults to the high and mighty.

When Jesus begins his public ministry, he goes to the neighborhood church in Nazareth.

Reading from the prophet Isaiah, he announces that the blind will see, the deaf shall hear, and the lame walk.

And then he has the temerity to say: "Today is the day!"

So offended are his fellow citizens – that Jesus dares to step into the shoes of a great prophet – that he's nearly tossed off a cliff.

Weeks later, his family tracks him down, sure that he's lost his mind; only to have Jesus respond:

"Who is my family but those who hear the word of God, and do it?"

He calls Peter a Satan, because Peter cannot imagine a suffering messiah.

Everyone knows that suffering is evil.

Suffering is God's punishment.

So how can the Messiah suffer?

Perhaps the same way we think about Haiti with all of its terrible natural and political disasters.

The frequent response is: "they must have done something to deserve it!"

One televangelist calls Haiti's sufferings: "God's punishment for voodoo."

But for followers of offensive Jesus, the question God is actually asking has nothing to do with those who **are suffering** – and everything to do with those **who are not**.

The question being asked is:

“How are we **responding to their suffering?**”

With compassion?

Or with judgment?

Why is Jesus so offensive?

And why do we prefer the picture of gentle Jesus meek and mild over the Jesus of the gospels?

Perhaps because gospel Jesus constantly challenges, cajoles, insults, teaches, argues, demands and scolds.

Indeed, the only people Jesus doesn't confront are those who already know they're in trouble.

The thieving tax collectors who steal from their own people.

The prostitutes.

The outcast and the demon possessed.

Folks like drug addicts.

And alcoholics.

Folks who, if they pass by a mirror, rarely look up.

I'm a long time fan of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The beauty of AA is that its founders took the spiritual wisdom of the ages, and with the help of Fr. Sam Shoemaker, discovered that recovery from addiction to spirits means learning to live an authentically spiritual life.

It isn't the head game of religion, with its nods to dogma and doctrine and creed.

These things matter, to a point.

But to rescue the hopelessly lost, (which Jesus tells us every day includes us), something more is needed.

It's been said that religion is for people who are **afraid of** hell, while spirituality is for people who have **been through** hell.

And so, in AA, the first step toward recovery is to admit that one is powerless over alcohol.

It's not a "head" admission.

It's a "brutal fact" admission.

Because only from a place of genuine surrender can a person move forward into a lasting recovery.

"Well, that's all fine for an addict," you may be thinking, "but that's not me."

True.

Most of us aren't addicted to alcohol or drugs.

But we are all addicted to the human condition.

Which says:

"I do what I like."

"People get what they deserve."

"What goes around comes around."

All of which boils down to:

"I'm in control."

This need to be in control is the air we breathe, the water we drink.

It's so pervasive that we rarely notice it.

Much less question it.

Much less seek to change it.

Yet it's this very human condition that Jesus not only notices, he's come to smash it!

No wonder he ends up on the cross.

No wonder we prefer that sweetly sentimental Jesus to the real savior who alone can save us.

Our obsession with being in control leads to unjust and unbalanced class structures.

To bigotry and racism.

To wars and strife.

As the Taliban take control of Afghanistan, it's almost comical to hear political leaders of every stripe express amazement that such a thing can happen!

Although wars never bring real peace, but only interludes of time spent preparing for more violence, we are, nevertheless, still shocked when all of our efforts at control turn to dust!

That unwillingness to let go of control creates the nails that pin Jesus to the cross.

"I'm in control" is a deadly virus, far worse than COVID, that infects who we are.

It distorts who we are called to become.

The need to control gives birth to very strange, but very common myths.

How many people believe (even if we never say it out loud) that if a seemingly good person becomes afflicted with a disease or public embarrassment or financial calamity -- then that person is not right with God?

But God is not the judgment police.

God meets us in the face of Jesus.

If you want to know what God is like, look at what Jesus says and does.

He speaks words of compassion.

He heals.

Through him, the physically and spiritually blind, see.

The physically and spiritually deaf, hear.

The physically and spiritually lame, walk.

And the poor in pocketbook and the poor in spirit hear the good news that life's struggles are not a sign of God's anger.

They're simply part of the human experience.

The accidents of life: illness, misfortune and the like, are just that, accidents!

Which is threatening to the healthy and wealthy who are at the top of their game!

Because it undermines our sense of deserving what we have.

Being entitled to it all.

Rather than the truth of the matter.

That our fortunate condition is also merely an accident.

Of birth.

Good luck.

Chance.

But also of unjust economic structures and systems which Paul takes aim at today.

These powers and principalities that hold all of us in bondage.

One quick glance at our body politic or the front page of the paper bears this out!

Jesus embraces a new world being swept in by the kingdom of God.

It sweeps away distinctions between people.

Upholds prejudice.

And examines the log in my own eye before I try to remove the speck from your eye.

Jesus is all about rescuing us from our addiction to the human condition.

And the narrow door that allows this rescue is opened by the grace of humility.

It's said that Jesus sends no one away empty — except those who are full of themselves.

As Bernard of Clairvaux observes:

“It’s only through humility that great grace can be obtained.

And so when you’re feeling humbled, rest assured that grace is on the way.

Just as a heart, puffed up with pride, is ultimately destroyed, the heart must be humbled before it can be honored.”

Perhaps this is why Jesus spends so much time speaking of himself as bread.

There’s an old saying:

“You are what you eat.”

If we are what we eat, then eating this bread of service, gentleness and compassion slowly transforms each and every one of us.

From people who were once afraid, anxious and proud – into people of faith who know in our bones that all shall be well.

As we dedicate our hearts, minds and wallets to building up the Kingdom of God!

All because we have come to believe and to know that Jesus is the Holy One of God.

+amen