

To Receive Jesus is to Receive his Message

A reflection developed from a text by Carroll Stuhlmueller

At this Sunday's Eucharist the first Scripture reading tells us about the rejection of the message of the prophet Jeremiah while the Gospel tells us about the rejection of Jesus' message. The second reading ties these together by presenting the heart of God's message to our race—whether proclaimed by a prophet or by his Only Begotten Son. It is that we must love God with all our heart and love our neighbor just as God has loved us. Paul presents it in a marvelous description of what divine love as lived by a human person is like.

Jeremiah spent his life trying to persuade people to make God the center and source of all their hopes. He pointed out that there is no other God and so there is no other being or person who can lead us to the kind of life we hope for. In the end he was killed because he wouldn't stop proclaiming this message, and the same happened to Jesus. But in Jesus' case we can learn something new about the ways in which we limit our love; we discover this means rejecting God. To reject God's gift of love—i.e., of becoming able to love others as God does—is equivalent to rejecting God. To reject Jesus is, of course, to reject God!

In the Nazareth synagogue Jesus proclaimed that God's love and salvation is a reality that is offered to those who hear him "right now". Since the Gospels are God's Word, and since that is what Jesus is explaining, this holds for us. How are we reacting "right now"? Many in the Nazareth synagogue thought Jesus' words beautiful but couldn't believe in "him". How could he be more than the person who had done carpentry work for them for so many years? If he wanted them to believe in him as sent by God let him do some of the miracles they'd been hearing about!

Jesus' response was to tell them they were being more resistant to God than pagans! The prophets Elijah and Elisha had done miracles, but for pagans rather than Israelites. The pagans believed in God's word and the Israelites of their time had not. Worse, yet the examples made it clear that God loves and cares for pagans who believe, just as much as for Israelites—perhaps he even favors pagans who believe over Israelites who refuse to believe. This reminds us of St. Stephen's telling his judges they had "pagan" ears and hearts. They, like the crowd in the Nazareth synagogue, were so enraged that they mobbed their accuser. Jesus was pushed and shoved to the edge of a steep, cliff-like place from which they sought to make him fall and be killed.

Then they experienced a wonder. They couldn't push him off but had to let him walk away. What happened? They believed they were God's Chosen People and deserved favors whereas the non-Jews deserved nothing but damnation! God responded by telling them all will receive the gift of loving as God loves, no more and no less. What does that mean? Paul answers. It means not being jealous, or prone to anger. It means being patient and kind and forbearing. It means not brooding over past injuries or slights. But people wanted God to give them what they wanted, not lead them to what he wanted. If God wouldn't come across they looked elsewhere. Have we ever done that? Perhaps we rejected Jesus' without realizing it. That is what Jesus forgave on the Cross. Do we need forgiveness?

Our Call to Share Jesus' Message

A reflection based on a text by St. Cyril of Alexandria

Because he wanted to win over the whole world and so bring everyone to God the very Lord of the universe took the form of a servant. He then declared Good News to those about whom no one cared very much, the poor and outcast. He tells us that this is why he was sent. He came to raise everyone, and everything, to a new and more wonderful condition and so renew the face of the earth.

Who are "poor"? All those who are deprived of spiritual blessings and nourishment. Those who live in the world without hope because they are without God are the really poor! God has sent the Son to enrich such people by faith, as we see in what he has done for the Gentiles. They have been made rich by faith in Christ because they have gained a divine and heavenly treasure in receiving the saving proclamation of Jesus. It has made them sharers in the Kingdom of Heaven. They have thus inherited blessings impossible to describe or even to understand. It's said, isn't it, that "eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor human heart conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him".

Christ promises healing to those who are broken and trapped by illness; Christ proclaims release to those who are imprisoned mentally or spiritually; Christ proclaims sight to those who cannot see the truth. So many have said—"you made me what I am" to some human creation or "you gave me new life" to an organization or leader. Aren't such people blind spiritually? To them the Heavenly Father sends true knowledge of their actual Creator and Savior. Then they know God and are known by God. They begin as children of darkness but are made children of light.

All of this could have been said in a certain sense to the Israelites to whom Jesus proclaimed the Good News. Christ came to them first of all. Christ made known the purpose of God. Christ proclaimed a time of reconciliation "acceptable to the Lord". Yet that acceptable time was the time of Christ's crucifixion! Paradoxically, what was a time of rejection became the time when all were made acceptable to God.

