

Mixed Reviews for Jesus

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Joanna C. Leiserson at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, July 6, 2008.

People have been hanging around Jesus for some time now, learning the ropes of his ministry and getting a sense of who he is. So far, he's done things that would attract a crowd. He's healed hopelessly sick people. He's offered forgiveness—love, even!—to prostitutes, tax collectors, and other bums and good-for-nothings. He's even hosted a party for 5,000 people, come as you are, everybody welcome, no strings attached.

But apparently Jesus and his disciples are getting some mixed reviews about his ministry. It's true that lots of people have almost rioted to see Jesus—most visibly the hard living people, the street people, the ones bent down and broken by addiction, violence, medical and mental illness, and everyone else on the margins of respectable life. But most of the religious leaders and many of the decent and upright members of their community are staying away in droves.

And yet, look at the people who come to hear Jesus. They are the ones who don't have the means or the good health or the leisure or the good enough morals live that respectable life. But with Jesus, they now have hope. To them it's like the dawn of a new morning. To Jesus, it's the kingdom of God.

In today's reading in Matthew, Jesus is speaking to the hostile reactions he's getting from people. The people who reject him, he says, are like children who are never satisfied with the way you're playing their game. "We were playing the wedding game and we piped, but you didn't dance for us. And when we played Funeral, you wouldn't be the mourner. You never do what we expect you to do!" Neither John the Baptist nor Jesus fit the mold. "John," they say, "doesn't eat or drink with us. He's too gloomy and strict, like a funeral. Whereas you, Jesus, you're more sociable, like a wedding. But you like being with lots of—shall we say—*diverse* people. You're a glutton and a drunkard!" Jesus shows us the kingdom of God by feasting with the rejects and the outsiders. He's challenging us—what constitutes the Kingdom? Is it really made up of a whole world of rejects? Is this really God's world? And if it is, who wants it anyway?

Now these are criticisms made by perfectly intelligent, perfectly sincere and devout people, who feel sure that they will know a Messiah when they see one. It will be one who is austere—but not as austere as John—and convivial—but not a libertine like Jesus. One who is respectable! The Messiah will be one who dances when they play, mourn when they wail—in other words, one who acts as they expect him to act.

In retrospect, we may look down on Jesus' critics. But we should be used to disagreements about the nature of kingdom of God. All over the place, we Christians disagree about what constitutes the Kingdom. Just look at the Anglican Communion as we approach the Lambeth Conference in England and prepare to argue over homosexuals in ministry, or the absolute authority of certain passages in Scripture. These are deep

disagreements. Which of us is following God and bringing God's kingdom—them, or us? How can we tell that we are on the right track? How do we even know what the right track is—and when we know, can we accept it? We debate endlessly with each other about God's will regarding women in the church, welfare for the poor, flat taxes, war in Iraq, the downtown parking garage... What does it mean to live as faithful Christians?

Jesus says some very clear things. In Matthew, he makes absolute demands—love your enemies, bless those who curse you, turn the other cheek, do not judge or condemn, do not swear! Do not even think about lusting after someone else. Forgive 490 times. From these commandments, we then try to interpret and to live them out—sometimes more faithfully than others. The trouble is, when we hear these teachings, we tend to just sort of skip over the hard parts or the parts we disagree with. But when we do this, in effect we are trying to control the terms of our own salvation, we are defining the will of God on our own terms. You've heard the arguments: "This teaching doesn't apply to my situation." "You have to fight back or they won't respect you." "Of course we can't turn the other cheek; we need to defend ourselves." "He doesn't deserve to be forgiven; he didn't even say he's sorry." You see, in theory, of course we see the reign of God as loving everyone and so on. In practice, though, it's not quite that simple.

For one thing, it doesn't seem very practical in this world. Much of our sense of law and order in this world is based on the premise that we need to fight crime, defend ourselves and our nation, stand up for ourselves, and earn our way to success and to forgiveness. The reign of God seems to be better fitted for heaven than for earth.

For another thing, our society often does not welcome Jesus' radical values. In fact, the world around us can be positively hostile to Gospel values. Just look at what it took for the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's to bring about a more just society for all persons. It cost people their jobs, their friends and families, and for some, even their lives. You may get a smaller portion of this hostility if you ever had to quit your job because you refused to carry out in an unethical decision, or been criticized by a member of your family for being too devoted to church activities.

And for another thing, frankly, we may in some ways resist or even *refuse* the reign of God. We in the mainstream live a comfortable respectable life, and Jesus challenges that comfort. Jesus offers to us a world turned upside down. He paints a picture in which God eats with the criminals and the guards are left out. Do we really want to be a part of *that* kingdom? We have come to minister TO the hard living people in the Undercroft on Tuesday evenings, but have we been able to imagine that the Kingdom of God IS the Undercroft on Tuesday evenings? And if so, where does that leave us, the comfortable ones?

But still, we *are* called to follow Jesus. We are called to be a prophetic voice in this broken world, and a welcoming voice in an inhospitable world. In many ways, our conventional wisdom doesn't show us how—our conventional wisdom and culture embrace different values. And as part of our culture and as part of our human condition,

so do we. It is not that God *withholds* understanding and divine wisdom from the intelligent, as our passage from Matthew sounds, but rather that our pride and our human wisdom sometimes get in our way. We think we know better. And because we know better, we want to be in control of our own destiny and our own choices, like a grownup. But the fact is that in terms of learning how to live as God intends, we need to be more like infants than like co-workers for God. We need to be more like the uneducated riffraff with whom Jesus wined and dined—the hard living people of the world, the ones who have been dealt a bad hand by the system. They are the ones who followed Jesus while many of the wise and intelligent of the world rejected him. They are the ones who know how much they need God’s mercy and forgiveness. The Scriptures are full of stories of God bypassing the proud and calling the humble and the lowly: Moses, David, Mary. They knew that by themselves they cannot achieve the righteousness that God demands of us. In other words, we inherit the kingdom when, like infants who know who they depend on, we recognize our need of God, and then God can work in us.

“I thank you, Father,” Jesus says, “because you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants.” He’s thankful for those spiritual infants who accept their dependence on God. As infants, we know that we do not need to earn our way to heaven. We know that we do not need to try on our own to achieve the perfection of the Kingdom of God. We can admit that we are bent low beneath the burden of the demand to “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” We can admit that we cannot participate perfectly in God’s kingdom without God’s saving grace.

We are told to be imitators of Christ. But in case we think we cannot come worthily to the Lord’s Table as imitators of Christ, we can be sure that we are invited to come as children of God, and as forgiven sinners. And that’s okay, Jesus assures us. We do not have to bear the burden of our sinfulness alone. “Come to me,” he says, “all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.” Jesus offers us rest from the burden of having to deserve our salvation. He offers to share our life, to be at home in our homes, to redeem us from our pretenses to wisdom. He offers us the wisdom of infants. That’s *Good News!*