

Have you received Christ?

Sermon 24 June 2011; Second Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 10:40-42;

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Introduction

Many people become very nervous when they hear talk about 'receiving Jesus' or language of this sort. Why?

Maybe because the Christian faith comes very close to us personally when we are invited to 'receive Jesus'. Or maybe because we do not like such an individualized religion? Or have we had bad experiences with rather insistent evangelists?

Whether we like the 'receiving-Jesus-language' or not, truth is that Jesus himself was the first one to use it... He spoke of 'receiving me' in the Gospel-reading of this morning.

Receiving Jesus in his apostles

Jesus said to his disciples, his students: 'Whoever receives you receives me...'

These words that Matthew quoted are actually the closing words of a long speech of Jesus in which he commissioned his disciples to go out into the world and preach the Gospel. In this speech, Jesus explained that their ministry as apostles would be rough at times; He predicted persecutions, sometimes even by family and former friends.

But there is also a sunnier side to being a follower of Jesus Christ. Following Christ, doing what He asks, means risking this present life to gain eternal life. And Jesus encourages his disciples that there will also be people who positively receive them, and those people will be greatly blessed for receiving them as apostles.

The word *receive* means to receive *purposely*. In the context of receiving a person, it means to warmly welcome, yes to embrace that person and all that he or she stands for. It is fully accepting someone for who that person is.

'Apostles', Jesus says, 'expect problems, but know as well, that many people will receive you warmly, because you represent me.' These amazing words speak of the high, very high role of the apostles in the church of Christ.

The first apostles of Jesus Christ fully represented Him and His words. They mediated the life and words of Jesus Christ to the community of the Church.

In those days the proper word for the apostolic function of the disciples, in the Aramaic language

that Jesus used, was *seliah*. The Greek word to translate this Aramaic term, was apostle.

A *seliah* was someone who was sent as a formal delegate. As a representative. In Israel in the time of Jesus, you could hire such a *seliah* to represent you legally.

Jewish Rabbinic scriptures say: "The representation of a person is like the person himself." (B'rakhoth, "Benedictions" 5:5)

Anything people would do, or say, to that person, the *seliah*, was considered as done or said to you. Such a person, such an apostle, acted fully on your behalf.

Ambassadors in our modern day play a similar role, representing their country. The manner in which the ambassador is treated, is seen by his or her nation as the manner in which the whole nation is treated. Treating an ambassador badly can therefore be a cause for war.

If receiving the ambassadors of Jesus, his apostles, actually meant receiving Jesus himself, then how can we, today, do this – long after those apostles have died? This is important, as receiving the apostles means receiving Jesus.

Our own Egyptian church father Origen, who lived from about 185 to 254 AD, was a respected teacher in the School of Alexandria. He explained the words of Matthew. He wrote that receiving the apostles for us today, practically, means to properly interpret their writings, the New Testament:

One who has properly extracted the meaning of the apostle's writing, and has not misunderstood it, is receiving the apostle as well as Christ who speaks and dwells in the apostle and is the source of the apostle's teaching.

Receiving the apostles today means to receive the words of the apostles as recorded in the gospels and the letters they wrote, and as handed over to us throughout the generations by the leaders of the Church who faithfully gave that word to each new generation.

For us today, it is therefore incredibly important to receive the apostles – through their writings - because in as far as we receive those words, and welcome those words as truth, and live by those words, we welcome Jesus and God himself.

If we do not receive the apostles and their words, we reject Jesus Christ, and God. This is a terrifying thought, coming from Jesus himself.

This must lead us continually to be very careful to both know the words of the apostles, and to receive them with our whole heart and life – if Jesus and God matter to us.

Receiving Jesus in Church

It is important to underline that Jesus did not speak these words with the idea in mind that people could *read* the words of his apostles *in a printed Bible*.

Church members in those days did not have the Bible at home. Most people could not even afford scrolls of parts of what we now call the Bible. That was too expensive.

The hearing of the words of the apostles was a community affair – their writings were read out loud when the community gathered.

The idea to sit in our Lazy Boy Chair at home to individually read the Bible was unknown. So ‘receiving Jesus’ could not be an individual matter. It was personal, yes, but never individual.

This communal aspect is also underlined by Jesus when he speaks of welcoming a prophet, and of receiving a righteous person, and of giving a cup of cold water to ‘one of these little ones’.

Let me try to rephrase the words of Jesus a little bit. He says: ‘If you purposely receive and warmly welcome any apostle, or any prophet, or any good person, or even any little Christian, you actually receive Jesus Christ, and God himself, and you will be rewarded for that.’

