

Lent (3c)

Once upon a time there was this preacher who felt so fed up with his job that he decided to try his hand at something else. He went for a job at the local zoo but the position had just gone. However, the local gorilla, the children's favourite, had just died. Not having an immediate replacement, the minister was asked if he would fill in, don a gorilla costume and do a stint at entertaining the children. He reluctantly agreed. At first he was just lying there eating a few bananas, walking back and forth and tumbling round the cage. After a while he got the hang of it and started doing new acts. He was getting more attention now than when he was in the pulpit. On one occasion, he jumped up on the trapeze bar and began to swing back and forth with great enthusiasm to the added laughter of the children. Suddenly, he slipped off the bar and went flying over the railing into the adjoining cage where a hungry looking tiger was crouched over him with a large paw on his chest. Forgetting that he was supposed to be a gorilla, he shouted at the top of his voice. "Help! Help! get me out of here". The tiger retorted, "keep quiet, you fool, I'm Father Murphy".

So whether we're dressed as a gorilla or a tiger, in dog collar or ordinary clothes, we're all in the same boat or in the same cage, when it comes to our need of God's forgiveness. It's so easy to look out onto the world and go on a tirade against those who apparently commit awful crimes and forget to take a long hard look at ourselves.

It is said that comparisons are odious. The temptation is to minimise, even justify our own sins when comparing them to those whose depravities often hit the headlines. The apostles seemed to have fallen into this trap when they suggested that the 18 people on whom the tower of Siloam fell must have been worse sinners than the rest of the people in Jerusalem. Jesus emphatically said that they weren't. When the Haitian earthquake happened, one pastor in America was suggesting

that because the indigenous people were into voodoo and witchcraft, they brought this disaster on themselves. Well, that way of thinking seems to be at variance with the Lord's own teaching today.

Yes, I have no doubt there are much worse people in the world than you and I. What we've got to do, however, is pray that they will receive the grace of God to change. Our prayers and fasting will help bring people back to God. Our Lady of Fatima said that fasting can avert wars. St Theresa prayed for a notorious death row criminal that he would turn to God before his execution. She didn't know him personally. As he ascended the scaffold he was seen to kiss the crucifix. That was all she needed to prove her prayers had been heard.

The parable of the barren fig tree brings out God's undying patience with all of us but it's a timely warning as well. He gives us umpteen opportunities to repent and sort ourselves out but we can harden our hearts and not turn to him for forgiveness. The longer we leave it the harder it gets.

On the day of judgement when the Lord looks for the fruits of repentance on my tree of life may he not be disappointed.