

Tough !

Lent II

St Augustine's

24 Feb 2013

By Fletcher Davis

Last Sunday Fr Nigel offered us a fresh slant on the temptations of Christ, concluding that we might consider not the familiar traditions of Lent – like giving up chocolate – but doing something far more challenging – like giving up our need to control, as Jesus did, putting our lives instead in God hands.

Ever wonder how the preacher selects the topic for a sermon? One of the ways I do it is to read the propers, the appointed lessons for the day, and let them slowly marinate with our current events, then invite Christ to guide my thoughts. Today's readings elicited two responses: first, my heart sank because it seemed they were tough, then my heart leapt because it seemed that they were, well, tough.

Images like the Christ the Good Shepherd appeal to us because they reveal a loving, compassionate Christ. We like to think of Jesus as a healer, a beloved storyteller, the prince of peace. Did you sense that warmth in today's lessons? I didn't. Did the tone strike you as odd or unusual? It struck me as rife with tough talk. And that gave me an idea.

When people warned Jesus that Herod Antipas wanted to kill him – he had already beheaded John the Baptist – Jesus said, “Go tell that fox for me, ‘Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.’” [Lk 13.32]

In the other gospels, Herod Antipas is portrayed as a weak and vacillating figure, an indecisive hand-wringer. But Luke portrays him as the Tony Soprano of Galilee: “We took care of John, now let's put out a contract on Jesus.” But Jesus doesn't blink. Instead, he says, “Go and tell that fox...” – in other words, “That bully is too petty for me to fear.”

Tough words. Not the kind, reassuring words we expect. We hear this lack of fear in today's other readings. In Genesis, God says, “Do not be *afraid*, Abram, I am your shield.” [15.1] The psalmist says, “The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom then shall I be *afraid*?” [27.1] Paul writing today's epistle from prison, not fearing his own death, advises his friends in Philippi, “Join in imitating *me*.” [3.17] What do you make of that stance? Is our image of Jesus large enough to embrace a tough Jesus? He never once let the bullies win.

Think of Lincoln in Steven Spielberg's remarkable new film on the the final four months of the president's life, and his heroic struggle to get the House of Representatives to pass a constitutional amendment to end slavery for all time, a battle filled with hate, lies – and bullies.

Yale political science professor Steven B Smith, notes, “Lincoln came to regard slavery as a unique moral evil, something beyond the limits of a consensual society. There are some things – like taxes – that are subject to deal-making, and others – human dignity for one – that are not. On slavery as an institution, Lincoln was prepared to negotiate; on slavery as a principle, he would not.” [NY Times Book Review, Feb 17, 2013, p 14]

Think of Nelson Mandela who endured 27 years as a political prisoner rather than accept apartheid. When he was finally released, his moral clarity catapulted him into the presidency of South Africa and the challenge of dismantling apartheid without violence. That in turn made him an international icon of courageous leadership and one of the most admired people in the world.

Or consider Aung Sang Suu Kyi, elected Prime Minister of Burma in 1990 only to spend 15 of the next 21 years confined in house arrest for outspoken beliefs that she refused to renounce. Recently liberated, she now serves as a member of Parliament and heroic symbol of intrepid defiance of racial and political exploitation.

Or think of Rosa Parks and her disquieting disobedience to segregation rules in the American South in 1955, when she refused to move to the back of the bus. Why should anyone agree to separate but unequal treatment? Or the Dalai Lama, exiled from Tibet, his homeland, who governed in exile with extraordinary persistence and good cheer. Both defied the bullies and their threats.

These women and men are contemporary symbols of courage in the face of moral wrong, people who refused – with the help of hard-won self-knowledge – to yield to structures of exploitation. In the language of today's gospel, they were not cowed by Herod Antipas.

Who is *your* Herod Antipas – the one against whom you are called to stand firm this Lent? You might want to make some time today to figure that out. Who are the bullies in your life? Who do you fear in your heart or your head? Who intimidates you – unconsciously or deliberately – at work or at play, or even among your family and friends?

Is my Herod someone I'm afraid of offending if I challenge her? Is he a comfortable way of thinking that I'm loathe to change? Is he something inside me that makes me want to lash out, or run away? Is he the conflict between what I ought to want and what I really want? I know the Holy Spirit will give me power to walk the talk with Christ, if I ask. Will I ask?

Four days after the pope announced his retirement at the end of this month, Bert Spier shared an article by E.J. Dionne, the Washington Post columnist. "Consider, first, what constitutes the [Roman Catholic] church's strongest claim on public respect and affection. It is not its earthly power, the imposing beauty of St. Peter's Basilica or even its determination to preserve its doctrine whole.

"Rather, the church impresses even its critics, and inspires its most loyal and most dissident members, because so many in its ranks walk the talk of the Gospel. Hundreds of thousands of nuns, priests, brothers and laypeople devote their lives to the poor, the marginalized, refugees, the disabled and the homeless, simply because Christ instructed them – us – to do so."

Dionne continues, "Matthew 25:40 contains what may be the most constructive words ever written, Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these my brethren, you did for me." [Washington Post, Feb 15, 2013]

Three years ago, as the sex abuse crisis in the Roman Church sharply escalated, Nicholas Kristof observed, "In my travels around the world, I encounter two Catholic Churches. One is the rigid all-male vatican hierarchy that seems out of touch....

"Yet there is another Catholic Church as well, one I admire intensely. This is the grass-roots Catholic Church that does far more good in the world than it ever gets credit for. This is the church that supports extraordinary aid organizations ... saving lives every day, and that operates superb schools that provide needy children an escalator out of poverty." [New York Times, April 17, 2010]

You stand up to your Herod Antipas when you knit a prayer shawl. You do it when you cross yourself and walk into a scary place like a hospital or a hospice to visit someone, when you take a stand against injustice, when you care for creation. You do it whenever you reach with a heart of love and a hand of help to anyone who is hungry or homeless.

You do it best when you act with other members of the body of Christ, the Church, fulfilling our baptismal vow to strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being.

Thank you. You're in pretty distinguished company. Standing up for what is right, especially when it is scary, expresses our unity in Christ. Your bold acts help forge us into the image of our Lord. They make us instruments of God's peace. So don't let that bully, that sin, that fear, have power over you.

How about making *that* your Lenten rule - or part of it? Allow Jesus to roll up his sleeves and go with you. Get tough! Tell that fox that you and your Lord cannot be intimidated. Eat the chocolate but challenge the bully!