

Good?

Bette Davis and Joan Crawford had been feuding for years. Then Joan Crawford died. Bette Davis is alleged to have reacted saying something like this: “My mama taught me always to speak good of the dead. She’s dead. Good.” She didn’t quite get idea, did she? As is so often, she confused the letter of the law with the spirit of the law.

In these days of the “ramp up” to the Great Fast, the Church provides us with a meditation on what it means to be good. Very often, the people who are declared “good” are not the ones we would expect. Why? There are many reasons.

First of all, we so often base our judgments on appearances; in fact, that is what pretentious Hyacinth Bucket of the Britcom “Keeping up Appearances” is counting on. The problem is that people like Hyacinth all too often like to put on a show to convince their “audience” – and perhaps also to convince themselves - that they are good or smart or important or ... well, you get the picture.

Is this so different from what was going on in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican? Listen to the proud Pharisee:

O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity – greedy, dishonest, adulterous – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I pay tithes on my whole income. (Luke 18: 11-12)

He is so worried about the show that he is putting on, about the mask he is wearing, that he has become an empty shell – or worse. Jesus had a definite opinion about people like that:

Woe to you ... you hypocrites. You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside but inside are filled with ... every kind of filth. Even so, on the outside you appear righteous, but inside you are filled with hypocrisy and evildoing. (Matthew 23:27)

Oh, dear! Could he be talking about me? (Gulp!)

This brings me to my second point. I have a cousin who knows me altogether too well, but who nonetheless insists on telling me to “Be good!” even though she realizes how impossible that is for me. Since “misery likes company”, I take comfort in the fact that I am not the only one who cannot “be good”; in fact, we all need to admit that any goodness any of us has is due not to our own merit, but rather derives from the merciful God Who declares us good when we’re really not.

Isn’t that what Jesus tells us in the parables we hear these weeks? Jesus seems to like sinners, and the publicans of Jesus’ day – the tax collectors - were among the most notorious sinners: not only were they reputed to be cheats, but they also collaborated with the hated Romans. Nonetheless, we see Jesus deliberately declaring two publicans justified. The first of these is the one whose humility was contrasted with the pride of the boastful Pharisee, and whose prayer we still use: “O God, be merciful to me, a sinner”; the other was Zacchaeus, who went out of his way to encounter Jesus – going so far as to climb a tree to overcome his “shortcomings”. Then there is the case of the Prodigal Son, that ingrate who deserved to be rejected by his father, but who instead was welcomed back with open arms.

When there is an ordination, the ordaining bishop says that “the God Who heals what is infirm, and Who makes up for what is lacking, raises the servant of God”. Doesn’t God do the same for each of us? There’s a hitch: we need to have the humility to let ourselves be raised. All too often, however, our pride gets in the way, so we foolishly choose to wallow in our misery. But that is not what God wants: God wants to take our imperfect service and make it worthy, declaring us good servants, but He won’t do it without our permission. It’s up to each of us to decide what we will let God do for us. I can only decide for myself...

-Fr. Jim Karepin, op