

# STOPPING PRETENDING

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Alas ... hardly a week ... a day ... goes by without a news story of some public scandal—this or that person betraying public trust or private vows. Very often, it’s politicians who are, as a character in “The Hunt for Red October” put it, kissing babies in public and stealing their lollipops in private—the hypocritical face, sometimes criminally so. Rich and famous shattering wedding vows are so common that they’re not even a shocker anymore—more like a tally count. But some of the most painful for us Christians is when other “Christians” are caught embezzling, lying grievously, or disregarding solemn vows of marriage, priesthood, etc. One wonders if such things have always occurred so and just not known or publicized, or is this a more recent development due to cultural shifts? Where and why has the personal sense of honor been so abandoned?

These thoughts came to mind while reading the scripture for the Mass this weekend—from the prophet Jonah, in which Jonah goes through the great city of Nineveh, prophesying its oncoming destruction. In this, Jonah echoes the other prophets, John the Baptist and even Jesus, all of whom preached repentance from doing evil and walking the path of virtue—bearing the fruits of righteousness. To the Ninevites’ credit, they DO repent and thus are saved from destruction. It’s a short but poignant book—something read in less than an hour (hint, hint).

Now, no doubt hypocrisy has existed in every time and place, as it is rooted in selfishness and self-interest. In the religious arena, people often want others to think well of them, and yet, in private, do not control their actions to the contrary. Yes, this can be—often *is*—due to even the sincerely religious succumbing to momentary strong temptation, but not infrequent are those who simply put on the show, all the while being persistent in unkindness or even plotting destructive behavior. There are Christians “feuding,” refusing to forgive, sticky fingers, or outright embezzling. Treachery. I guess even Jesus is not immune from betrayal; we shouldn’t be surprised if it worms its way into the Church and other venues that have the public face of charity. After all, how many embezzlements do we hear about targeting public entities and non-profits that were formed for charity to the needy and less fortunate?

Yet we *each* have a little Nineveh within us; even the best of us sometimes marring the image of God that we are with some vice and selfishness. Most of us, if not all of us, have some sort of nagging difficult-to-defeat sin or vice—a disordered appetite for something we should not have—“dis-ordered” meaning roughly “not in accord with God’s will, and thus by definition out of accord of what is good.” For some, it’s food or drink; for some, it’s sexual; for some, it’s an abuse of substances, gossip, holding grudges, love of money ... etc., etc., etc.

But, like the Ninevites, God gives each of us a little Jonah within ourselves—*conscience*, which constantly calls us back to God and to what is right and good.

People often accuse we Catholics of emphasizing “guilt” ... of shaming. But what IS “shame”? Shame is simply the reproof of conscience, aiding us (if heeded) to depart from evil and return to the good. Shame felt is often God’s grace leading us back to Him. Thus, shame or guilt properly heard is a *good* thing if we act on it for the better.

Now, “conscience” is often misunderstood. We have the tendency to try to rationalize and justify our desires as “conscience” even when they conflict with what God teaches. We all have, like in the old cartoons, the little devil on one shoulder and the little angel on the other—each whispering into our ears ... the spirit and the flesh, as St. Paul terms them, in perpetual conflict. Conscience is the little angel and is only true when it is in accord with the truth and, moral law and goodness. And what God teaches IS truth ... IS righteousness. He is all truth. Thus, to know truth, we must learn from Him and from His teaching.

We all tend—especially young people—to be drawn by the glamour and acclaim and the things of the world. But there was a story a few years ago of a gorgeous, popular, wealthy 20-year-old Brazilian model. She had *everything* that the world looks for—beauty, fame, tons of money ... a spectacular future with no end in sight. But she contracted a rare disease, and died within a few days. To what benefit now are those things she had ... that beauty and fame can avail nothing in the grave.

But beauty of righteousness before God ... the beauty of virtue ... the beauty of service to God and our fellow man ... those are things which death cannot touch ... and the beauty of them lives forever.

St. Paul exhorts:

*I tell you, brothers and sisters, the time is running out.*

*From now on, let those having wives act as not having them,*

*those weeping as not weeping,*

*those rejoicing as not rejoicing,*

*those buying as not owning,*

*those using the world as not using it fully.*

*For the world in its present form is passing away.* (1 Corinthians 7:29-31)

This does not mean neglecting our earthly duties or relationships but always looking most of all to the eternal. Our true home is Heaven, Paul is saying; focus upon that! No, it’s often not easy, but Peter tells us: “...though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith... may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 1:6-7) And Jesus promises in John’s vision in Revelation: “Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.” (Revelation 2:10)

Jesus warns us that His disciples will undergo difficulty, hatred, temptations and persecutions in the world. And yet, He tempers that ominous warning with the assurance: “Blessed are you if you do [the things that I have taught]...for your reward will be great in Heaven.” (cf. Luke 6:22-24)