

Luke 4.1-13

Fairly early in his goofy errandries, Sir Don Quixote de la Mancha, Knight of the Woeful Countenance, decides to ride into the Sierra Morena and go crazy. He dispatches his squire, Sancho Panza, to report this fact to his ladylove. When Sancho points out that most preux chevaliers save that kind of behavior for when their beloveds have somehow betrayed them, Quixote reveals the genius of his plan.

There is the point, and that is the beauty of this business of mine; no thanks to a knight-errant for going crazy when he has cause; the thing is to turn crazy without any provocation, and to let my lady know, if I do this in the dry, what would I do in the moist?

That last line is particularly appropriate as an allusion to Jesus' words on his way to the cross; appropriate because a fictional Spanish hero helps make sense of a biblical Jewish messiah.

Jesus inaugurates his public ministry with a forty day fast punctuated by a punch-up with the devil. Evangelicals, pragmatic to the point of impracticality, tear apart this text in search of a mechanism: Jesus re-creates the wilderness wanderings to announce a new Exodus; Jesus' triptych of temptations cauterizes all types of sin; the forty-day fast ends all such foolishness by ushering in the millennial feast.

Any or all of those explanations have some merit but they leave out what may be the most important one: Jesus burns with a crazy-love for the Father that only insanity can satisfy. Pondering the aesthetic feats of St. Francis, G. K. Chesterton observes that a person will not roll in the snow or go without food for abstract principles of philosophy or theology, but "will do things like this, or pretty like this, under quite a different impulse. He will do these things when he is in love."

Jesus fasts in the green tree of his early ministry as an earnest that his lunatic love will one day hoist the dry tree of a Roman cross. He volunteers suffering as a sign that he will suffer more when his call requires him to drink the cup.

Lent should make more sense this year because it begins one week after Valentine's Day. In addition to being Transfiguration Sunday, February 14 is, in a sense, Song of Solomon Sunday. On this day lovers revel in the opportunity to go crazy with no more provocation than the sheer romance of the thing. When we're in love, something in us wants to suffer, whether our lover benefits from it or not.

We sometimes speak of giving things up for Lent as though God earned interest on our misery. In more optimistic moods, we might mention the personal benefits of a brief abstinence to an overindulged society. What we miss with such logic is the stunned smile on the face of a Father to whom our by-passed pleasures are not the slightest use. Where we fail is in feeling the adrenaline rush of a hormone-addled teenager who uselessly holds his breath on behalf of his beloved.

The pure grace that promises forgiveness assures us we have no need for neurotic obsession with our salvation. The blood of Christ that cleanses from sin negates all occasions for self-flagellation. And there (to quote Quixote) is the point: no thanks to a child of God for going crazy when she has cause; the thing is to go crazy for the sheer love of the Father.

Bring on the Windmills!

Doug