

Beware!

Luke 10:1016

February 24, 2013

I have a confession to make. I have this strange obsession. Maybe you know someone who has the same affliction. I like to be liked! I want people to like me, to approve of me, to have good things to say about me. And to that end, I work hard, very hard, not to offend, not to hurt anybody's feelings, not to say anything too controversial.

But there are consequences to this affliction. People may well like me, but they may not really know me. Fortunately, this malady of mine is not too far advanced, because if it were, if pleasing other people became my sole obsession, I would lose myself. I would be nobody, nobody other than a reflection of what everybody else wants me to be.

To be somebody means not to be somebody else. To stand for something often means to stand against something else. If I am somebody, if I do stand for something, somebody is not going to like it.

The same is true of the church. We like to be liked. We want to enjoy a good reputation in the community. We want to be appreciated and approved and praised -- for our music, for our building, for our charitable work, for our contributions to community life. We try hard not to offend, not to hurt anybody's feelings, not to say -- or do -- anything too controversial.

But a church that seeks first not to offend, but to be acceptable and pleasing to the culture out of which it comes, or worse, a church that pursues the very same ideals and goals as the culture out of which it comes, that church loses its identity. It is no church at all.

A church that suffers no persecution but enjoys the privileges and support of the things of the earth -- beware! -- is not the true church of Jesus Christ.

Beware! The quote, the quote on the cover of your bulletin, is from Oscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador from 1977-1980. A church that suffers no persecution, beware!

Jesus walked with God, and he was rejected, by the world, and by the powers that be. If we walk with Jesus, what should we expect?

If we walk with Jesus, we must expect too to be rejected, by the world, and by the powers that be. Jesus told the seventy-two evangelists he sent ahead of him to expect as much. Some will welcome you and some will not welcome you. Some will listen to you and some will reject you.

But what is especially interesting to me is that Jesus speaks of their rejection not just by some individuals here and some individuals there, but by whole towns.

Whenever you go into a town and are not welcomed, go out in the streets and say, "Even the dust from your town that sticks to our feet we wipe off against you. But remember that the Kingdom of God has come near you!"

And Jesus himself decries the stubbornness and unbelief of the towns in Galilee -- Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum -- in which he had done so much of his ministry, preaching the Good News and healing the sick. The gospel is about transforming lives, but not merely one by one by one. It's about transforming whole communities, about changing our way of life, about changing our way of being people together.

This is the task of the church: not to fit in where it is, but to transform where it is, by speaking the truth, by standing for the gospel way, by following Jesus, by continuing Jesus' work of proclaiming and building the kingdom of God, by being Jesus, being Christ's body, Christ's physical, material, tangible body in this world. And if the church is Christ in this world, it must expect to be rejected as he was, because people love the darkness rather than the light!

This is the task of the church. Listen now to more of what the modern day prophet, Oscar Romero, has to say to the church.

To be a Christian now means to have the courage to preach the true teaching of Christ and not be afraid of it, not be silent out of fear and preach something easy that won't cause problems.

Not be silent out of fear ...

Let us not take fright at the boldness of today's church. With Christ's light let us illuminate even the most hideous caverns of the human person: torture, jail, plunder, want, chronic illness. The oppressed must be saved, not with a revolutionary salvation in merely human fashion, but with the holy revolution of the Son of Man, who dies on the cross to cleanse God's image, which is soiled in today's humanity, a humanity so enslaved, so selfish, so sinful.

The church dares to be so bold for the sake of a vision of this world as God intends it.

If instead of relying on human devices, people would rely on God and on his devices, we would have a world like the one the church dreams of, a world without injustices, a world with respect for rights, a world with generous participation by all, a world without repression, a world without torture.

Here is the heart of the matter, and some questions to give us pause.

Do you want to know if your Christianity is genuine? Here is the touchstone: Whom do you get along with? Who are those who criticize you? Who are those who do not accept you? Who are those who flatter you?

It is very easy to be servants of the word without disturbing the world: a very spiritualized word, a word without any commitment to history, a word that can sound in any part of the world because it belongs to no part of the world. A word like that creates no problems, starts no conflicts.

