

## Sermon for the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday before Lent 13 Feb 2011 Nicosia

Some of you may be familiar with the Darwin Awards. People are nominated for the Darwin Awards when they do something really stupid that costs them their lives. The reason that they are called the Darwin Awards is that by offing themselves in such an absurd way, it is suggested that these misguided folks have inadvertently improved the gene pool for rest of humanity. It's a cynical view of life, but it has led to a collection of stories that are both true and bizarre.

For example, there is the story of a Darwin Award winner named Christopher, a nineteen-year-old man in Missaukee County, Michigan. Christopher spent an evening sometime back partaking of a large quantity of alcoholic beverages when he noticed a shortage in his liquor supply. He concluded that his neighbour had stolen a bottle of his booze! With a knife he went to his neighbour's home, to no avail, whereupon he retired to his own apartment to brood about revenge. And he continued to drink.

Finally, when he was thoroughly sloshed, he figured out the perfect way to get back at his liquor-thieving neighbour. He would stab himself and blame the neighbour!

A witness testified that he saw Christopher enter the bathroom while he was calling 9-1-1. Christopher calmly informed the 9-1-1 dispatcher that his neighbour had stabbed him. Witnesses said Christopher looked fine when he emerged from the bathroom, but a moment later spurts of blood emanated from his chest. Suddenly he began screaming, begging for help. The dispatcher heard a woman shout, "Why did you do this?" He collapsed at the door of his apartment.

Deputies arrived quickly, but Christopher had already bled to death from self-inflicted stab wounds to his chest. An autopsy determined that he had stabbed himself twice. The first wound apparently didn't look dangerous enough, so he tried again. The second time, the knife plunged into his left ventricle. This wound did the trick. He was dead in two minutes.

The ironic thing is that his plan to frame his neighbour for his stabbing was a complete failure. A witness confirmed that the neighbour was not even in the apartment. All Christopher got for his attempt at revenge was an accidental death sentence.

Could anybody actually be that dumb? Well, yes. Notice that he had been drinking a significant amount of liquor. Drinking has that kind of effect on many otherwise intelligent people it makes them do some really stupid things.

A better question is whether anyone could get that angry over a missing bottle of liquor that they would hurt themselves in order to gain revenge? The answer seems again to be in the affirmative. People make mistakes like that every day. Note how many people, after a divorce, carry around feelings of intense anger and desire for revenge for years. And, generally, the only person they hurt is themselves.

Jesus, as usual, hit the nail squarely on the head. "You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment . . . anyone who says, 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell.

"Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.

"Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison. I tell you the truth, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny."

Obviously this text refers to some legal niceties from Jesus' time with which we are not familiar. His point however is clear.

**Don't let your anger fester and grow. Act quickly. Get rid of it. It will do you no good.**

Sam and Jacqueline Pritchard, a British couple, started receiving mysterious phone calls to their home in the middle of the night. The person on the other end never said anything. After a long pause, he would hang up.

The Pritchard's changed their phone number to stop the harassing night calls. The stalker changed his tactic. He started sending them obscene and threatening anonymous letters in the mail. Then the problems escalated. The couple discovered their house had been daubed with paint, and their tires were slashed. The Pritchard's became prisoners in their own home and spent a small fortune on a security system. Here's what was puzzling they had no idea what they had done to deserve such cruel treatment.

After four months of unexplained terrorism, they finally met the perpetrator. Mr. Pritchard caught James McGhee, a 53-year-old man, while he was damaging their car. As they looked at each other, Pritchard asked McGhee, "Why are you doing this to us?"

McGhee responded, "Oh, no I've got the wrong man!"

McGhee thought he was terrorizing a different man named Pritchard, who had been spreading rumours about him. He found the Pritchard's in the telephone directory and assumed the husband was the person responsible for slandering him. He got the wrong Pritchard.

What an absurd turn of events, but anger has a tendency to do funny things to us. It blinds us to reality. It blinds us to consequences. It blinds us to the irrational harm that

may come from our rage. For your own best interest, if you are angry with someone, let it go. Act quickly before you cause yourself and them any harm.

**The same thing is true when it comes to temptation. Act quickly.**

Jesus continues, "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."

I suspect the Master is indulging in a little hyperbole here. He doesn't really expect us to gouge out an eye or cut off a hand. At least I hope not. But the principle is the same. Do not let sin take root in your heart. The consequences can be tragic.

This is the way temptation works. We are drawn in little by little until a fence is built around us. It may begin with a glance . . . a casual remark . . . a phone call . . . and eventually heartbreak. Do not let sin take root in your heart whether it be anger or lust or whatever it may be. Get rid of it. Act quickly. Let it go.

**But how do you do that? The best way to let go of negative, hurtful emotions or desires is to turn to God. Don't try to handle it alone.**

Leslie Dunkin once told about a dog he had when he was a boy. His father would occasionally test the dog's obedience. He would place a tempting piece of meat on the floor and give the command, "No!" The dog was not to touch the meat. The dog, which must have had a strong urge to go for the meat, was placed in a most difficult situation to obey or disobey his master's command.

Dunkin said, "The dog never looked at the meat. He seemed to feel that if he did, the temptation to disobey would be too great. So he looked steadily at my father's face." Dunkin then made this spiritual application: "There is a lesson for us all. Always look up to the Master's face."

