

St. Thomas Anglican Church
St. John's, NL
Dr. Jonathan Dent
#1 Sin

March 13, 2011
1st Sunday in Lent

First of all, let me begin by thanking John Paul and the leadership team for inviting me, and many others, for this, the season of your 175th Anniversary. We just celebrated our 235th Anniversary at St. David's Church, formerly Queen's Road Presbyterian and Congregational Church before that. Our greetings and love to you on this wonderful occasion and season.

I have to admit that I was wondering about the honour of being invited here to speak on the first of the deadly sins, "pride." Then I remembered that John Paul first asked my good friend, racquetball partner and colleague in ministry at St. Andrew's Church, the Rev. Dr. David Sutherland, to speak on this subject, and therefore am somewhat relieved that I wasn't the first person asked to speak on "pride." Similarly someone told me years ago to beware of the person who has lots to say about "humility." Nevertheless, let's jump right in.

Pride is the number one sin. It is not only first on the list of deadly sins, it is chronologically first in history. This is based on an understanding of the devil, the serpent in the garden, Satan, believing he knew better than God and should take his place, much like the king of Babylon Isaiah is describing in chapter 14:12ff. and the apostle John in 1 John 3:8. The Scriptures teach us that this angel turned devil lost his position in God's court and took many other rebel angels with him, in Revelation 12: 7 – 9. They too had enough pride, pride defined as conceit, arrogance or self-sufficiency, that they thought they could prevail against God. This was the first pride parade, before even the accounts of the garden of Eden. But lest we think this is a mere matter of speculation, let us look at our own lives.

We too live in the shadow of this parade, and of our spiritual ancestors Adam and Eve. We too have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:9ff). Our righteous acts are like filthy rags, a very strong image Isaiah uses to remind us who think we are so good, that God has a different perspective. God reminds us if we trust only in our own good deeds, it is like trusting in used feminine hygiene products. All of us, me included, need to come to God, saying "I know the rebellion inside of me against you,

Jesus, I choose to go against that rebellion, and say “yes” to you and your way and will with all that I am.”

At that point we can come and receive the ashes, like we did on Wednesday, and receive the truth, “From dust we come, to dust we will return.” Or any time we come forward for the Eucharist, we must give up the place where we were sitting, come to the front, kneel down and humbly receive. If we come up to the communion rail, saying how good we are, and how much we know, and rehearsing our rights, then we have missed the point. We must come, I must come forward saying “I love the Lord a little, I want to love Him more.” I am hungry and thirsty, blind and wretched. I need healing for my wounds, food and drink for my soul.

Of course none of this is new to you. I am just repeating what you know by heart. The spiritual battle goes on a daily basis for our thinking, our living our lives according to the Lord's prayer, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done.” This competes with those inner tapes that say, “I know best for me. I will go it alone. I am captain of my destiny.” Nobody knows me or understands me.

In fact, the wider community knows that the first step in all 12 step programs is acknowledging our need. In so many ways, this should be the easiest of all the steps, it is simply agreeing with the fact that I need help, we need help. Why is it so hard to ask for help? In a word, it is pride. Could it be that same pride that says, “I can take care of anything that comes my way. I can do it.” But then as I open my eyes, I realize there is pain and suffering, loss and death, things I don't understand, relationships I mess up, and many things that I cannot blame on others, but simply must admit are my problems, my issues, my challenges. How about you?

I don't think “swallowing our pride” is the right expression. It's more like spitting it out. I know that's not a pretty image, like buying expectorant for your cold. But then a big part of the Bible message before hearing the Good News of what receive in Jesus, we need to hear the bad news of our sin and rebellion. Again, the twelve step recovery groups speak of our lives becoming unmanageable, then we came to believe there is a God who can help us, then turning our will and our lives over to the care of this God.

Jesus was teaching on the interior and exterior realities of our spiritual journeys. He was concerned in his great sermon, some call the Sermon on

the Mount, to warn us to not go so much by exterior appearances. He made the point that if you are more worried about what others think about you than what the Lord thinks about you, you're in trouble. Don't give offerings or gifts or charitable funds to draw attention to yourself. Don't fast or pray or help people on the street so others will know that you are so religious or so spiritual. There's only one audience that counts, the audience of one. God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

And if you think I'm being hard on you today, just remember how hard Jesus was on the clergy of his day. He called them "hypocrites" from the Greek referring to someone who played a part on stage. Jesus set out, in some detail, how they played to their audiences, but God sees the heart.

And lest we be too hard on the clergy, let me say that it is hard for clergy today to find the safe places to share the burden of their sins, to find relief and comfort in the presence of fellow clergy is difficult. Sometimes we find out on the nightly news about their secrets sins. And you know, not only in those moments, but also in your relationships with clergy, that we are just like you. I struggle to find places that are safe to share what I am going through. I attend 12 step groups. I know I need God. I'm not as disciplined in my prayer and Scripture reading as I ought to be.

Lent is a time to confess where we really are, no matter how bad. It is a time to say what we need to say to God first, and then to another human being, maybe your priest, maybe your spouse or friend. Shrovetide was the beginning of this last week, confessing our sins and being absolved of them for Shrove Tuesday, something most people don't even know used to happen, let alone happening in 2011, this week. But Lent is our season, for being honest, for giving up something in order to lean on Jesus where we used to lean on that thing, activity, or false comfort. You know its name in you, and if you don't ask someone close to you, what it is you need to be working on. The season of Lent is about self denial. Self denial sometimes helps us to come out of denial, and into the light that gives life.

May this season be one where you find yourself reconciled with God, open to God and God's ways in your life through Jesus Christ. This is what Paul was saying in 2 Corinthians 6. Paul urges us to "not receive the grace of God in vain." Don't simply receive your relationship with God as a kind of fire insurance against the judgment that is to come. Rather go as deep as you can, be as honest and courageous as you can, be fully committed

through all the details of your life. Give the Lord the keys to your car, to your house, invite him in, to the entry hall, to the living room, to the TV room, to the bedroom, to the washroom, to the basement, to the storage areas, every well used place, every dark and hidden place. Let him have full access to your life and shed the light of life into it all.

Let me conclude with Eugene Peterson's version of 2 Corinthians 6:

Companions as we are in this work with you, we beg you, please don't squander one bit of this marvelous life God has given us. God reminds us,
I heard your call in the nick of time;

The day you needed me, I was there to help.

Well, now is the right time to listen, the day to be helped. Don't put it off; don't frustrate God's work by showing up late, throwing a question mark over everything we're doing. Our work as God's servants gets validated—or not—in the details. People are watching us as we stay at our post, alertly, unswervingly . . . in hard times, tough times, bad times; when we're beaten up, jailed, and mobbed; working hard, working late, working without eating; with pure heart, clear head, steady hand; in gentleness, holiness, and honest love; when we're telling the truth, and when God's showing his power; when we're doing our best setting things right; when we're praised, and when we're blamed; slandered, and honored; true to our word, though distrusted; ignored by the world, but recognized by God; terrifically alive, though rumored to be dead; beaten within an inch of our lives, but refusing to die; immersed in tears, yet always filled with deep joy; living on handouts, yet enriching many; having nothing, having it all.

We are in this time together. Let's help each other, forsaking the "I can do it myself, alone" mentality which never gets very far, and risking opening up to one another, as James says, Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another that you may be healed. Let's trust God for this Lenten season and for all that we have in the Body of Christ.

Let us pray.