

Homily for March 3rd 2017

Jenny had been living alone since her husband died several years earlier. One afternoon, Father Albert had scheduled a visit to Jenny's home. Jenny still had a parrot that was her husband's pride and joy. Knowing that the parrot was prone to repeat the profanity it heard from her husband's retired Navy buddies, Jenny cautioned the parrot to be silent during the pastor's visit.

"I promise you, that if you start cursing and swearing when Father Albert is here, I will put you in the freezer until he leaves," warned Jenny.

"Okay, okay, I'll be quiet; I'll be good, I promise," pledged the parrot.

Father Albert did not even sit down before the parrot began spewing forth foul language.

With a loud sigh, Jenny grabbed the parrot and tossed it into the freezer beside the frozen turkey she was saving for Thanksgiving dinner.

Meanwhile, Father Albert stayed much longer than Jenny expected. When the pastor finally left, Jenny rushed to the freezer to free the parrot. When she grasped the parrot, Jenny asked, "Have you learned your lesson now?" The shivering parrot stuttered, "Y-y-yess. B-b-but I have j-j-just one q-q-question. What did that t-t-turkey say?"

There's a lesson here, somewhere, for us. It's not about the turkey, it's about the parrot. It's about hypocrisy; promising one thing and doing the opposite; it's about hypocrisy; putting on an outward appearance of goodness as if we were just as righteous on the inside. Like the parrot, we are all guilty.

This hypocritical attitude and behavior is not new for God's people. Isaiah addresses it in our Old Testament text. God accuses the people of being contentious and rebellious in their actions while putting on a good, religious front with their words.

The word hypocrisy comes from the Greek hypokrisis, which means "acting on the stage; pretense," or to play a part, to pretend."

In Isaiah 58 God challenges this hypocrisy. He is finding fault, you see, with the fasts of the quarrelsome; he is looking for the fasts of the kindhearted. He is finding fault with those who oppress others; he is looking for those who give relief. He is finding fault with those who stir up strife; he is looking for those who set free.

St Augustine said of this text:

In this way, in humility and charity, by fasting and giving, by restraining ourselves and forgiving, by paying out good deeds and not paying back bad ones, by turning away from evil and doing good, our prayer seeks peace and obtains it.

Picking up where Augustine leaves off, another early Father, St. Chrysostom encourages:

Do you see, dearly beloved, what true fasting really is? Let us perform this kind and not entertain the facile notion held by many that the essence of fasting lies in going without food till evening. This is not the end in view, but that we should demonstrate, along with abstinence from food, abstinence also from whatever is harmful, and should give close attention to spiritual duties. The person fasting ought to be reserved, peaceful, meek, humble, indifferent to the esteem of this world¹

It is good that we have this reading from Isaiah 58 at the beginning Lent. Isaiah wants us to be warned that merely ritualistic fasting is not enough. To be pleasing to God, fasting must be combined with charity and concern for the poor. When these practices are joined together, then God will hear and answer their prayers.

Let us guard our hearts, minds and bodies from a hypocritical Lent and take seriously what the Church prays in today's Collect:

Show gracious favour, O Lord, we pray, to the works of penance we have begun, that we may have strength to accomplish with sincerity the bodily observances we undertake.

Fasting undertaken with a rightly ordered heart will lead to sincerity. And what does it mean to be sincere? It means to be free from pretense or falsehood".

Such is the call of Isaiah today. May we observe a holy and sincere Lent.

¹ Elliott, M. W. (Ed.). (2007). Isaiah 40–66 (p. 211). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.