

“Blessed Is the One Who Is Not Offended by Me”

In the name of our coming King, dear friends in Christ: In last week’s message, we considered the *hope* we have as Christians, which we saw was not merely a wistful longing for a brighter future that might come someday maybe; but rather the supreme confidence that because God’s Son, Jesus Christ lived, died, and rose again for us and for our salvation our future is absolutely certain. The Christian hope is the surety that one day Jesus Christ will visibly return to this earth, at which time the dead will be raised in their bodies, all will be judged, the wicked will be cast away, and the righteous faithful will inherit and enter into the new heaven and earth, where sin, sorrow, loss, and pain will be distant memories and we will live forever before God in perfect peace, love, harmony, and joy.

In *today’s* Epistle, St. James counsels us to be patient. Specifically, we are to be patient while we endure the trials, tribulations, suffering and sadness of this life as we await the coming of the Lord and the glorious future he’s promised us. To illustrate this instruction, James gives two examples: first the farmer who waits in patience for the precious fruit of the earth to appear, and then the prophets who in the face of horrendous suffering displayed great patience.

This sounds like wonderful counsel; but upon further reflection, I think maybe James could have chosen better examples. I mean, forgive me for saying so, but I haven’t noticed that farmers are particularly patient people. Quite the contrary, I detect a lot of anxiety around here when in the spring it’s too wet to plant or when the summer turns too hot and dry or when in the fall conditions are less than ideal for harvesting. Don’t get me wrong: this is an observation not a criticism. And I don’t know, maybe in James’ day farmers were a lot more patient than they are in our time, but I doubt it. Human nature doesn’t change *that* much.

The prophets weren’t particularly patient people either. Moses often complained about the thankless task he’d been assigned. At one point he asked the Lord to go ahead and kill him rather than make him finish what he started. Elijah too was so disillusioned at one point in his ministry that he gave up and begged the Lord to let him die. Jeremiah is known as the weeping prophet because of the bitter tirades he launched at the Lord when things didn’t go as he had expected. And Job, the person James cites by name, displayed some patience, yes ... until you get to chapter three of the forty-two chapter book that bears his name, at which point he begins cursing the day he was born. He pretty much keeps up a steady lament of his life until the end of the book. These holy prophets of God were hardly models of patience.

And then in today’s Gospel we have John the Baptizer, the man Jesus called “more than a prophet” and the “greatest of those born of women”. This is the man whom the Lord chose to prepare the way of his beloved Son, who had the privilege of Baptizing the Savior, and who pointed his disciples at Jesus declaring, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” No question about it: John knew exactly who Jesus was. He was supremely confident that Jesus was the long-promised Savior.

But today we hear him singing an entirely different tune. He has sent a few of his disciples to ask Jesus, “*Are you* the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” So, wait, what happened? How could John have lost his confidence? Why is he now showing doubt about who Jesus is?

In answer to the question, some Bible scholars have speculated that John isn't really showing any doubt. They can't get over the idea that a man like John might have lost his firm conviction about Jesus' identity. So, they create all kinds of elaborate dodges to get him off the hook. The most common theory they set forth is that John knows his days are numbered, that he's soon to be executed. And so, what he's trying to do is to shift the allegiance of his disciples to Jesus. By sending them to Jesus now and having them witness the work he's up to, they'll know to whom to turn once he, John, is dead.

It's a nice attempt to preserve John's reputation for standing firm in the faith; but it doesn't make a lick of sense. John has been saying all along that Jesus is the Christ. That's what he's been teaching his disciples. He's also been saying of Jesus "He must increase, and I must decrease". The point being that John's disciples already know to whom they are to turn. Nor is there any reason to believe that John knows that his days are numbered. We're told that King Herod, who put John in prison for speaking out against his adultery with his brother's wife, actually admires John. Herod believes that John is a true prophet of God and he likes to hear him preach. You'll recall that it's Herodias, the King's unlawful wife, who conspires with her daughter to trick Herod into ordering John's execution. The point is that John has no reason to believe that his death is imminent. So, this idea of John trying to transfer the allegiance of his disciples to Jesus makes no sense at all.

