

Meditations on Mardi Gras

WHENCE the name *Mardi Gras*? It is French for Fat Tuesday. At one time the French may have been its most enthusiastic celebrants. New Orleans' French Quarter and Nice on the Mediterranean are still said to be some of the most exuberant observers, though Rio de Janeiro is not far behind.

The name originated from the old custom of parading fat oxen through the streets of Paris.¹ Why in mid or late winter? Mardi Gras precedes Lent, which spans the last 40 weekdays before Easter, itself designated as the first Sunday after the first Full Moon in spring.²

Lent—wryly suggested as being an acronym for *Let's end negative thinking*—was once a good time to fast because before the days of refrigerators fresh fruits and vegetables were hard to come by in winter. At this time people ate more heartily, often of things less than healthful; a cleansing fast would be in order.

Unfortunately, not everything done on Mardi Gras is exactly wholesome, albeit the Good Book does remind us that there is “a time to laugh.”³ There is also much “humor” in the Bible. A recent Bible dictionary of six volumes and 6,200 entries contains a “seven-page essay on Biblical humor,” dealing with the “light touches, sly remarks, witty expressions, and comical elements” of Scripture.⁴ Christian authors like Elton Trueblood and



From *Die Bibel in Bildern*, Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld (1789-1853)

The Temptation of Christ

Christ's Incarnation, coming into human flesh, was followed immediately by His version of Carnival, saying goodbye to the pursuit of fleshly pleasures, enabling Him to eventually say, "The prince of this world...hath nothing in me."

William Willimon have also written on the humor of Christ. Of course, there is a line between what one may laugh at, and what not.

Because of its nature, Mardi Gras has also been called a *Carnival*, derived from two Latin words. *Carni* comes from the same root as *carnal*—the flesh, the “sinful” nature referred to in Scripture. *Val* is an abbreviated form of valediction, bidding farewell or taking leave. Accordingly, *carnival* is bidding farewell to the flesh.

There is nothing more important for humans to do than just that. And when one genuinely has bidden farewell to the flesh—the lower nature—one has embarked on the Path of Regeneration. And “Regeneration and progression are the keywords on the Bible.”⁵ Regeneration is also the key for unlocking much of the Bible. And because the Christ enjoined us to “be...perfect,”⁶ there must also be growth on the Path—Progression. Yet not all who start out on the Path, bid farewell to the

flesh, make progress thereon. The idea behind Mardi Gras, as popularly observed, may hold a major key to why this is so.

Many people look at Mardi Gras as being “a last fling.” It is a most reluctant farewell to the flesh, a fond lingering and holding on to the fleshly appetites because one is really not at all looking forward to what’s ahead—lent, reformation, restriction.

Bidding farewell to life’s lowest with this attitude is not at all likely to bring success to the pursuit of life’s highest and best. After Mardi Gras comes *Ash Wednesday*, also called *Shrove Wednesday*, because the truly penitent were said to be *shriven*, old English for *forgiven*.⁷ Genuine penitence is totally out of harmony with the idea of a last fling, because a last fling at the ways of the world implies love for them. Genuine penitence is the very opposite, abhorrence rather than attachment.

Of our Lord it is written, “Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity.”⁸ Most people readily profess to loving righteousness—the good, the true, the beautiful. But if they do not also at the same time hate iniquity, they may be unable to withstand its onslaught. “Love of flowers and vegetables is not enough to make a man a good gardener. He must also hate weeds.”⁹ This applies also to the garden of the soul. Scripture urges us to flee that which exerts a downward pull.¹⁰ But alas, all too many leave a forwarding address!

A statement of our Lord helps explain how He triumphed over temptation: “The prince of this world...hath nothing in Me.”¹¹ There was nothing in His nature that responded to the wiles of wickedness. Why? Because He had no love for it; He hated it! Temptation has no power over the person who despises what it offers. Thus Napoleon was furious at the Pope because he despised money—so he could not be bribed.

Suppose someone tosses a hat against a wall. It will drop to the floor, unless there is a hook on the wall to catch it. Similarly, unless there is a “hook” within the heart, temptation has nothing to latch on to. Reluctant abstinence from sin—merely because it is cerebrally considered wrong—leaves one dangerously vulnerable.

