

Advent 3
15/12/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 35:1-10

Psalm 146

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

Offended at Jesus

In a sentence

Jesus' ministry troubles even his closest allies because, if this is the Messiah does, everything must change

A report this week related that Bill Shorten, the former leader of the federal opposition, was the least popular of Australian major party leaders for nearly 30 years. The apparent offensiveness of Mr Shorten and the policies of his party was enough, of course, to bring about the surprising election result of May this year.

Whatever we might make of that, what are we to make of Jesus' declaration, 'Blessed are they who take no offence at *me*': 'Blessed are they who are not *scandalised* by me' (the key Greek word is the root of our English word 'scandal'). We have some pretty clear ideas now about the offence given by Labor and its policies but why might people take offence at Jesus, given the kinds of things he has been doing? The blind are regaining vision, the lame are walking, illness is being overcome, the deaf are hearing, the poor are hearing good news and the dead, even, are being raised. What political leader could imagine that, if she were doing that kind of thing, she could possibly fail a political popularity test? To those for whom life is struggle for relief, Jesus is said to bring precisely what we desire, and we would consider anyone a saviour who performed such wonders for us.

So where is the offence? It is not the rumour of the miraculous. John would have expected the Messiah to be working miracles, and it is to *him* that Jesus makes this unexpected declaration: 'Happy you are if I am no scandal to you.'

Indeed, John already knows and believes what is happening; it is Jesus' incontrovertible miracles themselves which seem to cause him concern: are these the miracles the *true* Messiah would perform? What matters is not the miracles themselves but the *kinds* of miracles they are said to be, and for whom they are performed. This is to say that the offence which might be taken here is not the offence implied against 'the laws of nature'. The offence is *political*; it is against the social, moral and religious order. Why is the Messiah performing *this* type of miracle? Why *is* the Messiah concerned with the blind, the ill, the poor and the dead? What are *these* in face of the expected approach of the reign of God?

Of course, we know – after a fashion – that God *is* concerned about such things. This is the source of Christian activism and political engagements, and also of many of their secular equivalents.

But the needs of the poor are not quite the point in Jesus' comment, 'take no offence'. That Jesus *happens* to help the poor is less the point here than that helping the poor is *all* that Jesus does; the only evidence that Jesus is the Christ is that he does these things for these people. In the context of his own preaching, John hears what Jesus is doing and wonders to himself: Is *this* the axe at the root of the tree? Is this the *winnowing fork* that sifts the just and the unjust? Is this the baptism with *fire* (cf. 3.1-13) which is God's oncoming storm of righteousness?

Jesus tells the crowds, There has never been one 'born of women' who has been greater than John the Baptist and yet the one who can answer those questions with a Yes – the one who knows that the Messiah of this God would do such things – such a one is greater than John. The wild-eyed prophet who calls the people to prepare the way of the Lord knows that that the Lord is coming, but *does not yet know the Lord*. For it is the *healing touch* of Jesus which is John's axe and winnowing fork.

What does it mean that the Messiah does this? It does not mean that we are to do as Jesus does. *We are*, of course, to do as Jesus does, but *this* text is not about us becoming healers or helpers. This is because the possibility that the greatest of us all might be offended at Jesus is the possibility that *we* might be offended at Jesus.

How could it be that a vision towards the improvement of the lot of those with less might be offensive? Mr Shorten would be right still to be pondering that. In that connection we might say that to be offended at Jesus' expression of God's righteousness is a 'vote' against him. And a vote *against* Jesus is a vote *for* what?

A vote against Jesus here is a vote *for ourselves*, against others. It is a vote against the thought that when God comes it might not be for us but perhaps against us. For, if we are not those in need of Jesus' healing touch are we, then, among the 'brood of vipers' against whom John railed (3.7)?

In fact, the gospel doesn't accuse us in this way. It simply raises the question: do you take offence that God's righteousness comes *for* those who don't look particularly righteous? Do you take offence that God's righteousness comes not in disintegrating judgement but in integrating reconciliation?

Funny kind of righteousness it is which puts the axe to the root not of the person who might seem to deserve it but to the weeds which have grown strong and choked out the gospel for her. Funny kind of God it is whose winnowing fork does not separate the good from the bad but the needy from that which has made them so. Funny kind of fire it is which burns to heal.

There is a shock in 'Blessed are those who take no offence at me.' The shock is that we have no part in Jesus if do not, in one sense or another, know ourselves to be poor, blind, lame, in captivity, dead. If this is what the Messiah does, then the unrighteous *and* the unrighteous, the poor *and* the rich, the dead *and* the alive have some something to see and receive here.

The greatest of all born of women sits in a prison and wonders, Are *you*, who does *this*, the one we have been waiting for? Because, if you are, this changes everything.
