

A cart driver can encourage a horse to move by dangling a carrot on a stick as a reward for good behavior. Alternatively, he can use negative reinforcement with a threat to hit the horse with the stick. Jockeys who are racing for speed often use little riding crops, to encourage a horse to run faster.

Today's readings remind me of the carrot and stick approach. In the Book of Jonah, the prophet Jonah walks throughout the great city warning: "Forty days more and Nineveh shall be destroyed" (3:4). The message was met with an immediate respect for the power of God. When the people heard they proclaimed a fast. When the King of Nineveh heard, he reinforced the words of the prophet and went one better, encouraging everyone to pray to God and to repent of any evil ways. Responding to this demonstration of faith, the Lord removed the threat of destruction and upheld all of the Ninevites as models for repentance.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus warns, "Just as Jonah became a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation" (11:30). Jesus is referring to his passion, death, and resurrection. Jonah was buried in the belly of a whale for three days; Jesus will be buried in a tomb for three days before he rises from the dead. Jesus was lashed at the pillar for our offences. He takes the stick and offers us the carrot of resurrection that we will "Repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mk 1:15). Jonah walked throughout Nineveh to get the word out. We are called to pray the stations of the cross, recalling the painful journey of Jesus to Calvary.

In the midst of our 40-day Lenten journey, like the Ninevites, Jesus wants us to demonstrate our faith by prayer, fasting and almsgiving. "Blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it" (Luke 11:28). In our Gospel Acclamation, we are given another carrot, "return to me with your whole heart for I am gracious and merciful" (Jl 2:12-13). Indeed, the Lord is "slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting in punishment" (2:14).

Responding to the loving mercy of God, we are called to be patient and merciful with others. Are we? Or, are the words of Jesus from 2000 years ago fitting for our own generation? "This generation is an evil generation" (Lk 11:29). The evil of this generation seems to be a lack of willingness to work with others. We are quick to demonize those we disagree with.

"Let's spend these months leading up to Easter in deeper prayer, penance, and almsgiving. Instead of pointing accusatory fingers at others, let's point one at ourselves. How can I be more patient, kind, gentle, and compassionate to others, especially those I disagree with?"ⁱ "A clean heart create for me, O God, and a steadfast spirit renew within me (Ps 51:12). As we pray, let us pray for those we disagree with that the Lord bestow on them wisdom, courage, and grace. As we fast, let us fast from bitterness that the Lord will heal our own wounds against working with others for the common good. As we give alms, may we do so to build a civilization of life and love that helps to transform society and culture one heart and one mind at a time.

ⁱ Bishop Hying's reflection on the need for a renewed unity in Christ