This principle of the need to hate the “bad” was

dramatically demonstrated during World War II as the world watched in astonished awe as the Nazis in 1940 militarily crushed supposedly impregnable France within six weeks. Actually, the Nazi victory had taken years. Long before 1940, Hitler, expecting eventual conflict with his neighbor to the west, sent in his agents. They knew they couldn’t

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convert the French masses to National Socialism, so they didn’t try. But they were able to convince a great many Frenchmen that Hitlerism wasn’t really “bad,” just another political system. So the French nation was unable to muster the necessary negative emotion—*hate*—toward the aggressor from the east. The total will to resist simply wasn’t there.

“The greatest sinner becomes in time the greatest saint.”¹² Why? Because he knows the horrible-ness of sin—enough to hate it. Thus some of the most ardent temperance advocates are former drunks. Martin Luther surely was on to something when he thundered from his pulpit, “If you’re going to sin, do it in a big way!” This will kick back more strongly and bring repentance more quickly. The three-packs-a-day smoker is far more likely to quit speedily than the one cigarette a month man—dead or alive!

There’s also this danger about the “Mardi Gras Mentality”: Today I’ll have my fling, tomorrow I’ll repent. Can we be sure we’ll have another 24 hours? “Boast not thyself of tomorrow.”¹³ It is dangerous to postpone changing one’s habits until some future time, even if it will be ours, because of human nature—the power of habit. The longer one continues on a certain course of behavior, the more difficult it becomes to abandon it.

Galen Drake, the radio-philosopher of the post World War II years, once told of a lad who decided

to work hard and save so he could one day start living luxuriously. He made his pile all right, but he was emotionally unable to change his habits of many years when financially he could have afforded to do so.

Some years later, the media informed us of a Texas tycoon who daily lugged his lunch to his office in a brown paper bag; the habit of years had become second nature. And then of course there's the famous case of Thomas Edison. When his wife urged him to take a vacation, go to the place he'd most loved to be—she found him next morning in his beloved laboratory! His inventions have changed human civilization, but he couldn't change the habit of years.

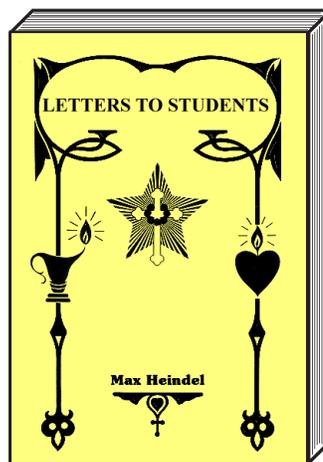
Most everyone knows about Niagara Falls, but not many know of Redemption Rock nearby. If one goes beyond it, one simply cannot turn back but is pulled toward and over the huge falls and to one's doom. That describes the great danger of the "Mardi Gras Mentality"—one does not know when one has persisted in one's ways so long that somehow one cannot turn back, or may not even want to. Habits, especially the bad ones, at first are like cobwebs, then ropes, then bands of steel.¹⁴

Should one say farewell to the flesh, have a spiritually motivated "carnival"? By all means, recognizing that postponing that which needs doing, that which is right, is wrong. □

—A Probationer

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1. *World Book Encyclopedia*, Volume 13, page 197.

2. The Christian feasts are all related to the planets. The *Rosicrucian Philosophy in Questions and Answers*, Volume I, Max Heindel, pages 178-180. Even as Easter, commemorating Christ's resurrection, comes when all nature comes alive, is resurrected, as it were—so part of Lent always accompanies the Sun's passage through Pisces, sign of restriction.

3. Ecclesiastes 3:4.

4. *U.S. News & World Report*, July 27, 1992, p. 13.

5. *The New Age Bible Interpretation*, Old Testament, Volume 1, Corinne Heline, p. 34.

6. Matthew 5:48.

7. *Encyclopedia Americana*, Volume 24, pages 768, 769.

8. Hebrews 1:9.

9. *Bartlett's Unfamiliar Quotations*, Edward Louis Levinson, editor, page 108.

10. 1 Timothy 6:11, 2 Timothy 2:22

11. John 14:30.

12. Corinne Heline, *op. cit.*, page 422.

13. Proverbs 27:1.

14. National habits of thought...left Germany susceptible to Nazism." *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 2, 1996, page B2. Italics supplied for emphasis.