

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.*

Last week, I was able to visit an old friend whom I hadn't seen for over a decade. Both our lives had changed a lot over that time. The conversation came around to our faith. She was a Lutheran, but no longer went to church. She said that her church was full of hypocrisy; the folks who attended did not live up to their beliefs, but claimed they were better than other people. She didn't reject Christ, but rejected the church, as so many others do these days, for different reasons.

In reading today's gospel, I can see her point. It is unsettling, or even offensive to some. The gospel puts some people off. In verse 41 we read, “<sup>41</sup> .....whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous.” Does that mean that the church will only welcome, and be full of ‘righteous’ people? If so, it's not surprising that people might reject the church and the message.

Over the centuries, the church has replied to this rejection in a variety of ways. One way is withdrawal. At times, the church has said to society, ‘I'll just do my own thing and to heck with everyone else.’ It has chosen to withdraw into the safety of its own isolation. It may be that the rejection is too painful, or the claims of Christianity too embarrassing, or the effort to tell the story too costly. And what do we do? We retreat. We give up.

But this does not seem like a faithful response to rejection. The passage we read today from Matthew chapter 10, talks more about those who receive our message, than it does about those who reject it. But when we look at the context of the passage, we find that it is part of a larger whole. And that larger whole is made up of Jesus' instructions to his disciples before he sends them out on their first mission. Jesus is in fact saying that not everyone will receive the well-intended ministry of the disciples. They are being sent ‘to heal every disease and sickness’ (v. 1) and to announce that ‘the kingdom of heaven is near’ (v. 7). But not everyone will be glad to see them.

In verse 14, Jesus says, ‘If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave.’ And in verse 22, ‘All men will hate you because of me.’ This mission is full of danger. ‘I am sending you out,’ Jesus says, ‘like sheep among wolves’ (v. 16).

But Jesus sends them out anyway. And he says to them, ‘Do not be afraid’ (v. 28) – though there is much to be afraid of. ‘Whoever acknowledges me before people,’ Jesus says, ‘I will acknowledge him before my Father in heaven’ (v. 32). And Jesus considers this due consolation for the risks at hand.

Some people find the gospel to be offensive. But maybe, it's not so much the message they find unacceptable as it is the messenger. We appear self-righteous. We are inconsiderate. Our inflated egos betray our true motives. We forget that ‘people don't care how much we know, until they know how much we care.’ We may lord it over others instead of serving them.

But it's not always the messenger who is offensive; it is the message itself. The gospel is good news, but, for us to see it as good, we must accept what it says is bad. Denial is the principle form of self-delusion. And when the gospel announces that there is a remedy for sin, and we take offence because we don't think we need correction, then we are in denial.

The gospel wounds human pride. It is to the ‘poor in spirit’ that the kingdom of heaven is promised, but we resist the very idea of our own spiritual poverty. The gospel challenges us not only because of our sin but also

because of our perceived righteousness. ‘All our righteous acts are like filthy rags,’ it says in (Isa. 64:6). And in our over-valued attitude of self-sufficiency, we take offence. ‘I’m as good as the next person,’ we say, and we think we shall be judged by comparison to those whose sins are greater than ours. But the gospel will not tolerate our self-deception. ‘Everyone will die for his own sin,’ it says (Jer. 31:30).

This is offensive to the human ego. We do not want to be told of our need. We do not want to be held accountable. We do not want to give up our beliefs in our own adequacy.

But here’s the good news: God can melt away our resistance. ‘I will give you a new heart,’ God says, ‘and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh’ (Ezek. 36:26). And when God changes our hearts, he changes our attitude. He changes the way we respond to the gospel. Paul speaks of those who live ‘in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding,’ he says, ‘and separated from the life of God because of...the hardening of their hearts’ (Eph. 4:17f.). But now the gospel announces that the Holy Spirit softens the heart, and subdues it, and, when she does, we are willingly humbled before God. And we see the light that exposes our need, not as some glaring, upsetting truth, but as the grace and mercy that it is.

Jesus says to his disciples, ‘He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives the one who sent me.’ When we welcome the messenger of the gospel, we welcome the message. When we welcome the one who brings in the kingdom, we welcome the king he represents.

The gospel says to us, ‘In Christ, God rescues sinners.’ When we put our trust in that word, we put our trust in Christ. We get past the offence of the gospel, and what we find in it, is the best news of all. By God’s power, we pass from darkness to light. By God’s grace, we get past the offence of the gospel, and what before seemed a reproach to us, we receive with thankful hearts.

Thanks be to God.

*Credit (parts) from Isaac Butterworth, 2017*