Knowing this, we are to bear fruit for God. But remember what Jesus said: "I tell you truly that unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains as it is, a single grain; but if it dies it bears a rich harvest". So Jesus was lifted up on the Cross and on the third day he came to life again, after trampling all death's power underfoot. What did he do then? He addressed the following words to his disciples and to us: "*All power has been given to me in heaven and on earth; go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*". We have been appointed to proclaim the message he proclaimed. Through us he will call all to God and change the face of the earth. If you have received Christ you have received this call. You must find ways to do this.

Who is Your Light?

A reflection developed from a text by Carroll Stuhlmueller

Let Christ be your light! That summons can lead one to experience something as overwhelming as the light which blinded Paul on the road to Damascus, or something as gentle as the candles carried in today's processions. Light is used as a symbol of whomever or whatever guides us; it shows us where we are going. God is your light if you depend on God to guide you in deciding what to seek and how to seek it. To whom do you turn when you want to know whether doing something is for the good or not? According to the Book of Genesis the fundamental human sin is trying to make such decision on one's own and without reference to what God has revealed to us.

Because God spared the lives of all Israelite first born sons when he took the lives of the Egyptians' first born, every first born son was seen as "consecrated" to God; their lives were God's in a special way. Jesus was a first born son and so consecrated to God in this way. God, in fact, had called Jesus into existence to, in the words of the angel, "save the people from their sins". He can only do that for those who seek and use his guidance.

Clearly, Jesus offers to free us from trying to make decisions about what is good and bad without reference to God. He is the light that shows us what is good. He shows us this by his deeds even more than by his words. What does he do? He shows us a new kind of love—the kind of love God "is". He shows us that when we love as God does we share God's life. He is God's messenger to bring us this light.

We hear once again today the story of Simeon talking the baby Jesus into his arms and prophesying to Joseph and Mary about him and his impact on Israel and all humans. The judgment ultimately passed on any human life will be only a comparison with Jesus' way of living and loving. Those who are like Jesus have chosen God as their light and have found the way into God's Kingdom. Those who have not chosen to imitate Jesus do not come to the Kingdom. When people carry candles today carry Jesus' light, showing the way to everlasting life.

In Scripture blood is the symbolic and actual bearer of life. And life belongs exclusively to God. Jesus accordingly gives his blood to God, and with it the blood of the entire human race. This symbolism has to be made real by the way we care for and reverence human life, and by treating it as God's to guide and bring to fulfillment. Each of us has been given the light that is Christ to carry before our world. We are to carry it in a way that shows God alone is the way to life's fullness. Our vocation is to make our every action a way of doing it, or at least trying to. We love like Jesus.

This is usually done gently. Sometimes, however, it requires strong words and deeds. Jesus used both. He can show us when the one is called for rather than the other. If God wants power God will give us the words or the deeds needed. God begins gently but does whatever it takes to pry us loose from whatever does not lead us to Jesus and to the Way of Life. Let us be grateful.

Spreading the Light that is Jesus

A reflection developed from a text by Romano Guardini

Jesus scandalized many who grew up with him. They couldn't believe that God had given him a light they didn't have. "Where did he get all this?" they asked. Some meet with the same reaction today when they hold up Jesus to those who they live and work with. In Jesus' case the scandal turned into rage and an effort to bring about his death. He challenged their way of viewing life and themselves and God's designs in an intolerable way; so they felt.

Jesus causes a similar scandal today. Those who want to be his followers and friends come in for many hostile reactions. Where do "you" get these ideas that "you" know what others, even our entire world, needs in order to find a good life rather than violence? Everyone knows how much wrong and suffering and mutual hurt there is in our world but Jesus has no answer for it. This seems a mysterious, inexplicable impulse in confused human hearts revolting against "God" and God's "holiness". It doesn't matter that most of the ideas of God that evoke this revolt are the works of human minds only. To practice the love shown by Jesus is enough to set off violence, now as during his ordinary life on earth.

