

Offended in Christ

Advent III *From the Gospel* (St. Matthew xi. 2.)

And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.

Our Gospel today continues the Advent theme of introducing Jesus Christ as King. The Advent I Gospel was the triumphal entry. The cosmic events that will precede His Second Coming were the focus of the Advent II Gospel. In today's text, Jesus' reviewed His miraculous works for the sake of the prophet John, now in prison, who not long before had declared to the multitudes in the wilderness the immediate arrival of the One whom all Israel waited for in expectation.

Each Gospel carries with it its own paradox, which is why our emotional reaction to these texts is so mixed. Following that time of great heraldry and celebration at His last arrival in Jerusalem, the gladness quickly evaporates. Jesus would not permit Himself enthronement, but instead pushed to the extreme the antagonism that has been building against Himself. At that future moment when He will return a second time to earth to indeed actually, visibly reign, the immediate events surrounding that event will hardly be one of worldwide rejoicing, but *of signs in the sun, in the moon, and in the stars; and upon earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men's hearts failing them for fear...* (from Lk. xxi. 25ff). This Sunday we are back with Him once again in ancient Israel, and He has fulfilled all of the appropriate signs which the nation would have attached to the coming of Messiah: *the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel reached...* And then suddenly, in the midst of this message of assurance which He wishes to be related back to His cherished friend and relative, John, He says: *And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me.*

What a remarkable interjection! And why here? Many thoughts and questions come to mind. How could anyone be offended with one who does such things? Would we have taken offense at the life and works of someone like Mother Teresa? Would we be insulted by the activities of those who selflessly staff the local soup kitchens? Would St. Francis and his poor Christian brothers have represented to us a great affront? Would we be scandalized with anyone who has devoted themselves to the virtues of purity, modesty, simplicity, holiness? The idea is absurd, improbable, almost unthinkable. And yet..., and this is the crux of my sermon, it is something inherent in human nature that causes this to be the case.

And now I want you to imagine something. Consider first of all the nature of a child. The faces of children enthrall us in their innocence and wonder. We see a little girl running after a

butterfly that has occupied all of her attention. A little boy with nothing other than a stick commands an army of thousands. If we haven't spoiled them, even a very little bit will satisfy and even thrill them. They view all the world without judgment and prejudice. How small and shriveled and reprimanded we feel, when their wide-eyed gaze captures us in an adult transgression, whether its a loss of temper, or a scornful word, or an expression of spite! How long we remember that moment, and how painfully its memory stings us! To be arrested by the sweet guilelessness of one so far below us in stature and knowledge and years. And it wasn't even as if they possessed criteria with which they would have assessed us. It was only that simplicity, that untainted quality, which somehow placed them in a position to highlight something very dark and shameful in ourselves. Suddenly they seem to tower way, way above us. We could hardly believe that such a thing could happen.

And now I want you to transfer all of these qualities to the face and person of a Man. There He is, looking at you. Even, you feel, right through you. "I could have tolerated this maybe in a child," you find yourself thinking almost angrily, "but I can barely stomach the idea in a man." There is nothing in Him to pin anything on. His every gesture, His every facial expression, are filled with significance, because nothing whatsoever beclouds His motives. There is not one motion of His body, not to mention one word that drops from His lips, which arises from any source other than pure virtue.

And what is the consequence? This man collides with everything that is high, and exalted, and that lifts itself up in humankind. It is only the meek, those whom life has shorn of agendas, those close to the low levels of misery, who can, and want, to get anywhere near Him. No wonder that John the Baptist in his proclamation of Christ's coming had repeated those words of the great prophet Isaiah: *Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough ways smooth...* (Lk. 3:5 and Is. 40:3b-4). The mountains and the hills represent the pride of man that incessantly builds edifices to defy the Living God, without even realizing it. Now we understand the tremendous conflict that raged against this Man Jesus Christ in His own day.

But what of you and me? Those same eyes are looking deep into our souls. They accuse, without even accusing, because of what they are, the eyes of Jesus. How am I to deal with it? I know that I am not exempt from those mountains and hills within me that parade themselves against Him. *And blessed is he, who shall not be offended in me.* What offense do I take? Believe me, I take offense easily. I take offense when circumstances suggest that I'm nowhere near what I should be in all the areas that I fancy myself way ahead. I take offense when my judgment

proves deficient, my decisions poor, my work shoddy, and myself far, far less of a man than I thought I was. These realizations hit me where it hurts the worst. And I know Who is behind those realizations, although I may remain ignorant of that fact for a long, long time. It is that same One who walked the roads of Galilee those many years ago: a sinless, immaculate heart, enshrined in the body of a man.

I know I am presented with two choices. It's either to turn and run, until He catches up with me again, somewhere down the road, at other some point in my life, and fixes His gaze once more upon me. Or turn, hard as it is, full toward Him, to face the blinding light of His scrutiny. How long will I delay it? A lot of that is up to me.

But this is where the metaphor of comparison with a child must be clearly qualified, for there is another virtue resident within this One who looks upon us, in whose sight we know nothing can be hid. It is the virtue that is the most supreme mark of His divinity, and the one which we, in our human helplessness, ourselves our own chief enemy, are so completely dependent upon. It is love.

It is love that pursues us until we give up, and forces us to take account of ourselves and of life. It is love that expects the very, very best, and simply will not quit until it has been realized. It is love that moves us from hell to heaven, that rescues us from what would otherwise be the result of our own entanglements. It is love that pronounce us, in spite of the mound of our transgressions which speak against us, to be innocent, forgive, clean.

And blessed is he, whosoever shall not be offended in me. If only I can make it my reflexive reaction to take no offense to those things that He permits in my life to humble me. Each time I do so, I'll draw a bit nearer to Him, and He to me. It's what I've always wanted. And I suspect it's what He's always wanted, as well.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.