

The Third Sunday in Advent
St. Luke 7:18-35

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

There is a bit that is lost in most English translations of what Jesus said to John's disciples before they departed. It's one thing to be offended by Jesus and what He says. I'd wager that everyone here has been offended from time to time by who Jesus is and what He has said. The very idea of someone else dying in your place for your sins SHOULD be offensive to you: after all, He didn't deserve it, but you did! No, Jesus isn't cursing those who are offended by Him.

Jesus said, "Blessed is the one who is not scandalized by me." To be scandalized by who Jesus is, what He has said, and what He has done is something that goes beyond mere offense. It goes right to the heart of what John's disciples asked Jesus: "Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?"

Much time and effort has gone into trying to decipher who it is that really wanted to know the answer to that question. John was in prison at this time—there's the set up. Now, was he doubting that Jesus was really the Messiah, was this the reason that he or his disciples were scandalized by Jesus? As I recall, the producers of *The Chosen* played with this idea, and it makes sense; languishing in prison for proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of God could cause one to doubt whether Jesus really did come to set the prisoners free, as prophets and psalmist declared. (cf. Isaiah 61:1, Psalm 146:7, *et al*) However, that is a wrong understanding of what God meant in those places. And that's what it means to be scandalized by Jesus—to think that He ought to be doing and saying one thing, but He does and says something else.

Was it John or His disciples who doubted or were scandalized? Only God knows. In either event, John sent them to ask (after all, he couldn't go). God-in-the-flesh gave this answer to their question: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them." In other words, "I'm may not be doing things the way you understand or want them to go, but look at the things that I've done and line them up with the prophecies. I AM!" "And blessed is the one who is not scandalized by me."

Any number of heresies and false religions could be attributed to being scandalized. The fourth century presbyter and ascetic Arius was scandalized by the divinity of Jesus and taught that He was a created being later inhabited by the Second Person who was of similar substance to the Father. Followers of Islam are scandalized because they cannot come to terms with Jesus being the Son of God, of being God Himself, so they make Him out to be the second greatest prophet behind Mohamed.

In fact, most of the rest of the world has been scandalized because of Jesus. From those who consider Jesus being a real figure of history, but nothing more than a great teacher, to those who would deny that Jesus ever even existed because the reality of Jesus doesn't line up with their perceived notion of what reality ought to be. I suppose any theology which denies the reality of Jesus would qualify as a false religion, scandalized because of Jesus.

Back to John and his disciples, though. What's the scandal there? Perhaps, like many at the time, they were expecting the Messiah to be some sort of political hero, one who would rid the promised land of any occupying forces, namely the Romans, and propel Judah (and maybe a reunited Israel) to the top dog position in the world. He would be one who would make Israel unconquerable, who would have all enemies under his feet. (cf. Psalm 110:1) The Messiah might even be a religious leader who would cleanse and restore the temple to the way it used to be. In short, the Messiah was supposed to make life better immediately. Again, you might imagine the question was prompted by John being in prison, especially since he proclaimed the coming of the One whom his disciples were questioning!

Jesus was none of those things.

The Pharisees might have been looking for a slightly different kind of Messiah. For them, maintaining some kind of status quo would have been desirable. The Messiah would approve of and confirm the Pharisees and what they were doing and teaching. So, he wouldn't stir the pot with the Romans too much as that would have had consequences for their leadership and political aspirations. The Messiah would hang out with them, eat with them, teach them...be one of them.

Jesus was none of those things, either.

So, for the scandalized people of His time, Jesus was either too much or too little. He wasn't the right kind of Messiah. He wasn't the Messiah they wanted Him to be. Other than for a few poor souls and sinners, everyone was scandalized because of Jesus.

You know what? People haven't changed too much. There are those who still stumble over the real Jesus in one way or another because He couldn't have really existed or He really isn't who He revealed Himself to be. So, there are those who deny Him outright, who proclaim that He's nothing more than a created being who was inhabited by the divine, that He's just another one of the prophets (a great one, no less, but nothing more). For the rest of the world outside of Christianity, he still either too much, too little, or too wrong.

Even among Christians, so-called, there are those who are scandalized because of Jesus. There are those who want a Jesus who is a different kind of Savior who does things differently than He has already done. It needs more flash, more pomp and circumstance, more glitz and glamour, pyrotechnics and flashing lights and emotionally moving music...something different. They want Jesus to prove to the rest of the world that they are right and that their theological and political aspirations are valid. They want a Jesus who won't point out their flaws and opinions but affirms them.