Yes, the church knows a hierarchy, but for God, it makes no difference whether you honor your bishop or whether you help the least important Christian you can imagine. In both cases it is as if you receive Christ, and God himself.

God is received and honored by how we treat one another.

Does this not draw the concept of ‘receiving Christ’ away from a one-sided focus on my individual choice, and make it much more a matter of living in community with the people of Jesus?

This does not deny the need for a personal choice to follow him – but it places this choice in the context of the whole people of God and how we live in this community.

Jesus is not preaching some vague form of religious humanism. He is not speaking of just any charitable act. It is not so that just being nice to anyone is equated with receiving Christ.

Jesus speaks of receiving people who are known to be his followers. And of receiving these Christians in their capacity as followers of Jesus, *because* they follow Him.

And Jesus had also just spoken to his disciples about the persecutions they would face.

People who show kindness to those persecuted followers of Jesus clearly risk their own lives. The kindness they show is costly. Yes, it may only be a glass of water, but giving that glass means that you show your true colors.

It is as if you say: I belong to those people.

So what we have read is not making a donation to just any good cause over the internet. It is about siding with persecuted Christians and thereby taking a personal risk.

Those who receive apostles, bishops, righteous people, these small one’s, they are obviously part of the same community. The words of Jesus are about how Christians support other Christians when the going is tough.

Mutual sharing of our lives

The example of giving a glass of water to someone in need, is beautiful.

St Hilary, bishop of Poitiers in France – he lived from the year 300 to 368 AD, stresses that it is not for nothing that Jesus speaks of giving this glass of cold water to someone. ‘Jesus teaches that no deed of good conscience is useless’, according to Hilary.

So even the poorest in church have no excuse. They can give a cup of water to someone else, and thus fulfill God’s desire, namely that as Christians we show our welcome to one another in the name of Christ.

Anyone in church can show this form of love, no one in church is not in a position to be a blessing to others in one way or another. And anyone here in this congregation can mean something for someone.

You are even a meaningful child of God if you are not able to give any help to anyone else because you are in need of support.

Here is another amazing thought. If you feel utterly unimportant, maybe even a failure as a Christian, if you think that you could just as well not participate in Church life, Jesus is here underlining your value.

Each of us, if we desire to follow Him, is representing Him. You are incredibly important in the eyes of God, so important that He, the God in heaven, feels that He is loved and accepted, if other people show love for you in your need.

So how can you give Christ to the community? Maybe simply by being your faithful self, and sharing your personal needs with someone else in church.

This enables someone else in church to be a blessing to you. In doing so, both are a blessing to each other – and both represent Jesus Christ to the other.

The church is a unique community of people, who receive each other as representatives of Christ, and in doing so, we actually receive and welcome Christ, and God. This is an amazing concept. By participating in the life of the Church, we have access to the heart of God.

Each Christian is linked to God through other Christians if we receive, and welcome, love, honor each other as representatives of God. So Matthew actually describes here very dynamic community in these few verses.

The church is a community of continuous giving and receiving.

The apostles, bishops, prophets, they give to us from the treasures of Jesus Christ and God, and we receive and welcome them.

But the poorest, simplest Christian in church also gives to the community from the treasures of Jesus, in as far as they live a Christian life, and allow others to serve them.

We are all called to do these two things: on the one hand, to represent Christ to the other, and on the other hand, to receive the other as Christ's ambassador.

By doing this, we both give of Christ and we receive of Christ. We bless others and we are blessed by others.

All of us, apostles, bishops, prophets, righteous people, little ones, priests, deacons, lay readers, people in the pews, all of us, are called to be Christ to each other, and in as far as we do so, we can also expect others to receive and welcome us.

This is the life of Christ; this is the life of the Church.

The quality of our life as a church can only increase if we are purposeful in being a blessing to one another.

We are all accountable to one another for presenting Christ to one another, in our language, in our life, in our words and in our deeds.

And we are all entitled, even called by God, to hold one other accountable to live this life of giving and receiving.

Conclusion

Let me finish with a quote from Pope Benedict XVI of Rome; he has some beautiful things to say about this community where people mutually bless and receive one another:

Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, his own. Communion draws me out of myself toward him, and, thus toward unity with all Christians. We become 'one body', completely joined in a single existence. Love of God and love of neighbor are now truly united.

To those words of the pope I can only say:

AMEN