



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Shooting the Messenger."**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Isaiah 43:16-21
Second Reading Philippians 3:8-14
Gospel Luke 20:9-19

In today's Gospel, we once hear Jesus speaking to us about being stuck in our ways. Did I say "*our*"? Yes, I did. The traditional interpretation of this parable is as follows: after Creation, God leaves His people, the Jews, in charge of the Kingdom of God on earth. To keep them on the straight and narrow, He sends them the prophets. But convinced that there will be no final reckoning based on their failures and poor stewardship, the messengers are mistreated and killed. Finally, the owner's son, who is obviously Christ himself, is sent as the final and most authentic representative of God, the Owner. But he too is killed and, as we are told, the owner exacts revenge by killing the tenants and turning the field over to new clients.

Biblical interpreters often suggest that this story really belongs to the period after Christ's presence on earth and that it refers to the total destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD, the "9/11" event of its day. In that case, the story is an explanation of why the Christians are the new Chosen People who will prove more faithful than the Jews to the expectations of God. But that's a bit too slick, really, and it lets us off the hook.

The fact of the matter is that this parable is being told about us, too. The explanation would run like this:

We, you and I here today, have been given our lives, our families, our careers, our souls and bodies, to keep and maintain. We are most often not doing a particularly good job at it. God sends us messengers to remind us of that fact: these messengers come in various shapes and sizes: the Bible, the Church, parents, friends, our health, our finances, current events in the world...all kinds of things, really, some subtle and some very blatant, but saying the same thing: "please look at what you are doing to yourselves and make choices, healthy choices, in order to stay connected to Me."

We have gotten so comfortable with imagining that God is not around- that He just might be a figment of ancient imagination or the personification of societal teachings and human longing, that in most things we feel justified in ignoring the messengers that God sends. They offend us, threaten us, and make us feel uncomfortable. That's not a good thing for 21st century to have to be. So we find excuses to become cynical, dismissive- and proud of it! We revel in our independence, our modernity, and our progress away from the dysfunctional ways of the past. We turn defensively on those who remind us of our faith commitments, our Christian morality; we "shoot the messenger," as they say. And so we wind up very much like the tenants in that field today: we'd rather imagine that *we're* the owners of our lives now, and that what we do with our bodies and our minds is nobody's business but our own. God takes that statement very seriously, believe it or not. And so, when disaster hits, we have no-one and nothing to blame but ourselves...just like those guys in the field, just like the people of Jerusalem, just like (dare I say it) all of those responsible for man-made disasters and tragedies that could have been avoided if human pride hadn't gotten in the way.

Doesn't God care? Of course He does!

There is an episode in the life of St. Innocent, the Russian missionary to the Aleuts in Alaska in the 19th century. The saint is asked a question by his deacon: "Father, if God is infinitely merciful, how can he deprive anyone of his heavenly kingdom?"

"I'll ask you a question," the saint replied, "Why do you keep twisting your head from side to side? Why don't you sit still?"

The deacon replied, "Because the sun keeps hitting me right in the eye and just won't leave me in peace."

"There. You've answered your own question, " the bishop laughed. "God doesn't deprive from his heavenly kingdom sinners who don't repent. They themselves simply can't bear its light- any more than you can bear the light of the sun."

C.S. Lewis, the great Anglican writer, is even more pointed in his work *The Great Divorce*. In it, those who are described as being in hell are there because they want to be. They are given any number of choices and options and are even shown what life in heaven is like, but they are determined to stay where they are and to rationalize their choice.

One of Lewis' characters explains: "There is always something they insist on keeping, even at the price of misery. There is always is always something they prefer to joy.... You see it easily enough in a spoiled child that would sooner miss its play and its supper than say it was sorry and be friends. You call it the Sulks. But in adult life is has a hundred fine names-...Revenge and Injured Merit and Self-Respect and Tragic Greatness and Proper Pride." Lewis always seems to know how to get us where we really live, and in this case, how we really *die*.

We are now entering the last leg of our Lenten journey. The cross looms ever larger in the hymns and the prayers of the church. We are confronted by the symbol as a terrible irony on God's part: an insult to our sense of the way things ought to be. Surely we can attain to salvation without such a terrible and messy death. Other religions do it, and don't make the same demands as Christ does. Can't we take the easy way out? Haven't we done enough already?

I pray today for us all. Not just you there, or the choir over there, or the numberless masses of Christians out there, but for all of us together: we who are altogether too much alike. We all are hoping that we won't have prophets or messengers sent to us

whom we will be tempted to reject. That's because we know, deep inside, that we already have seen and heard them and we have chosen to go our way and blithely hope that when things get really serious, we'll then get all religious and say and do what will get us saved. But there's a nagging problem with that faulty thinking, and that is the realization that we never know how much time we have to make those right choices, or how many chances we'll be given before God's justice kicks in and we get what our behavior and attitudes have demanded all along.

God help us from the complacency that allows us to do what we know is wrong, is cowardly, is cruel. God help us this end of Lent to finally see the Cross for what it is: the final accusation of the bankruptcy of our lives and the only workable solution to save us from ourselves.

So what is the Good News in all of this? What is spark of hope that we can take from our celebrations here today? The answer is that the acceptance of the joy that God offers is so easy a thing that it's hard to believe it's true: just reaching out the hand that is reaching out to us; realizing that Christ's way of denying the claims of the world and the illusions it presents and the false rewards it offers is by far the best way. It is the one that has worked for Christians for 2,000 years, and it is still the ultimate truth.