What you'll see these Christians doing is gathering around a false teacher of some sort, hands raised over their heads and they sing childishly simple and repetitive "Christian" songs, listening to self-help messages that purport to tell them that Jesus wants them to live prosperous lives, filled with every material blessing, or some such blasphemous thing.

These false teachers are scandalized because of Jesus, and they are leading great multitudes straight to hell. They ought to have millstones tied around their necks and be cast into the sea. (cf. Luke 17:1-2)

There is no loss of irony, in light of these modern scandalized teachers, what Jesus then turned to ask the crowds after John's disciples had left.

What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing?

What's the irony? The questions were rather pointed. Jesus was asking them if they went into the wilderness to look for the oddity or entertainment. He was asking them if they went out into the wilderness seeking someone or something elegant. Is that what people go to church for? The novelty and entertainment and glamour? Is that what church is about; is that what church is supposed to be about? The real church is rather scandalous by comparison.

"What then did you go out to see? A prophet?" I often wonder if Jesus waited for an answer to the preceding questions. There's no answer given in the Scripture, either by anyone in the crowd or by Jesus Himself. However, He then asked this question, and answered it right away,

Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is he of whom it is written, "Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you." I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.

They went out to hear the Word of God, the message to repent, and the proclamation of the coming of

the Kingdom of God. Sounds like maybe that's what the church ought to be doing, too.

So, let me ask you, what do you come here for? Is this a weekly social gathering for you? Do you come here for your weekly dose of holiness so that you can be who you want to be beyond these doors for the rest of the week? Do you come here to show off your latest clothes and outfits? Or do you come here to see and hear a prophet?

I suppose there's something to be said about some of those first ideas, to some extent. There's nothing wrong with a little socialization in a place like this. In fact, I highly encourage it! But that should not be your primary concern for coming to a place like this. Similarly, it's a fine thing to come here for a dose of holiness, so to speak, but only because of what you are beyond those doors which precipitates your need for Jesus. If you have nice clothes and like to wear them, whatever; but again, that's not the point of this place.

That said, you do come here to hear a prophet, though not entirely in the Old Testament sense. You come here to hear the Word of God, to hear someone speak on behalf of God, but only those words which God has given him to speak. You come to hear the command to repent, and, having made your God-given repentance, to hear the sweet salve of the forgiveness of all of your sins. You come here to hear of the nearness of the Kingdom of God, and to partake of the foretaste of the feast which will be your eternity in His kingdom. If that's what you have come out of the wilderness to this place for, blessed are you, because you are not scandalized because of Jesus.

So, be on your guard. Those scandalous teachings are quite tempting, from the ancient ones which afflicted the likes of John or his disciples and Arius to these modern ones. They will all cause you to stumble over Jesus and can threaten your salvation. No one is immune from the attacks of these falsehoods, except Jesus. If you have Jesus, then you are blessed; better yet, if Jesus has you, then you are blessed. Therefore repent of your sin-sick heart's desire, the scandal that infects you, and receive the grace and mercy of your God, who delights to give of Himself for your forgiveness, life, and salvation.

And thank God that Jesus is immune from the attacks of these falsehoods. That's not to say that He wasn't tempted—His time in the wilderness with the devil is proof enough that even Jesus was tempted. And what great scandals it would be had the Son of God given in to those temptations. All of humanity would be doomed—no hope. Through it all, however, Jesus remained humble and steadfastly committed to His mission.

John decreased and Jesus increased. From John, Jesus went about the countryside, teaching and healing and raising the dead, and eventually made His way to Jerusalem where He would complete His mission by dying for the sins of the world, proclaiming from His cross, "It is finished." (cf. John 19:30) He shed His blood for your propitiation, covering your life in His death, redeeming you from your sinfulness and every offense and scandal which may afflict you. Daily, you sin much, but the love of Jesus for you covers the multitude of your sins.

This Jesus invites you to follow Him. In fact, the words He used are to take up your cross and follow Him. In other words, the following of the real Jesus won't be easy, because you must cope with your Old Man always warring against Him, bringing to mind the scandalous teaching and feelings you must have, and bringing you to sin. But, in following Jesus, there is plenty of goodness and mercy, because He has taken up your death in His flesh, doing that offensive bit: dying in your place so that you don't have to. Confess them, because by that confession, you are not scandalized because of Jesus.

In fact, you are blessed...blessed to hear these words: you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.