That may sound a little simplistic, but it is also true. The best thing you can do when you are tempted by anger or lust or any other hurtful emotion or desire is to keep your gaze fixed on your faith. If you have committed yourself to Christ, you know what is right and what is wrong. You know that which is life-affirming and that which is destructive. Do not even allow yourself a glance in the direction of that which would pull you down. And pray with all your might that God will help you deal with your anger, deal with your lust, deal with your spiteful tongue or whatever there is in your life that could bring a blemish to your reputation or cause you to hurt someone else.

And if you have already gotten yourself in a bad situation, remember that God is a God of healing and reconciliation. There is still hope if you are willing to yield to God's control.

When sin has us in its grip, the worse thing we can do is to depend on our own willpower, our own ingenuity, our own strength to extricate us. At such times we need the power of God to come into our lives and make us new people. The important thing is to act quickly before you cause yourself and anyone else any hurt or harm. Too much is at stake. Ask God's help today.

Finding your voice. That is the theme of the surprise Academy Award favourite movie "The King's Speech." Royal watchers and romantics have focused forever on the king who gave up the throne for the woman he loved, Edward VIII, never giving much thought to the "spare" who replaced the "heir." With a profound stammer and knock-knees, Prince Albert, aka "Bertie," hardly rated a second glance until he was suddenly his country's "second chance" at having a new king.

The greatest obstacle preventing Prince Albert from becoming King George VI was his inability to find his own voice. The movie focuses on how the royal monarch's relationship with a gifted speech therapist, Lionel Logue, enabled a stumbling stammerer to become a beloved sovereign. Logue is self-taught and without credentials. But he utilized the most advanced technology he had at hand to help his royal student. He even used phonograph recordings of the king's own voice so that Albert could truly "hear" himself for the first time.

But Logue also used something more important and powerful: the age-old power of relationship to tune and tone the king's voice. It took years of coaching, learning to trust each other, and building respect for each other, before Logue could declare to Albert "You must have faith in your voice!" But when that point came, it was their relationship that enabled the man no one ever thought would be king finally to respond "I have a voice!"

Do you have faith in your voice? Have you used your voice?

In the past week young pro-democracy protestors in Egypt have shown they "have faith" in their voice.

Even when the electronic, high tech versions of their "voice" were silenced by the government when it cut all internet connectivity; Even when pro-government supporters used old-fashioned camel drivers to incite terror and violence;

Even when the army, the “peace-keepers,” looked away and let violence prevail: The voice of the protestors remained strong and sure.

They knew their message and they used their voice: “Mubarak must go.” And he did.

Yet the sound of a voice being raised is not enough. Our voices must have something beautiful, good and true to tell. Powerful voices can bring POWER, and if that power is abused the result is tragedy and evil. Anyone want to deny that Adolf Hitler had a powerful, persuasive voice? Of Joseph Stalin? Or Pol Pot? Or Idi Amin? Or the Ayatollah Khomeini? Or Osama bin Laden? Strength is not the measure of what should carry a voice. Truth is. Beauty is. Goodness is.

Today’s First Testament text is taken from Moses’ concluding words to the Israelites as they were finally about to enter into the Long-Promised Land. The voice of the prophet does not focus on power. Instead, Moses’ final words urge the people to do nothing less than “choose life.” Deuteronomy is the last book of the “Torah,” the five books of Law and Covenant in the Hebrew Scriptures. But Deuteronomy is the first book of the Torah to speak of a Loving God, and a God who invites our love. You might even call Deuteronomy God’s First Valentine.

Choosing life, choosing obedience to God, means choosing Love. Love for “the Lord your God,” love for life, love for each other, love for all creation stand as “witnesses” to this new covenant. The “witnesses” Moses “called” to formalize this covenant were “heaven and earth” – which makes the requirement to “love” about as widespread as it can get.

When Moses declared that the Israelites should “choose life,” he was really announcing an already done deal. The covenant had been signed and sealed on Mt. Horeb. The people of Israel did not so much have to “choose life” as they had to acknowledge – with loyalty, obedience, and love – the “chosenness” God had graced them with. The “chosenness” of God’s covenanted people had nothing to do with their own worthiness and everything to do with God’s unmerited love and commitment to the people of God’s creation. God choose to enter in to a ridiculous relationship with the fractured, fragmented human creatures of his creation.

Why? Out of love. All we have to do is love back. That is our “choice.” That is how we “choose life.”

A consumer culture says you are the sum of your choices. A consumer culture says that your identity is found in the choices you make, the brands you buy, the clothes you wear.

A biblical culture says your identity is not found in your choices but in your chosenness. “You did not choose me: I chose you.” And because we have been chosen, we can be secure in who we are because God made us who we are. In fact, our “choicefulness” is really a snare and a delusion.

No wonder Jesus proclaimed he did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfil it. Our Deuteronomy Valentine tells us that, even though people keep getting everything all wrong, God always keeps everything all right. The Torah was loving God. The Law was a life lived loving God. Now Jesus embodied and embedded the Torah in himself. Jesus fulfilled the Law by making a life loving God finally and fully available to every human being. Jesus took away the final barrier that kept love from being more than a Valentine.

In Jesus Love was given voice and visage. Because of Jesus, it is possible for us to have a voice. Like Prince Albert. As handicapped and weak as we are, we have been given a voice to love and raise. Jesus calls us to stand up and trust our voice, to stand up and raise our voice. Not to tout ourselves or our abilities. But to announce to the world that it is chosen, and to choose the life that comes with chosenness. We have been offered life and love. And it is this life of love which we are to announce to the world.