

Sermon on Good Guys and Bad Guys, March 20, 2022

Do you remember the old western movies? The early ones? You could always tell the Good Guy. He was the handsome, upright guy wearing a white hat, and often a nice pair of tan pants and shirt, looking like they'd been freshly washed and ironed. Someone like Gene Autry or Errol Flynn. The Bad Guy was the slimy looking character with a black hat and clothing, who slunk around looking evil. Remember those?

You know the plot line, with variations. Some poor rancher is trying to hold on to his acres and the Bad Guy is harassing him to sell because, unbeknownst to the rancher, he has discovered gold on the land. The rancher, assisted by the Good Guy, who is often romantically interested in the rancher's beautiful and helpless daughter, helps to fend off the Bad Guy. Finally the Bad Guy kidnaps the daughter so the rancher will cave in, the Good Guy goes off and, after many adventures, rescues her and gets the Bad Guy sent to jail, the gold mine is discovered, they are rich and they all live happily ever after.

Actually, a lot of old movies and novels, too, follow this general plot line. Robin Hood. Knights of the Round Table. Detective Stories. We kind of like it. It reinforces our ideas that the Good Guys will always win in the end, the helpless will be protected and vindicated, and the Bad Guys will come to a sticky end. We like this because it appeals to our sense of justice and romance. I read murder mysteries because the murderer is always caught and brought to justice. It feels right. And also we identify with the Good Guy, or maybe the innocent victim, and we like the idea of winning in the end.

The biggest problem with this story, attractive as it is, is that it doesn't actually reflect real life. In real life, Good Guys often are not rewarded, the innocent poor are often not defended, and Bad Guys often do very well for themselves. The other big problem with it is that we start to impose the story on how we see real life. We start to see people in terms of Good Guys and Bad Guys (Ah, ...we and our friends are the Good Guys, and people we dislike, or who oppose us are the Bad Guys). And we sometimes kind of broaden it to the idea that if people come to a sticky end, they were probably Bad Guys. They deserved their fate.

In our Gospel passage today Jesus more or less dismisses these ideas. Some people come and tell him that Pilate has slaughtered some Galileans, probably assuming they were Bad People. Jesus asks them, "Do you think they were worse sinners than the other Galileans?" And he broadens it to people who met with an accident when a tower collapsed. "Do you think they were worse sinners than the rest of Jerusalem?" "No!" he says, answering his own question. They were no worse than anyone else. Bad things happening to people does not imply that they deserved it. Bad things can happen to anyone.

And then he says that we could also meet a sticky end like that and we might want to take the opportunity of the time that is left to examine our own behaviour and repent for the bad stuff or the good stuff we're failing to do (that's what the fig tree bearing fruit is about), or we might also meet sudden death and it would be too late. And in saying this,

Jesus reminds us that all of us are a mix of good and bad. Every person has a good side. Every person has a bad side. We often forget this.

Here's a down home example for us. Have you ever had a quarrel with your spouse? Or a close family member? When they did something hurtful or otherwise annoying and you, the innocent one, had to take them to task and then they had the nerve to blame you for the whole thing? When it was clearly all their fault? Does that sound at all familiar? I think it comes from this kind of Good Guy/Bad Guy thinking. In fact, in real life, more often than not, it takes two to tango. We both contribute to the problem and we both need to step in to solve it. Not always, but most of the time.

Another problem with this kind of thinking is that we tend to think that God is like us. In fact, we tend to create our idea of God in our own image. And naturally, God is on our side. That part is actually true, God is on our side. God is always working for our true well-being. But we assume that means God is against our enemies or those we're mad at. And that part isn't true. God is also on that person's side. God is capable of loving, sympathizing with, caring for - and challenging - people on both sides of any argument or conflict. And God doesn't see us as Good Guys and Bad Guys. God sees us as hurting, imperfect, and loveable human beings. All of us. Even the ones we think are Bad Guys. Everyone. Doesn't mean God condones our behaviour, but he still loves us.

