

First Sunday in Lent

Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil: “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to turn into loaves of bread”...The devil then took him and set him on the parapet of the Temple: “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down...” Next, taking him to a high mountain, the devil showed him all the kingdoms of the world...”I will give you all these, if you fall at my feet and worship me.” *Matthew 4, 1-11*

The readings selected for this first Sunday in Lent encapsulate the whole story of God’s saving love: From creation to humanity’s propensity to succumb to temptation, to God’s redeeming love expressed through the person and life of Jesus. The principal focus, however, is on the gospel where we read that Jesus, just like us, is a target for temptation.

Some of the world’s greatest writers and dramatists have given their attention to analyzing human behavior and the propensity in us all to do evil. Shakespeare attempted one such analysis in *Othello*, a play named after its principal character whose tragedy lay in the fact that he, a leader of great integrity, could be deluded into believing the lies of his seemingly upright lieutenant who set out to manipulate his emotions and, ultimately, destroy him. This real villain of the play is Iago, a man who is repeatedly described by other characters as “honest Iago.” Yet he is, in reality, full of treachery. In a long exchange with Othello in which he works on his general’s tragic flaw and incites him to jealousy and distrust of his wife, Desdemona, Iago cynically says:

I should be wise, for honesty’s a fool
And loses that it works for. *Othello*, Act 3, Sc 3, l 390-391

While he presents himself as Othello’s loyal and trusted friend, Iago is, in fact, seething with anger from having been overlooked for promotion. And so, he sets about pouring into Othello’s ear the “pestilence” of doubt, suspicion and jealousy. Buoyed by his immediate success, he descends into lying, theft and murder to drive home his gains. His scheming and deception lead to the climax of the play in which Othello, in a jealous rage, is driven to murder his own innocent wife. When Iago’s treachery is eventually revealed, he offers neither excuse nor explanation:

Demand me nothing; what you know, you know;
From this time forth, I never will speak word. *Othello*, Act 5, Sc 2, l 309-310

Clearly, he did what he did simply because he could.

There is probably a little bit of Iago in all of us. Who of us can say that we’ve not been hurt at being overlooked, or that we have not tried to even the score against those who have offended us or not resorted to gossip in order to make ourselves look a little better? The Iago in each of us appeals to our fears, our petty jealousies and our selfishness. He manipulates us to think and plot

in ways that hurt others for our own ends. The Iago in us helps us to temporarily shelve our principles and ethics so as to give ourselves the space to rationalize and justify to ourselves some course of action that we want to take.

Today's gospel tells us how Jesus, in preparation for his work in the world spent forty days in the desert. It tells us, too, how he was tempted to suspend his humanity and to take short-cuts which would earn him comfort and wealth and reputation. He was tempted to look after himself by turning stones into bread but he flatly refused. He was invited to accept personal popularity by putting on an extravagant dare-devil stunt, but he stoutly rejected that. He was asked to compromise his integrity and sell his soul for a storehouse of endless wealth and commodities. Instead, he chose to pursue a path of honesty and integrity that would earn him enemies and lead to consequences that only enemies could devise.

In Lent, we are invited to venture into our own wildernesses, to confront who we really are and to opt for what really matters if we, too, are to live with integrity. To do this, the Church has traditionally challenged us to take on a regimen of fasting as an aid to putting the focus of our living and our own genuineness.

I'm sure you will remember an incident later in Matthew's Gospel where some Pharisees complained to Jesus that some of his disciples ate without washing their hands. Jesus responded to them by saying: "It's not what goes into a person's mouth that makes him (her) unclean, but what comes out of his (her) mouth." (Matthew 15, 11) In that context and in the context of the Church's challenge to us all to fast during Lent, I suggest that we could all give our attention to fasting from what comes out of our mouths rather than concentrating on our intake of food and drink. And the list of the possibilities of what we can utter is almost endless: crudities, obscenities, double meanings, put-downs, criticism, sarcasm, destructive gossip, rumours and dismissive judgements. Fasting from things like these might well be more demanding than fasting from food and drink and might give us a broader and richer understanding of what it really means to fast during Lent.