

How do each of us react when someone offers us uninvited criticism? I suspect our usual initial response is defensive even if the criticism has some, or more than some truth to it, accompanied with a challenge to re-evaluate our attitudes and/or lifestyle. Change/conversion/ metanoia (to use biblical language) is never an easy task.

Again this weekend our Scriptures confront us with some harsh words in the reading from the prophet Isaiah and from Jesus in the Gospel. It helps if we understand the context of both readings. Isaiah is speaking to his contemporaries who have abandoned, or severely watered down, the following of God’s covenant relationship established between Israel and God through Moses on Mt. Sinai. Comparing Israel to a vineyard, instead of a well-tended and fruitful one, through their lack of attention and care as stewards of God’s gift, the vineyard yields not good, choice, juicy grapes, but has become overgrown with brambles and untended vines which produce sour wild grapes. In the Gospel, Jesus following his triumphant entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday now encounters the events of his death on the cross casting their imminent shadow across his life as he preaches in the Temple precincts and confronts head on the leading Pharisees and Elders, the religious hierarchy, over their stewardship of leadership of guiding God’s people in covenant living. Jesus pulls no punches in his parable. The hierarchy clearly see his words aimed at them as they plot how to get rid of this troublesome preacher from Galilee.

The temptation for us who listen to Isaiah and Jesus can be to relegate their message to the millenniums ago when they were originally uttered and perhaps smugly muse: “They should have known better.” However, while the words of the Scriptures were originally given in a particular time and place, to particular people, being the Word of God, whenever they are proclaimed, especially here at Mass, they are the God’s word addressed to us who hear them now. Isaiah and Jesus are speaking to each of us today. Each of us must give a response to God’s word addressed to us today.

Like the Pharisees and Elders we, too, have a difficult time admitting our wrongdoing and embracing change/conversion/metanoia. As Isaiah and Jesus note, what is at stake is our very lives—fullness of Life in “the Kingdom of God.” So the question for us is—how open is each of us to the prophetic word that comes from God? Are we, too, tempted to kill

the messenger? Have we, too, constructed a faith and religious observance that is safe, comfortable, predictable, measurable, “Well, I’ve never murdered anyone, and I go to Mass on Sunday,” but when it comes to issues our personal, partisan political allegiance, or social circle finds objectionable finds us saying: “Well, while that may be in Scripture, Jesus really didn’t mean it that way, and when it comes to the Church, well, I form my own conscience, the Church isn’t going to tell me what to think or believe.” For example: when it comes to racism, which Church teaching like abortion states is intrinsically evil, always and everywhere mortally sinful, where do I stand? What reaction did I have to the events in Charlottesville and the response given it do I have? What response do I give to Pope Francis’ call to protection of the natural environment in his encyclical on our responsibility as stewards of creation two years ago? A few weeks ago I spoke of the call to build bridges of understanding between the LGBT community and the Church. Through what eyes do I look at and respond to an LGBTQ person? And then there are the traditional life issues I mentioned in last Sunday’s homily. Ultimately, what kind of fruit am I bearing as a steward of the life of God entrusted to me through baptism, confirmation and the on-going life of Jesus I experience in my reception of Holy Communion here at Mass?

St. Paul in today’s epistle gives us good advice today as he urges us: pursue “whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, gracious”. The question becomes, will I choose to hear? Will I choose to change? Do I live for the world or for the Kingdom of God? What price am I willing to pay for each?

On December 11, 1845 James R. Lowell penned these words which sum up today’s call to us:

***“Once to every man and nation, comes the moment to decide, In the strife of truth with falsehood, for the good or evil side; Some great cause, some great decision, offering each the bloom or blight, And the choice goes by forever, ‘twixt that darkness and that light.’***

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