The passage from Isaiah today really stood out for me. The prophet, speaking for God, says, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways," says the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." And he makes abundantly clear what he means by this: the Lord will have mercy on all who turn to him, he will abundantly pardon all who repent, God will include all who come to worship him. And, in fact, all the nations around Israel shall come to them because of their relationship with the Lord their God, and they shall all receive abundantly at the hand of the Lord, without cost. He promises an everlasting covenant of steadfast, sure love.

This is God's desire for us. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God. God desires to shower us with blessings and God desires that we turn to him and live. Isaiah says, "Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous ones their thoughts and return to the Lord." David also, in the psalm, speaks of God's care for him, comparing it to a really rich feast. He says his flesh faints for the Lord, as he thirsts for water in a dry land. And God satisfies him abundantly.

We are in Lent right now, as you know, and one of the things we are called to do in Lent is self-examination and repentance. All our readings call us to that today. St. Paul says all these stories are an example to us, so we won't make the same mistakes. And he promises that when we do turn to the Lord, then when we are tested one way or another, God will be with us and strengthen us.

The problem with all this is that it's hard to see our own faults. It's pretty easy to see other people's faults, especially people we don't particularly like. It's much harder to look carefully at ourselves and see where we're falling down a bit. I don't imagine any of us are

doing anything too horrendous. Murder and theft and so on. And most of us do a lot of good things in our day to day lives. So take heart. None of us is the Bad Guy of those stories.

But neither we nor our friends are the “Good Guy,” either, the one who is wholly good and without any faults. How do we see in what ways we are not the people we should be? Well, one easy way is to listen to what other people say to us, especially those who love us and know us well, but including those who dislike us. It may be exaggerated, especially if it’s said in a moment of anger, but it is likely to contain a grain of truth.

You know, in my family growing up, I didn’t learn to do this. Not uncommon in our society. I learned to defend myself when anyone criticized me. Critique tended to be pretty heavy handed and comprehensive and it would drag up all sorts of past sins, and it was humiliating. Having to apologize was an ordeal. We didn’t learn how to do this gracefully. It wasn’t until I was in CPE a few years back that I learned to value critique. It was one of my goals, in fact. One of our supervisors, Gary, modelled this wonderfully well. If anyone ever criticized him he would beam and say, “Thank you!” He truly valued the input. I’m not as good at it as he is, but I have learned that it is one of the easiest ways to see how I come across, which is often not the way I want to. Of course, you have to evaluate the critique, but I have learned to listen to it, not to write it off, and to truly appreciate it. And I appreciate the courage of people who care enough to tell me where I’m falling down.

Another way to do self-examination is to ask ourselves, “How would Jesus react here?” As honestly as possible, and bearing in mind that we tend to think God (and Jesus) is like us. And he isn’t. And if our behaviour is not like what we think Jesus’ behaviour would be, that’s a good place to start. And ask God for some help.

One of the problems we have with this process is that many of us had parents who did humiliate us when we made mistakes (or were outright bad) as kids. So we kind of expect God to humiliate us and punish us severely. But remember what Isaiah says, “My ways are not your ways and my thoughts are not your thoughts.” God never sees our repentance as a reason to punish. God sees it as a reason to rejoice. A reason to abundantly pardon and shower us with new life and blessings.

I think it would be helpful to us, this Lent, to take some time for self-examination. While the Good Guy/Bad Guy narrative makes for a nice, satisfying story, we need to be careful not to apply it to real life. We need to accept the fact that we, and all our friends, and all our enemies too, are normal human beings, a mixed bag. When we can truly accept that about ourselves, then we can take that to God for God to work on for us, without getting all upset and defensive. So God can transform us to be more like Jesus.

When we can accept it about the people we meet, all of them, we can see them more clearly and we, too, can help to draw out the good parts and minimize the bad parts in all our interactions. It might give us courage to tell someone we love, in a caring way, about something hurtful they do. It might help us to see our enemies as struggling human beings, and so feel compassion and empathy for them. Maybe even befriend them. It will certainly enrich all our interactions.

Take heart from Isaiah. "Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters. You that have no money, come, buy and eat." I pray that we may all repent and return to the Lord, and drink deeply of the living water God offers us.