

4 Lent B SML 2021
JN 3:14-21

One of the great roles played by Our Blessed Lord, that reveals something of His divine character, is His role as a prophet or teacher. What is so striking is His teaching methods contradict the teaching methods of the world. For only God could use such unworldly methods and still be successful in impressing His message on all ages and on all mindsets.

The world has always had prophets, but it is reserved for our day to be filled with prophets. Never before in history has there been:

- ✓ so much thinking and so little coming to the knowledge of truth,
- ✓ so many schools and so little scholarship,
- ✓ so many wise men and so little wisdom,
- ✓ so much talking about religion and so little prayer.

But first, a word about the world as a teacher. There is no one point on which teachers agree, there being as many opinions as there are worldly teachers. Yet all agree that a successful message must possess three things:

- ✓ it must be smart;
- ✓ it must be liberal;

- ✓ and it must be modern.

By smart, the world means the message must be sophisticated, so as to appeal to the intelligent and to frighten away the uneducated. The modern prophet seeks to astound us with his outpouring of scientific facts and dazzle us with a deluge of re-naming in which sin is called a poor choice, and religion is defined as a crutch. He is always trying to convince the man on the street, not how simple Truth is, but how complex Truth is.

Secondly, the twenty-first century prophets agree that the message must be liberal. This means the message must reduce moral law to nothing absolute, substituting:

- ✓ kindness for morality,
- ✓ patriotism for piety, and
- ✓ sociology for religion.

The ideal must not surpass that which is approved by public opinion. There must be a minimum of restraint (if any), no mention of mortification, and an endless litany of catchwords like:

- ✓ inclusivity,
- ✓ progress,
- ✓ relativity

✓ and service.

This way, the message will attract the self righteous, and at the same time not offend those who believe that ethics must be suited to those think, “I’m OK, you’re OK,” and morality to “but he’s such a nice guy.”

Finally, the present day prophet seeks not only to be smart and liberal, but also to be modern. Above all else, he wants to convince his hearers that his doctrine is suited to the age; that we have outgrown other codes of morals and religions that are 2000 years old. After all, we do live in the 21st century and not in the 13th. The primary reason why the world should accept his teaching is not because it is true, but because it is up to date.

This type of thinking greases the skids for the disease of modernism. Modernism makes the mistake of judging those in the past according to today’s standards, and what results is cancel culture.

- ✓ Names are being removed from buildings,
- ✓ statues are being toppled,
- ✓ books are being burned
- ✓ and films are being blacklisted

because these men and their works do not pass the 2021 test of impeccability.

Let's go after my own jugular. Judging my parents according to 2021 standards, my parents and everyone who raised children as they did would be considered child abusers today because they spanked their children. Fulton Sheen will be accused of promoting child abuse because he wrote: "A pat on the back will help build character if it is given often enough, hard enough and low enough." Rest assured that if any of the building scrubbers, statue topplers or book and movie blacklists of today were for another reason to rise and be a hero today, modernism tomorrow will find reason to remove them from the annals of history because they will not pass the sniff test of tomorrow's modernism.

To those who say, "Father, the Church needs to loosen up," I'll quote Fulton Sheen yet again. "Any religion which keeps up with the times must be prepared to die with the times." Why? Because the modernism of 2021 will not be the modernism of 2022.

So let's turn back the pages of history to Him Who could teach the simple as well as the wise, the common folk as well as Master Nicodemus. Let's turn to the One whose message has been more successful than that of any teacher who ever lived, than any other founder who started a Church 10 minutes

after Pentecost or 10 minutes ago. We discover that His method was just the opposite. He did the very things the prophets of today call foolish. He chose the very methods the others label unsuccessful. His teachings possessed the three opposite characteristics of the world. His message was:

- ✓ not smart, but simple;
- ✓ not liberal, but transforming;
- ✓ not modern, but eternal.

Today's Gospel is case in point.

The cross is the most absurd thing in the world of and by itself. Because the vertical bar of life is contradicted by the horizontal bar of death. It is the symbol indeed of the incomprehensible. But if you put Someone on it, then it's no longer an absurdity. Because He who is put on it teaches that death is the condition of life, that Good Friday leads to Easter Sunday. And when He came to the cross, it was the fulfillment of an old symbol or type.

As He explained to Master Nicodemus, centuries before when the Israelites had disobeyed God, they were bitten by poisonous serpents. And they went to Moses and asked to be healed, Moses spoke to God and God said, "Make a serpent of brass, one that looks exactly like that snake that poisoned you,

and hang it on the crotch of a tree, and everyone who looks at that serpent of brass will be healed.” Now there’s absolutely nothing in looking at a brass serpent on the crotch of a tree that will cure a snakebite. Why does God suggest that?

Because it was to be a type of Himself. So as that serpent of brass did not have poison inside of it but looked as if it were poisonous, so Our Blessed Lord would look as if He were guilty but would in fact have no sin. And as all who looked at that serpent of brass would be healed of the poison, so all who looked at our Lord on the cross would be healed of the poison of sin.

What is sin? Sin is hurting someone we love. That is why the crucifix is our autobiography:

- ✓ His crown of thorns is our sins of pride
- ✓ His nailed hands are our greed and avarice,
- ✓ His nailed feet are the times that we’ve wandered away from His love,
- ✓ His flesh hanging from Him like purple rags is all of our sins of the flesh,
- ✓ His pierced side is how often we broke His heart.

The life of each and every one of us has been written. His blood is the ink. His skin is the parchment. And whenever we say the Act of Contrition it is always in relationship to the cross.

Our Blessed Lord's message was always plain and simple. There is nowhere an attempt to impress His hearers either with His Omniscience or their nescience. He is never complex. What Our Blessed Lord has to say is as good for Nicodemus and it is for you and me.