It's also entirely unnecessary. John was a great man and a prophet of God, yes; and he showed tremendous faith and conviction about Jesus. But he was only a man. So, it's not at all hard to believe that in the face of his trials and suffering he, like so many of the prophets before him, showed signs of cracking under pressure.

What happened was that John became impatient. Jesus wasn't doing what John expected of him. John looked at prophetic passages like today's reading from Isaiah that describes the Messianic age and he wondered when Jesus was going to make it all happen. Where's all this "Behold, your God will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God. He will come and save you"? Where's this promised "Highway of Holiness" on which only the righteous will travel? When is the desert going to rejoice and break forth in blossom? When will the burning sand become a pool? When will the glory of the Lord be revealed?

In last week's Gospel we heard John preaching about Jesus as the Judge of all the earth, who'd come to kick bottoms and take names. "His winnowing fork is in his hands" John declared, "and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire!" It's a description of violent judgment: the redemption of the righteous and the destruction of the wicked.

That's what John expected – and right soon. But that's not what he was hearing. Where John had preached hellfire and brimstone with forceful fury, Jesus is gently preaching about God's grace and forgiveness. Where John had been a total ascetic: living in the desert, abstaining from wine, eating bugs, and wearing rough clothes; Jesus is exactly the opposite. He's going to feasts and celebrations – in the homes of tax collectors no less, what with even prostitutes in attendance. Word is that he made several hundred gallons of wine for a wedding party. What's up with that? And here's the kicker: where Jesus is walking around free and living it up, John is chained in Herod's dungeon for the high crime of speaking God's truth to those in power. It's not at all hard to guess what John is thinking: "Jesus, I told everyone that you came to save Israel. Well, you can start with me ... unless ... unless you aren't who I thought you were."

John is more than impatient: he's offended by Jesus. And unfortunately, that word carries a slightly different meaning for us than it did for them. The actual word used in the Greek is the root for our word "scandalized". It means to be tripped up or to be caused to stumble and fall. It's in this sense that John is offended by Jesus. His not doing what John expected of him exactly when, where, and how has caused John to lose his confidence in Jesus. His faith is badly shaken.

And that's why the reply Jesus sends back to John is so important. They aren't angry words of judgment: "How dare you become offended? You unworthy weakling, how can you lose faith in me? I am so very disappointed in you." No, they are words meant to refill John with faith and confidence. Specifically, they are quotations from prophetic Scripture that assure John that Jesus is indeed fulfilling his Messianic mission. "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by me."

Jesus knows what he's dealing with: fallen humans who are subject to doubt and despair in times of hardship. He knows that we lose confidence and become impatient. He knows that at times we become offended by him and the way he does things. To be sure, when he responds to John, he knows a time is coming when *all* his followers will be offended by him. When he goes to the cross, even his most faithful disciples will have their faith in him shaken to the core. When he dies and is buried not one of them will continue to believe in him. But he won't cast them off as a result of their lack of faith. Instead he'll come to them and proclaim his word of forgiveness. He will refill them with faith and continue to strengthen it in them by his Word and Spirit. He will bless those who were offended by him by removing their offense, by taking away their sins, and by giving them new hope.

So, James is right after all. We should take the prophets and John in particular, the greatest of them, as our examples. Not so much for the way they held up in times of trial, but for the way the Lord dealt with them when they became impatient and offended. Jesus knows our weaknesses. He knows that as this world's history unfolds and the times get darker, as the moral fabric of our society unravels, as our bodies waste away, we are tempted to succumb to fear and doubt. It is precisely for this reason that he continues to send his Word to us – not of condemnation for our lack of faith (though we surely deserve it), but of strength and comfort to assure us that he removes our offenses, that he grants us his Spirit to believe, and that he will in his good time and according to his perfect plan fulfill all that he has promised.

May we then keep open our ears to hear and our hearts to receive his Word that our faith be strengthened, that we be assured that our sins are forgiven, and that regardless of what happens in this ever-darkening world we be blessed by not becoming offended by Jesus as we await his glorious return. God grant it to us for Jesus' sake. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!