Thus into the hour glowing with the fullness of holy beauty and truth, into the very midst of worship, slashed the question: "Isn't this the carpenter's son?" "Isn't this the brother of James and Joseph and don't we know his sisters?" "Where did he get all this?" But those who ask these questions are only being confronted with their lack of knowledge about how to find human happiness and well-being. Jesus forces a kind of enemy lurking in our hearts out into the open. Maybe we didn't know what was "in us", but now we have to face it because it rebels so strongly against Jesus words. From those who had just witnessed, amazed and moved, the grace and beauty of Jesus' words in Nazareth a paroxysm of rage broke loose. Already the Cross stood waiting.

However, the hour in which the power of darkness will have its way had not yet come. Besides, the strongest things are often the quietest. Jesus just walked away from the Nazarenes, as Jesus just overturned the tables of the money changers in the Temple and sent the sellers of sacrificial animals outside. No one could do anything to stop him. It was spiritual power, and a power that can't be resisted by ordinary violence. That is offered to us.

Jesus' hour came and he gave himself entirely to the Father. Now it is our hour. We must make the same gift and make it for the same reason. We have received a mission to hold up the light of God's love before the world. The truth Jesus has given us is this love as lived out by individual people. It is a spiritual power that overcomes "the world". It is an irresistible force limited due to nothing except God's decision about the "hour"—the time when his love is to be shown to the unbelieving and the violent to reveal that they can do nothing against it. The love of God shown us all in Jesus Christ is the most powerful force there is. Live in it and you will see what wonderful things God can do.

The Persons We Become In Jesus

A reflection developed from a text by Emeric Lawrence

When King David sensed he was close to death he called Solomon, whom he had already made king, and gave him some final advice: “Have courage and act like a man! Keep faithful to God, walk in his ways and keep his laws and commands”. We all know that in many ways Solomon failed. He was courageous and he “acted like a man”, but according to the way being a “man” was understood in his culture and day. We see that in his three-hundred wives and in the fact that he worshiped with those who weren’t Israelites and so worshiped “foreign gods”. He didn’t understand that there could be a conflict between the ways of God and the ways of a human culture. He didn’t understand that he needed to learn how to “be a man” from God rather than from the people he lived among.

We learn to be a “man” or “woman” by looking to Jesus. What we call “gender identity” has to be re-shaped by Jesus’ example and teaching. It is transformed if we allow this to happen. We can’t become the person we want to be by using what our culture or society teaches, at least until we have allowed Jesus’ message and example to transform everything.

When Rehoboam, Solomon’s son, became king the tribes of northern Israel complained that Solomon had oppressed and mistreated them and asked for changes. Rehoboam replied that he would oppress them even more if they didn’t keep quiet and do what he said. He was only “acting like a man”, and it lost him more than half his kingdom and left the Chosen People a heritage of violence and strife they never outgrew.

Jesus teaches us that we must respond to violence, or mistreatment, with love. That doesn’t exclude what we now call “tough love”. Jesus showed that to many Pharisees and scribes. But he didn’t meet violence with violence or hatred with hatred. He had been sent not to condemn but to save. He did that by showing love and mercy. He called all to “turn to God” (a literal translation of the Hebrew and Aramaic words usually translated as “repent”). He lived a life totally turned toward God. Being for God and giving self to God was Jesus entire life—both as a human and as the Second Person of the Trinity. This reality shaped and reshaped the way his contemporaries understood being “a man”. How it reshaped “being a woman” is seen by the many women who accompanied him wherever he went as well as by Mary, his mother.

God has created us human. We cannot seek or find God except as human beings who have a human gender identity, and various other identifying human roles. They all shape us. We are called to live them in ways that keep us turning to God and living the love which Jesus shows us. No one of us is anything more or less than a human being and we all live in and through a human culture and its ways of organizing life. We are called to learn and to show the world how to do this as Jesus did it. Jesus lives on in and through us. We are Christ’s Body. Through his Body Jesus continues to save us and free us of our sin—especially that rooted in our cultures and societies.

Transforming All Things in Christ

A reflection developed from Butler's Lives of the Saints

Almost no details of St. Agatha's life—written up in the form of ancient legends—can be confirmed as historical. Besides the fact that she was Sicilian and from Catania, what is known comes to this: From a Roman point of view, she did almost everything in the wrong way.

For instance, she was wealthy but she used the wealth to help the poor rather than to gain prestige for herself or her family. In fact, she was transforming the prestigious practice of playing “public benefactor” by using her faith. The benefactions weren't meant to enhance her family's reputation but to follow Christ's teaching about loving others as oneself.

