

Offensive Jesus

And Jesus said: "Blessed is he who takes no offense in me."

There once was a very religious, devout, churchgoing Christian woman who looked down her nose at anyone who drank wine.

When someone reminded her that Jesus enjoyed his wine, she said, "Yes, I know, and I always disliked that about Jesus!"

Not long ago, one of the talk radio guys was holding a Friday afternoon talk on faith, and one of the things he mentioned is that "of course God will punish those who do wrong, because, if he didn't, nothing makes sense, so it would be an outrage for God to do anything BUT punish those who do wrong."

This was followed by one of the on-air evangelical ministers who went on and on about how, when God does justice at the end of days, we will all stand around and nod our heads in agreement that God's justice makes perfect sense, "it is exactly right," we will all say!

And Jesus said: "Blessed is she who takes no offense in me."

Make no mistake.

John the Baptist is deeply perplexed by Jesus.

John is deep in doubt over whether the one he so confidently announced as God's Messiah only a few short months ago is in fact the real deal, now that Jesus has been out and about; now that Jesus has been doing his Messiah thing; all in ways so completely different from what John - from what we - expect in a Messiah.

And the fact is, we tend to whitewash these doubts so that we can keep up the show of religious respectability.

Just as we were preparing the bulletin for today's Mass, I came across something that is a suggested bulletin insert, helping to explain the gospel lesson, and it said something like this:

"John the Baptist knew full well Jesus was the Messiah. John had no doubt about it. The reason he sent his disciples to ask Jesus if he's the one is NOT because John had doubts, it's because John wanted to be sure HIS DISCIPLES had no doubts."

I had to laugh out loud when I read that.

Because the poor fellow who wrote it is twisting himself into a pretzel to make the reading say something it plainly doesn't say.

And no, we didn't include that fellow's misguided effort to save John the Baptist from the shadows of doubt in your bulletin today, because clearly John is perplexed, he's rolling in doubt.

It's not just John the Baptist who's having trouble wrapping his head around this wine drinking, freely forgiving, rule ignoring, young whippersnapper from Nowheresville, Nazareth, but it's most folks who purport to be his followers too, back then, and today too.

We expect, John expected, our children's children will expect, that God should look like, sound like, act like, and judge like, us, only more so.

So we, often in God's name, punish those who commit wrongs, we condemn those who aren't like us, we favor our family and friends over strangers, we reward loyalty and we look for even exchanges when we deal with each other: making sure my Christmas gift to you matches yours to me; returning dinner party for dinner party.

You know the drill.

At this time of the year especially, we're all of us up to our necks in it!

It's the way we are.

It's what we expect God to be.

But that's not the way God is, and that's what's got John so flummoxed, that's what will drive the talk radio guy nuts (when he finds out judgment may not look like he thinks it ought to), it's what's going to confuse the radio preacher when instead of nodding our heads in agreement at the judgment of God, we're all standing around with our jaws on the ground, saying to one another: "I can't believe that just happened!"

Just like Matthew's story about the last judgment when the two groups look at Jesus and look then at each other in stunned disbelief, asking, when did we see you naked or in prison or thirsty?

There's a reason, I think, why we get so obsessed with thinking of God and God's Messiah as coming to even scores, to punish those folks over there, and to make a clean sweep of the whole mess.

Have you ever noticed that if you've done some public speaking or turned in a project at work or done just about anything at all that invites the scrutiny of other people, how a hundred people can say "great job!" - but it's the one guy who says "you stink" that keeps you up all night long?

I think how we read or listen to Holy Scripture is like that.

For example, these past few weeks we've been listening to the gorgeous, hope-filled, poetry of Isaiah that evokes beautiful images of God's plans for all of humanity.

Lambs shall lie with lions, children will play over snake holes, there will be no more tears, no more war.

It's beautiful, don't you think?

As you know, Holy Scripture practically overflows with love songs from God to us - just like what Isaiah's been telling us.

The Song of Songs contains some of the most beautifully erotic poetry found in all of ancient literature (see, you CAN say erotic in church!) as it expresses God's intimate love affair with all of humanity.

From Genesis to Revelation, scripture overwhelms with God's intense desire to have each and every one of us.

But just like that one critic who ruins the mood after your speech at the Rotary club, so those relatively few bible stories of wrath and punishment seem to overshadow the central theme of Holy Scripture: that we all of us are the apple of God's eye.

And that's where John the Baptist is stuck this morning, and this is where we often get stuck too.

The love, the mercy, the tenderness of God's Messiah is catching John by surprise; since he's expecting axes and threshing floors and burning chaff.

And Jesus says: "Blessed is he who takes no offense in me."

Because, it's not the "through no fault of their own" blind who are healed: it's the blind, period!

It's not the "worthy" lame who can walk again, it's the good, bad and indifferent lame who receive this great gift.

And it's not just the "deserving" poor who hear the good news - as much as we wish God would limit his grace to the deserving.

All of this is hard on John, and it's hard on us too, but, there we have it folks, this is the character of your God and mine.

As my best buddy (whom I've never met), Fr. Bob Capon says:

"God is not our mother-in-law coming to see whether her wedding present china has been chipped.

God is a funny old Uncle, with a salami under one arm, and a bottle of wine under the other, with lots of stories to tell, and lots of smiles to share.

So we watch for him, not out of fear, but simply because it'd be such a pity to miss all the fun." Capon, The Parables of Judgment, 501. (paraphrased).

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