

“And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.” Kind of a peculiar statement that Jesus makes in our Gospel text. It can seem especially odd if someone has an understanding of Jesus as a big softy, the ultimate “nice guy.” But when you read the Gospels, you find that Jesus offends a lot of people. And when you consider that He was the one who spoke by His Spirit through the prophets and apostles, then the number of people Jesus offended goes up even further.

But why is this? Why is Jesus offensive to some? It’s not because He enjoys offending people, or that He goes out of His way to do it, or says things purely for the reason of causing offense. No, Jesus doesn’t desire people to be offended, hence His declaration that such people are blessed. But as we see, there are elements within what Jesus says and does that offend some. What are they?

The first thing that would be offensive is how Jesus – and His prophets and apostles – call out sin. Jesus is pointing to this when He asks concerning John, “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind?” A thin reed would be easily bent this way and that, whichever way the wind was blowing at the time.

John the Baptist was obviously not that. When the Pharisees and Sadducees come out to his baptism, John calls out their hypocrisy and false repentance for all to see, referring to them as a “brood of vipers” – the offspring of the Serpent, Satan. John would boldly declare that those trees who do not bear good fruit would be cut down and thrown into the fire.

And to those who did repent, John directed them on the path of righteousness, pointing them to Jesus as the one and only Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, as well as directing them to live lives of good works, sinning no more. Rather than a limp reed, John was an unshakable rock in the wilderness, even as people cursed him when they stumbled over his words.

Jesus would do the same as His prophet, for again, John’s words were His words. Jesus would call the Pharisees “blind guides,” “whitewashed tombs,” and just as John, a “brood of vipers.” He literally cursed a fig tree that had borne no fruit, and it withered and died. He declared that He alone is the way to salvation; no one comes to the Father but by Him.

For those who repented, Jesus forgave them and then directed them to live lives that reflected their faith. He plainly stated, “If you love me, you will keep my Commandments.” In a way that was both discrete but also firm, He told the woman at the well that her living with a man who wasn’t her husband was sinful. He refused to condemn the woman caught in adultery, exposing the hypocrisy of her accusers, and the told her, “Go and sin no more.”

The teaching of Jesus offended plenty of people, some of whom got so mad they ended up having Him crucified.

As the Church is called to follow in the footsteps of the prophets and apostles and of Christ Himself, the Church’s proclamation must follow theirs as well. This means that, if the Church is doing what she’s supposed to, people will be offended.

Like John, and Jesus, the Church must call people to repentance. No one likes having his sins called out, being told to turn back to the ways of God, but it's absolutely necessary. Unrepentant sin is what destroys faith. Without the Law, the Gospel is hollow. John the Baptist told people to put away their sin so that they would be ready when the Christ came. We the Church must do the same so that people will be ready when they meet Jesus.

And while we wait for that day, the Church directs people to lives of good works – not to earn salvation, but to glorify God and serve our neighbor.

Yet there's a second reason why the words and actions of Jesus cause offense, one that is a little more subtle, but which might strike a little closer to those who follow Jesus. Some disciples are sent from John, who is now in prison, with the question, "Are you the one who is to come (meaning the Christ), or shall we look for another?"

Now, what might provoke these disciples to ask Jesus this? After all, John has been quite clear, openly declaring for all to see that Jesus is the Lamb of God, the greater one to come. He had confessed that the time had come for him to decrease while Jesus increased. So why would these guys wonder?

Well, where is their master, John? He's in prison. Why is he in prison? For offending someone! He had called out Herod and Herodias on their unlawful, adulterous marriage. John had been faithful, and was suffering for it.

But now John's disciples hear of the works of the Christ, acts of miraculous power done by Jesus. Surely with such power Jesus will come and set their master free from his unjust imprisonment! It would be offensive to let the faithful prophet continue to rot in his cell. How could Jesus do that?

Jesus' own disciples will struggle with this as well. Recall the occasion when St. Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Jesus praises Peter's confession, which the Holy Spirit has revealed to him. Jesus then goes on to speak to His disciples about how, as the Christ, He must suffer many things and be killed, and on the third day rise.

How does Peter take this? He responds, "Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you!" How could the Christ, the Son of God, be made to suffer and die at the hands of sinful men? It's shameful! It's embarrassing! It's offensive!

