

Homily for February 21st 2018
First Week of Lent

PBS Masterpiece Mystery: “The Case of the Dancing Men.” As the story opens, a young woman is gathering flowers in her garden. Suddenly, her face is transformed into terror by something she sees. She drops her basket of flowers and runs panic stricken toward her home. Once inside, she bolts the windows and doors, draws the drapes tight, and falls sobbing and trembling into a chair. Her alarmed husband and maid both rush to her aid. She is both unable and unwilling to tell them what has frightened her so. A long time passes before she is finally able to take her husband to the garden and show him the cause of her terror. Someone has painted small figures of dancing men on the wall of her garden. These dancing men are symbols of a troubled past that she has tried to forget. From this moment on, she walks about half dazed, with terror always lurking in her eyes. She could not leave her past behind.

David, King of Israel, had an experience that struck terror into his heart. It wasn't a painting on a wall that awakened the past for him. Rather it was a simple story told to him by the prophet Nathan. “There were two men in a certain town,” Nathan began, “one rich and the other poor.” The rich man had an immense herd of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one small lamb. The poor man raised the lamb as a pet. It grew up with his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

Now a traveler came to visit the rich man. The rich man was obligated to provide a meal for his visitor. However, instead taking one of his own sheep or cattle to sacrifice for the meal, he took the small lamb that belonged to the poor man, slaughtered it and had it prepared for his visitor.

When Nathan finished his story, David was filled with righteous indignation toward the rich man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die! He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.”

Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man! . . . You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own.” (2 Samuel 12: 1-9)

It's one of the most powerful scenes in all of literature. “You are the man!”

David had sinned. He knew it. The entire nation knew it. The prophet Nathan confronted him with it. Adulterer. Murderer. David had abused his power as the divinely appointed ruler of his nation. A man after God's own heart, but he had failed God and he had failed his nation. Ultimately he had failed himself. In the quiet of the night, the guilt and the shame weighed heavily upon him, and he began to pray.

We have his words in Psalm 51, “Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight . . .”

As you and I come to Mass we may not feel the weight of our sins like David did. That is not because we have not sinned. It's just that as a culture we have developed a highly effective ability to rationalize and justify our behavior. We don't even use the word sin anymore. We "make mistakes." We "mess up." We shrug our shoulders and declare, "Oh, well, nobody's perfect" as if somehow that is an acceptable excuse for our misdeeds. Something has happened to us as a people that has caused us to shrug off responsibility for doing wrong.

The story's told about a man who visited Niagara Falls. As part of his excursion he traveled down into "the cave of the winds." This is a place behind the falls where you can look out on the tumbling waters. The noise is deafening.

This man asked the guide how he stood such noise.

The guide replied. "I never hear it."

"What do you mean?" asked the visitor.

The guide said, "When I first started to work here I couldn't stand the noise, but now I am used to it and I never hear it."

We're like that with regard to much of the sinfulness of our culture. We've acclimated ourselves to it. Behaviors that used to bother us, we now accept.

David had sinned and he knew it. The guilt lay heavily upon him.

Lent is that time when we are invited to look at our lives so that we seriously examine our conscience and cultivate hearts that are truly contrite. The more readily we can name our sin, the greater our experience of God's presence in our lives.

May this Lent be for us all a time when we ask the Lord to show us our heart, take advantage of the beautiful sacrament of Confession as we pray:

Create in me a clean heart , O God, and put a new and steadfast spirit within me.