

There was a Russian peasant named Ivan, who had a most fearsome wife. One day as Ivan was walking home from work, he came across a small sparrow that was half-dead from the cold. Ivan picked up the little bird, caressed it in his hands, and tenderly laid it in the folds of his great parka. The warmth of his parka soon began to take effect – and the little bird began to stir inside. Ivan felt very happy and continued his journey home. Then he thought of his fearsome wife. She would never allow him to keep the little bird, and he began to feel sad.

Just then he noticed a herd of cows in a nearby field. And as cows are wont to do – there were a lot of cow-pies in the field. Ivan noticed a fresh cow-pie. It was still warm and steaming in the cold evening air. And Ivan hit upon a plan. He took the little bird and set it smack in the middle of the cow-pie. It wasn't as pleasant as his parka, but at least he could leave the little bird there in the warmth.

As he started to walk home, he heard the little bird – singing his heart out – in the midst of his cow-pie. And Ivan felt happy once again. But suddenly – a great wolf came out of the forest, snatched the little bird, and gobbled him down.

Now the moral of the story is: It's not always your enemies who put you into it. It's not always your friends who get you out of it. And when you're up to your neck in it, it's no time for singing!

NOW this joke is actually connected to our gospel! Jesus talks about manure! But I am reminded of something that great American theologian, Will Rogers, once said: "Preachers are a lot like manure. Spread them around, they'll do a lot of good. Pile them all together in one place, they get to stinking!" Maybe THAT'S why we have so few priests! But the fact is that the word 'manure' appears 26 times in the Old Testament, and twice in the New, coming directly from the lips of Jesus and St. Paul, and Paul uses the word a lot more like we do – in our many and colorful forms of the word that we tend to use in our everyday language.

The word is tidied up in the translation we heard today. It is the Greek word KOPRION, which means 'dung,' 'feces,' or worse. So if you are of Greek extraction, when you back your car into a wall, you say, "O KOPRION!" When we flunk an exam or burn the roast we say "guano." We sometimes say: "I can't take anymore of this excreta." Or "I'm up cowflop creek without a paddle." Or we ask ourselves: "Why am I always on the spoor end of things?" I have heard teenagers call one another "Manure heads," (When they didn't know I was around, of course.) When someone is angry with us we say we're on that person's fecal roster. We've all seen that bumper sticker on the back of some cars that says "DUNG happens." And when you don't like my homily you say "he's just full of ordure." Yes, I worked with a thesaurus this past week. I even said "HOLY FECULENCE!" I had no idea there were this many elegant ways to say this! And yet, Jesus speaks very POSTIIVELY about manure in the gospel. In fact, it is the manure which gives the fig tree the chance to grow and bear fruit.

It is a fact of life – whether we know anything about organic gardening and composting or not. Manure makes things grow. And Jesus points out to all of us – that quite often the difficult, not-so-pleasant, and the painful experiences of life – the MANURE experiences – are what make us grow. They are what challenge our character, our reserves – and they make us bear fruit. As someone has said: "Smooth waters do not for skillful sailors make." The difficulties in life are what cause us to re-examine our values, where we are coming from, what we are about, and how we are living out our lives.

Sometimes these experiences are little things – or relatively little things – a skinned knee, a lost game, a missed appointment, a flat tire. And sometimes they are much bigger things – losing our job, breaking up

with someone we loved, getting seriously ill, losing someone we love to death, or finding a marriage we had put our whole heart and soul into simply cannot continue. BUT ALL OF THESE EXPERIENCES TEST US. Like nothing else will. They let us know what we are truly made of – what values we operate with. They are unpleasant and difficult – but they can cause us to bear fruit. Or die.

It is interesting to note in today's gospel that IT IS THE TREE WHICH HAS NOT BORN ANY FRUIT which is manured. It is given a second chance. This is my SECOND point. Fig trees in Palestine were expected to bear fruit in 3 years. If they did not bear fruit in that time, they were cut down and burned. They also generally produced at least 2, sometimes even 3 crops of figs a year. And so this tree was given a 2nd chance, after being barren for 3 years. The word APHES, translated here as "let it alone," is the same New Testament word for forgiveness. Jesus came preaching, "The hour is come. Repent! Change your ways! Believe!" and we crucified Him. He came looking for fruit ("Bear fruit that befits repentance.") Instead, He found barrenness, hard-heartedness, dried up, sterile sin. He came looking for fruit saying "I have come not to judge the world, but to save it." (Jn 12:47). And we nailed Him to a cross, then went back to business as usual, back to the clanking machinery of our world. Heaven heaved and raged, earth shook, ready to burst forth at last in a flood of well-deserved judgment. And from the cross Jesus said, "Father, APHES, let it alone." FORGIVE THEM. So the manure treatment – and APHES, being left alone for another chance, leads to the possibility of new life for us.

And so we might ask ourselves in this Lenten season: Are we that fig tree that has not been bearing fruit? Are we just cluttering up the ground? Just sucking in the heated air of the church, if we even choose to come? Never contributing, volunteering – just taking, taking, taking. And complaining about what the church should be like.

Lent is a time when we are 'left alone,' forgiven, given a second chance. What fruit are we bearing? What difference does it make that we come to church? Are we still just a crabby old man or cranky old lady? A selfish kid or pouty and uncooperative teenager? A workaholic parent who is ignoring spouse and kids? A Catholic in name only? The truth is that over half of this parish contributes NOTHING. NOTHING! Except criticism. But they are the first to write to me complaining about something. Amazing how frequently complaining and doing nothing and contributing nothing seem to go together. Some of you have come to know that if you write a letter of complaint to me and sign it, I'll read it. I also will check to see if you are contributing. It gives me a clear indication of how much time this criticism is worth. The gospel has something to say about that. APHES. Let them alone. FORGIVE THEM. KOPRION them. FERTILIZE them. See if anything will grow this time.

Lent is another chance. Even if we have never been involved or contributed to the life of the parish, even if we have never taken our gospel life seriously, sometimes a difficult life experience can jar us out of our complacency and cause us to actually begin to grow – and even bear fruit. I have heard stories about this throughout my almost 43 years of priesting. So many people enter the catechumenate, or come back to church after years of spiritual neglect, or finally get serious about what this is all about – after some life-shattering experience – some MANURE experience – makes them pause long enough to do some serious self-examination and evaluation. They often come to the conclusion that too much time has been wasted and that they need to get on with the REALLY IMPORTANT things in life. Life is only so long and contains only so many opportunities. Then it is harvest time, time to judge, evaluate, and gather in the fruits of a life's living.

Lents come and go – have we grown THIS Lent? Are we growing NOW? What will the Master Vinedresser find about us when He comes to harvest? Will this Lent prove to have been fruitful? How are we responding to the difficult experiences current in our lives?

Lent is an opportunity – an opportunity to be pruned so that we might bear more fruit. In the midst of our ‘manure treatments’ – can we do some real singing?!

OK, that’s it for this homily. Only 2 points. I realize that some of you are sitting there and saying, “Oh KOPRION, he’s finished way too soon!” So I say unto you: “Get a life! Feculence happens!”

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