Or recall when a Samaritan village rejects Jesus, how James and John react. Their master shouldn't be made to suffer this embarrassment at the hands of these outsiders. They ask Jesus if they should call down fire from heaven on His behalf to punish those fools for their offense. Even after Jesus has risen from the dead and appearing to His disciples, they ask Him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"

It's not until the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost that they finally seem to understand that the Kingdom of God on earth – the Church – will not be one of worldly power, comfort, or prestige, but one that will entail bearing the cross.

That Jesus allows His Church, His Christians, to suffer on this earth can tempt us to offense just like His disciples, and John's before them. Someone we know to be a strong, faithful Christian is made

to endure some great tragedy, or just one difficulty after another, and we wonder why God is allowing this to happen? Doesn't He care about this person?

Or when we suffer, it offends our sinful flesh to think that, somehow God has determined that that is the best thing for us at that moment. What sort of God would allow that? Meanwhile, those who aren't faithful, who don't believe or lead Christian lives seem to prosper. How is that fair, God?

Why all the suffering, the occasion for offense? Remember, all who believe in Jesus, be they prophets, apostles, or everyday Christians, will follow in His footsteps. And what happened to our Lord? He never had more earthly possessions to His name than the clothes on His back. He was made to suffer, to endure worldly shame and mockery. He finally dies a horrible death at the hands of wicked and weak men, forsaken by His heavenly Father, wept over by His earthly mother.

What could be more offensive than a God who would do that to His only-begotten Son, the Son whom He calls His beloved?

Yet as with all things, the Lord had a reason for all this, a perfect reason. Those things that He does which might lead to earthly offense are done for the sake of heavenly glory. Because of the shame and offense suffered by Jesus upon the cross, we who are joined to Jesus by Baptism will be able to stand before the throne of God without shame, not having to worry about causing offense to the holy God.

The Son endured all that the cross entailed, because He loves all people and was willing to take our punishment on Himself. He willingly died an unjust, offensive death so that He could satisfy divine justice on our behalf.

John's suffering was also used by the Lord God. As another prophet, Malachi, had foretold of John that he was God's messenger, sent before the face of God, to prepare the way of the Christ. John would suffer outrage from the powers that be to show that Jesus would suffer the same. John would be unjustly put to death by a weak earthly ruler to show what sort of death the Christ would endure. That John was not in a king's house but in a king's prison would be a clear confession that those who believe in Christ would not be guaranteed worldly comfort.

Yet though John suffered, the Lord used John's preaching to bring many people to repent of their sins and follow Jesus. And the Lord brought his faithful prophet through it all, taking him from dungeons of Herod to the splendor of heaven the moment the executioner's blade fell.

God's people endure the offense of the world so that our lives would point to the splendor of heaven. He has us forgo wearing soft clothing in worldly kings' houses so that He might clothe us in the robe of righteousness and dwell in His house, the house of the King of Kings. St. Paul writes to the Church in the book of Romans: "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

Just as the suffering of Jesus on the cross led both the repentant thief and the Roman centurion to a saving confession of Him as God, the example of the suffering Church still brings people to the faith. Have you heard the account of the recent martyrs of Libya? In 2015, ISIS jihadists kidnapped 21

construction workers there. Twenty of them were Christians from Egypt, and when they refused to denounce Christ and convert to Islam, they were martyred. The twenty-first man was from Ghana and not originally a Christian. He could have escaped death by simply going along with the jihadists. But when he saw how the other twenty died, when they came to him, he boldly declared, "I am a Christian like them." He then was executed as well. But through the example of the twenty who had gone before him, this man was brought to paradise alongside them.

Now, you may never have to suffer in such a way, but know that, when you faithfully endure whatever trials may come, great or small, the Lord uses your example to call others to faith and strengthen the faith of other Christians. To the world, such suffering causes offense, but to God, it brings glory.

Jesus said, "Blessed is the one who is not offended by me." Blessed are those who follow in the footsteps of Christ and the faithful. Blessed is the Church when her proclamation remains faithful to Christ. Blessed are we when we put aside the offense of our sins being addressed by God's word and instead pray to our Lord in humble repentance. Blessed are those who see the trials of this life, not as offensive, but as assurances that we are joined to Jesus, who will bring us through the trials of this life into the glory of the life to come.

In His holy name, amen.