Again, she was unmarried and refused to marry—declaring that her spouse was Christ. She refused to use her sexuality or gender to enhance her family (by marrying someone from a higher social status and continuing her family by having children). Thus, when a former Consul, a man of much higher social rank, wished to marry her she refused him. As a result lost everything—possessions, family and her life—but explained it as the result of marrying a person of the highest status possible, Jesus Christ. Becoming holy is more important than rising in a human social hierarchy.

Because she turned accepted social and cultural standards upside down she showed how many culture approved practices can be done for Christ and how doing this brings many to a life better and richer life than “worldly” practice made possible. Because she “Christianized” everything she had to do with, she was adopted as a patron by all sorts of craft groups. Patronage was a way of relating to others vastly important in Roman culture. One had more prestige in proportion as one had more “clients”—i.e., persons dependent on one's patronage. This was Christianized by making holy people patrons of others; after all they had the ear of God, the ultimate power and source of good.

The ways Agatha was asked to be a patron is made clear by the legends about the tortures she underwent due to refusing to do things the “Roman way”. The Consul she spurned was said to have had her breasts cut off and presented to him on a platter. Since they looked like buns she became the patron of bakers and her feast day was the occasion of a special blessing of bread in the form of buns. Since she was said to have been rolled over live coals she was patron of all those fleeing volcanic eruptions and lava flows. Her veil was carried on a staff to any lava flow from Mount Etna to divert it away from towns and buildings.

Religious life was interpreted anciently as a denial of worldly standards and as a way of replacing them by new standards derived from Christ's teaching about love of God and of one another. In this sense St. Agatha serves as a patron for those entering any form of life consecrated to God and Christ. She challenges all to find ways to transform the practices of their culture and society. She poses a question: What would your actual life be like if you did everything for Christ? The answers we give to this question show us the path to God and to holiness.

Loving God First and Above All Else

A reflection by one of the Japanese martyrs celebrated today

A short time after the then ruler of Japan had outlawed the Christian religion it was decided to create a spectacle and warning against becoming Christian by means of the execution of some who refused to apostacize. A group of twenty persons was arrested—three Jesuits, six Franciscans, and eleven Japanese laymen—and they were led on a kind of parade through the cities of western Japan, ending in Nagasaki where they were executed by the Japanese version of crucifixion. That means they were tied up (not nailed) on crosses and killed by a lance thrust to each one's heart. In the course of the "parade" four more laymen were added, so a total of twenty-four were martyred in Nagasaki.

Since the entire process lasted many weeks, a number of those martyred had opportunities to write to the groups from which they came, urging them to be loyal to God and Christ no matter what should happen. What follows is part of one such letter.

"The sentence pronounced against us was written on a sign carried in front of us. The sign said that we were condemned to death because we preached the law of Nauan (Christ) and disobeyed the emperor's prime minister. We were happy and consoled in the Lord because we had given up our lives to preach his law. When they conducted us through the streets of Miyako we were placed on carts and each had a part of one ear cut off before being displayed. The next day we were marched to Osaka and there we were mounted on horses for the parade through the city. In each city a public proclamation was made by a town crier during the parade. Only in Osaka were we informed we would be executed when we came to Nagasaki.

"For the love of God let your charity commend us to God. May the sacrifice of our lives be acceptable in God's sight. We expect to be executed this coming Friday and we ask you to pray for us with great fervor at that time. Help us with your prayers that our deaths may be acceptable to the majesty of God in heaven, where—God willing—we hope to go. We will remember you. We have not forgotten your love. I have loved and still love you and God with all my heart. I wish you the peace and love of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Till we meet again in Heaven. Remember us."

The campaign against Christianity was conducted under the banner of keeping Japanese culture pure of foreign influences. Christianity was seen also as a door through which foreigners might try to conquer Japan. Where it was known there were many Christians the population was assembled and all required to trample on a crucifix or be killed. Yet Christian communities endured and grew in secret and only contacted other Christians after Japan was opened to the West in the 1800s. They contacted the chaplains that trade representatives brought with them. These communities were the seeds from which the present Japanese church grew. The Lord shows us that he never deserts those who trust in Him.