

11.12.2016  
By Janet Foggie

## Introduction

At Christmas time a lot of people 'notice' Christians and Christianity for a while for whom that isn't a usual part of their week. This may lead to over sentimentalising religion, or to a criticism of 'religious people'. Jesus questions the people's expectations of John, and we too need to query our own expectations.

The conflict this is week is between the pious, the holy, the prophet trying to live a better life, and those they hope to inspire yet often alienate. The challenge of this week is not to obsess about the people who find us difficult but rather to think of the places where we ourselves are challenged.

---

## Text

Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

---

## Comment

One of the most interesting features of this passage is that the supposedly unshakable John the Baptist is sending his disciples to query whether Jesus is 'the one' or whether they are to wait for 'another'. It isn't often we get to see the insecurities of a prophet. Last week in the desert, proud and vocal, John had seemingly unmovable faith in Jesus as the messiah. This week, in prison and alone, he isn't so sure. Jesus reassures his imprisoned friend. He talks of the things God

does to bring in his kingdom, the blind are healed, the lame walk, the poor receive good news... Jesus does not refer to himself, his preaching or his authority, but instead reassures John through his disciples by listing the effects of the kingdom, a ministry of praxis, or practical activity.

Last week we compared John the Baptist to Greta Thunberg, and thought about her prophetic voice in a world of climate crisis. We thought about the need to hear her words not just as a rousing speech but as a call to personal action. Jesus adds to his reassurance to John the sentence, 'And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.'

Clearly, the analogy still holds that people took offense at, John, and indeed had imprisoned him, people took offense at Jesus and his ministry of healing, and his focus on the poor. In the same way a great many people, from celebrities, to world leaders, to ordinary folks, have taken offense at the words of Greta Thunberg. Many of the insults hurled at her are too offensive to repeat here.

Taking offense is all too easy an escape from mending our behaviour and while Christmas is often a time of giving to foodbanks, homeless charities and charities abroad, it is also a time when we spend money with very different priorities from our normal weekly shop.

We need to consider, this advent, the shocking level of single use expenditure which we simply excuse for ourselves. Whether it is crackers, or plastic decorations, or extra lights. We buy novelty toys and novelty socks, Christmas themed jumpers, headbands, earrings... The list can go on. Christmas tree growers are one of the largest users of the weed-killer glyphosate because they want to keep weeds down among the growing trees. A plastic Christmas tree if re-used many times, might be a more environmentally friendly option, or a tree which was organically grown.

It is very hard to revert this trend and buy a few gifts that will last longer. From the chocolate covered plastic egg to the mini-block character we add and add to the piles of things that our children receive.

And then, of course, we have that natural reaction to take offense at those prophets, those annoying 'holier than thou' people who preach on about such things, or give lentils and jute as gifts. And here is the nub of the issue the offense taken also includes unacknowledged guilt. If we can't face the guilt, we cannot accept our part in the climate crisis, and we cannot unlock our habits and make ourselves open to change.

Yet Jesus said, 'blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.' This lays down a strong challenge, to accept the guilt of only being able to do so much, and the simultaneous challenge to do more. This is the clarion call this Advent.

---

## Response

What can you do personally to have a more environmentally friendly Christmas? Can you take public transport when visiting family? Can you source an organic Christmas tree or reuse an old one? Can you have a 'shop-free' advent?

OR

Think about those pious people who annoy you? People who seem even just by being themselves to threaten or question your lifestyle or habits? What is it about their lifestyle or views you find challenging? Are they different from you in diet, or political beliefs or religion?  
Can you get together with someone who is really different in views or background and have a good conversation about that difference?

---

## Prayer

Offensive God,  
We bring before you the offense we take.  
The times we find others to be too holy, too pious, too politically correct.  
The times we find others too traditional, too inflexible, too set in their ways.  
When our sin is to judge others:  
as unacceptable, un stomachable, preachy or hypocritical.  
Forgive us our judgemental days.  
Forgive us for taking offense.  
Forgive us for harsh words or cruel jokes.  
Enable us to see the good in the good efforts of others.  
Widen our eyes to a better world.  
Help us find the courage to speak our own views with reason.  
And when we need to, to change our views for the better  
do not let our naturally offended excuses put us off.

AMEN