

We sometimes hear the criticism that the Bible contradicts itself. But we know that scripture, the inspired word of God, cannot be in error. So the only possible explanation when we encounter an apparent contradiction or inconsistency, is that it is our own understanding that is at fault. After nearly two thousand years, we still study the Bible in the light of divine revelation to understand its deeper meaning.

The word “apostle,” means “one who is sent.” Today Our Lord sends His apostles out into the world, to proclaim the Gospel, the good news of our salvation, to every creature. Those who believe and are baptized will be saved. Jesus does this as an act of love.

Time and again we are told that the coming of Jesus, His life, death, and resurrection, is born out of God's love for humanity. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life.”

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

But Christ also tells His followers that they do not belong to the world because they have been consecrated or set apart. He tells His disciples that the world hates them as it hated Him. Study after study continues to show that Christians are the most persecuted group in the world.

So is the world an enemy to be defended against or is it a victim that needs to be saved? Like so much of Catholic thought, it is both.

Forty years ago, this past week, Mehmet Ali Acga attempted to assassinate Pope John Paul II. On May 13, 1981 Mehmet waited in St. Peter's Square for the pope to arrive. He had with him an accomplice. The plan was that after shooting His Holiness they would set off a small explosive and escape to the Turkish embassy in the ensuing panic.

When the pope passed by, Acga stood and fired several shots, wounding John Paul. Acga was immediately grabbed by spectators, including one nun, as well as Vatican

security which prevented further harm to the pope. The accomplice panicked and fled the scene, never firing his shots or setting off the explosive.

The pope survived this attempt on his life and Agca maintained that he was acting as an assassin, hired by a Turkish nationalist group. But independent investigations in both Italy and America revealed that the Soviet Union was behind the attempt.

A few months later, Agca was sentenced to life in prison for the attempted assassination. On hearing the news John Paul II asked the people to “pray for my brother, whom I have sincerely forgiven.” In 1983 the pope met privately with Agca in the prison where he was being held. In the years that followed John Paul kept in touch with Agca's family, meeting the assassin's mother as well as his brother.

After nearly twenty years in prison, the pope requested that Agca be pardoned. The Italian government complied and deported Agca back to Turkey where he was again imprisoned for the murder of a Turkish journalist.

He was finally released from prison in 2010. It is reported that he has since converted to Catholicism and spends his days taking care of abandoned and stray animals.

Of John Paul II, Agca says, “The Pope became like a brother to me. When he died [in 2005] I felt like my brother or my best friend had died.”

When it was revealed that the Soviet Secret Police orchestrated the attempted assassination, the pope chose to not publish the information. He realized that responding with love would be far more powerful than any action motivated by revenge. And he was proven right. In less than 10 years the Berlin wall was dismantled and communism had all but collapsed in John Paul's native Poland.

Is the world an enemy to be defended against or is it a victim that needs to be saved? It is both.

When we refer to the world we might mean the created universe which the Bible tells us was created “very good.”

Or by “world” we might mean the forces of human society that have been corrupted by sin. These forces want to turn us away from God. They tell us that remaining a friend of Jesus is too hard and too demanding.

In this sense the world is one of Christianity's traditional enemies. It is the Kingdom of the devil, opposed to the Kingdom of God. It is the city of fallen humanity at war with the city of redeemed humanity.

This is the premise of Saint Augustine's book “The City of God.” The city of fallen humanity is ruled by love for self to the point of rejecting God, but the city of redeemed humanity is ruled by love for God to the point of self-sacrifice. Those two loves, we might say the assassin and the saint, exist within the hearts of every person; an old parable describes them as two wolves battling for your soul, and the one that you feed is the one that will win.

We must remember that we can never be completely at home in this world, we can never be completely comfortable. We are pilgrims traveling through a dangerous world, picking up more pilgrims as we make our way to Heaven. We are soldiers going from battle to battle in defense of our king.

When we forget that simple truth, then we get into trouble.

We are made to love each other. We are made in the image and likeness of God, the Most Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Trinity is a communion of love. The love between the Father and Son is so great that it is another person, the Holy Spirit. Saint John tells us that God is love. What then, does that say about us who are made in His image?

It is one of our most persistent questions about life. Why am I here? Today, just before He ascends to the Father, Our Lord answers that question. We are here to bear witness to Christ, to His message, and to proclaim the power of His love throughout the world. This is the purpose of our lives.

Jesus did not tell His disciples to go and find themselves, He did not leave them to figure things out for themselves. He told them, as He tells us today, “Go and be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth.”

This is the mission we have been given. This is what we are supposed to do. And each of us will carry out this mission in different ways.

God calls some of us to bear witness to Him as priests, deacons and consecrated religious. He calls some to be missionaries, bearing witness to Him in the most forgotten corners of the world. Others are called to transform the culture, either as great leaders or humble workers. But all of us are called to bear witness by the sincerity, faithfulness, and love with which we live out our lives in our responsibilities and relationships with others.

If you feel restless, if you feel there is something more you should be doing with your life, you will continue to feel this way until you realize that the mission entrusted to us by God is the highest priority of our lives.

We were created to live in friendship with God, to be an expression of His love for fallen humanity. And to live in friendship with God means that we must share in His work. His work in this fallen world is “that repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached in His name to all nations.”

In his account of the Ascension, St. Luke tells us that Jesus raised His hands and blessed His disciples, and that they returned to Jerusalem with great joy. Their Lord had left them but they were filled with joy because Christ had revealed to them the purpose of

their lives. They had a mission, their lives had meaning.

So let us follow the command of Our Lord and go out into the world preaching the good news. It is prudent to take precautions against the hostile world, but we must also recall that our bitterest enemies are also victims of our fallen nature.

Think of John Paul II embracing his would-be assassin, think of all the Christians in the last two thousand years who have forgiven their persecutors and held out to them the hand of friendship. This is the love that wins converts and changes the world.

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” this is the way.