

Friday (Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

By our enemies, Jesus means those who are quite intractable and utterly unresponsive to our love, who forgive us nothing when we forgive them all, who requite our love with hatred and our service with derision. Love asks nothing in return but seeks those who need it. And who needs our love more than those who are consumed with hatred and are utterly devoid of love?

Scripture (Psalm 35:11-15)

False witnesses come forward against me asking me questions I cannot answer, they cross-examine me, repay my kindness with cruelty, make my life barren. But I, when they were ill, had worn sackcloth, and mortified myself with fasting, praying ever anew in my heart, as if for a friend or brother; I had wandered restless, as if mourning a mother, so bowed had I been in sorrow. When I stumble they gather in glee, gather around me; strangers I never even knew tear me apart incessantly.

4th Week of Ordinary Time

Willing to hear what I want to hear

One of the problems God has is that he can't stop loving, even when his people abandon him. He can neither abandon them nor can he pretend their waywardness doesn't matter. To force them to change would not be loving, (and would remove free will), so he must somehow work to get them to change, which is where prophets come in.

The call of Jeremiah, (Jer. 1:1-19) is a clear example of what this calling involves – and I can't help thinking 'rather you than me'. He learns that from his time in the womb, God has set him apart to speak to the people. Although Jeremiah protests that he doesn't know how to speak ('I'm only a child'), God tells him not to worry as he will tell him where to go and will give him the words to speak.

What he says next gives Jeremiah plenty to worry about. God promises to make him a 'fortified city...a wall of bronze', so that he needn't be afraid in their presence. Clearly, his message won't be welcome and will provoke a hostile reaction against him: 'They will fight against you, but will not overcome you'.

Perhaps this is understandable. People neither want to have their faults pointed out to them, nor to be told that they have to give up what they perceive as 'the good life' and see no need to change, (the rich and powerful having come so far away from God, he is no longer a threat, nor can they see his way offers as much as they have now.)

Here, of course, I'm settling into my rather complacent 'tut tutting' because Jeremiah was a prophet when God's people were clearly a bad lot. The violent rejection of Jesus in Nazareth is more troubling, (Luke 4:21-30). Clearly, it is not what Jesus says that is the problem: they are amazed at his 'gracious words', or 'words of salvation'. But the atmosphere changes when they voice what appears to be a reasonable question - one which I'm sure I would have been asking: 'Hold on! I know you - you're the carpenter's son. Where do you get all this wisdom from? Who are you to tell us about salvation?'

It has to be said that Jesus doesn't help the atmosphere: rather than explaining, he accuses them of rejecting God just as their ancestors have always done.

Perhaps they have a right to feel affronted and angry at being tarred with the same brush as those who clearly rejected God. After all, Jesus is speaking to them in the synagogue, not some 'den of iniquity'; surely they can assure themselves - and anyone who cares to check their credentials - that they are God fearing, Law abiding people?

When Jesus says - confidently – that they will want him to perform the miracles they have heard about, he is accusing them of wanting to hear God say and do things for them. This will be partly to make their lives more secure or comfortable, but it would also be, in their mind, a sign that God is pleased with them. As noted with Jeremiah, God never sends prophets to pat people on the back and say 'Just keep doing what you're doing'; the role of prophets is always to speak to people who need to change. In this case, it isn't changing from 'bad', but changing to be ready to live in the Kingdom of God that Jesus brings. Their problem is not the message but the messenger: He is too ordinary. They expect a much grander Messiah, and when God comes among them in a different way, they are not are not open to him. This now raises an uncomfortable question: are my expectations of how God will speak in this ordinary week so fixed that I will miss him, or even reject him, if he speaks in a surprising way, through 'the wrong people?'

Martin Bennett

Monday (Henri Nouwen)

There is something in us humans that prevents us from letting God offer us a completely new beginning. While God wants to restore me to the full dignity of sonship, I keep insisting that I will settle for being a hired servant. Do I really want to break away from my deep-rooted rebellion against God and surrender myself so absolutely to God's love that a new person can emerge? As a hired servant, I can still keep my distance, still revolt, reject, strike, run away, or complain about my pay. As the beloved son, I have to claim my full dignity and begin preparing myself to become the father.

Scripture (Luke 4:22-24,28-30)

And he won the approval of all, and they were astonished by the gracious words that came from his lips. They said 'This is Joseph's son, surely? But he replied "No doubt you will quote me the saying, 'Physician, heal yourself,' and tell me 'We have heard all that happened in Capernaum, do the same here in your own country'." And he went on "In truth I tell you, no prophet is ever accepted in his own country." When they heard this, everyone in the synagogue was enraged. They sprang to their feet and hustled him out of town; and they took him to the brow of the hill, intending to throw him off the cliff, but he passed straight through the crowd and walked away.

Tuesday (C.S.Lewis)

He and you are two things of such a kind that if you really get into any kind of touch with him you will, in fact, be humble—delightedly humble, feeling the infinite relief of having for once got rid of all the silly nonsense about your own dignity which has made you restless and unhappy all your life. He is trying to make you humble in order to make this moment possible: trying to take off a lot of silly, ugly fancy dress in which we have all got ourselves up and are strutting about. I wish I had got a bit further with humility myself, getting rid of the false self with all its posing and posturing.

Scripture (John 3:17-21)

For God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but so that through him the world might be saved. No one who believes in him will be judged; but whoever does not believe is judged already, because that person does not believe in the Name of God's only Son. And the judgement is this: though the light has come into the world, people have preferred darkness to the light because their deeds were evil. And indeed, everybody who does wrong hates the light and avoids it, to prevent his actions from being shown up; but whoever does the truth comes out into the light, so that what he is doing may plainly appear as done in God.

Wednesday (Thomas Merton)

Although God lives in the soul of those who are unconscious of him, how can I say that I have found him if I never take any interest in him or desire his presence in my soul? What good does it do to say a few formal prayers to him and then turn away and give all my will to created things, desiring only ends that fall short of him? If my love does not reach out towards him but scatters himself in his creation, it is because I have reduced his life in me to the level of formality, forbidding it to move me with a truly vital influence.

Scripture (Jeremiah 1:5,17-19)

The Lord came to me saying ' Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you came to birth I consecrated you; I appointed you as prophet to the nations. Prepare yourself for action. Stand up and tell them all I command you. Have no fear of them and in their presence I will make you look fearless. For look, today I have made you into a fortified city, a pillar of iron, a wall of bronze to stand against the whole country: the kings of Judah, its princes, its priests and the people of the country. They will fight against you but will not overcome you, for I am with you, the Lord declares, to rescue you.

Thursday (A New Catechism)

Each person has deep down within them, prior to their personal acts and colouring all of them, an unwillingness to respond to God, a refusal in the face of real love. This does not mean that we will do evil all the time. But we cannot fail to recognise, as we look towards Jesus' cross, that our life is not a life of love. Where God shows his love and his heart, we feel that we fall short, and indeed are unwilling and rebellious. We resist. We refuse God's intimacy. We use our freedom to set ourselves against the divine life, the joy and love, to which we are called.

Scripture (Hebrews 3:12-14)

Take care that none of you ever has a wicked heart, so unbelieving as to turn away from the living God. Every day, as long as this today lasts, keep encouraging one another so that none of you is hardened by the lure of sin, because we have been granted a share with Christ only if we keep the grasp of our first confidence firm to the end.