What starts conflicts and persecutions, what marks the genuine church, is the word that, burning like the word of the prophets, proclaims and accuses: proclaims to the people God's wonders to be believed and venerated, and accuses of sin those who oppose God's reign, so that they may tear that sin out of their hearts, out of their societies, out of their laws -- out of the structures that oppress, that imprison, that violate the rights of God and of humanity.

This is the hard service of the word. But God's Spirit goes with the prophet, with the preacher, for he is Christ, who keeps on proclaiming his reign to the people of all times.

That's our task: to be Christ proclaiming his reign, his way, to the people of our time.

Christianity is not a collection of truths to be believed, of laws to be obeyed, of prohibitions. That makes it very distasteful. Christianity is a person, one who loved us so much, one who calls for our love. Christianity is Christ.

And we do the work of proclaiming Christ's way, not just in the church, not just as preachers, but in the very context of the places and jobs in which we find ourselves day by day.

How beautiful will be the day when all the baptized understand that their work, their job, is a priestly work, that just as I celebrate Mass at this altar, so each carpenter celebrates Mass at his workbench, and each metalworker, each professional, each doctor with the scalpel, the market woman at her stand, is performing a priestly office! How many cabdrivers, I know, listen to this message there in their cabs; you are a priest at the wheel, my friend, if you work with honesty, consecrating that taxi of yours to God, bearing a message of peace and love to the passengers who ride in your cab.

The task of the church is the same as Jesus' task: to incarnate, to embody, God's way, God's word, God's being, here and now.

We cannot segregate God's word from the historical reality in which it is proclaimed. It would not then be God's word. It would be history, it would be a pious book, a Bible that is just a book in our library. It becomes God's word because it vivifies, enlightens, contrasts, repudiates, praises what is going on today in this society.

And sometimes, even often, that is painful and causes offense, because we must speak against the sins of the culture in which we live, even as we confess our own sins.

There is an "atheism" that is closer at hand (than Marxism) and more dangerous to our church. It is the atheism of capitalism, in which material possessions are set up as idols and take God's place.

Here, in a capitalism that idolizes money and "human goods," is a danger for us as serious as the other, and perhaps more than the other, which gets the blame for all evils. Which is more serious: to deny God out of a false idea of human liberation, or to deny him out of selfishness raised to the level of idolatry? Who are the greater hypocrites, those who believe in this world to the point of denying openly what is transcendent, or those who use what is transcendent and religious as a tool and justification for their idolatry of the earth?

There is the sore spot.

The church must suffer for speaking the truth, for pointing out sin, for uprooting sin. No one wants to have a sore spot touched, and therefore a society with so many sores twitches when someone has the courage to touch it and say: "You have to treat that. You have to get rid of that. Believe in Christ. Be converted."

But this is the church's task, our task: to speak the truth, to stand for the gospel way, to follow Jesus. It is not an easy task, but it is a joyful task -- to engage the world in which we live, to be Christ's agents in transforming history. It is joyful because the kingdom of God is near, and the kingdom of God will come.

In his last sermon, his last sermon before he was assassinated as he served communion in a small hospital chapel, Oscar Romero said this:

History will not fail; God sustains it. That is why I say that insofar as historical projects attempt to reflect the eternal plan of God, to that extent they reflect the kingdom of God. This attempt is the work of the church. Because of this, the church, the people of God in history, is not attached to any one social system, to any political organization, to any party. The church does not identify herself with any of those forces because she is the eternal pilgrim of history and is indicating at every historical moment what reflects the kingdom of God and what does not reflect the kingdom of God. She is the servant of the Kingdom of God.

May we, may our church, be the servant of the kingdom of God, the servant of no one else and of nothing else!

This is what we need to give up for Lent: our idolatry of approval, our need to fit in, our need to be liked, and our fear, our fear of speaking up, our fear of rejection.

A church that suffers no persecution but enjoys the privileges and support of the things of the earth -- beware! -- is not the true church of Jesus Christ.