

“Repent, and believe in the Gospel!” (Mk 1:15)

There’s a short video making the rounds on the Internet right now featuring a stubborn toddler. He has snatched a large, raw, peeled yellow onion and insists on eating what he calls “an apple”. His mother kindly says it isn’t an apple, so he shouldn’t eat it, but he is relentless. She finally gives in and lets him run his own experiment. The triumphant toddler digs in. He immediately realizes it is indeed not an apple, but he is too stubborn to concede his mother he was wrong, so the poor thing, tears streaming down his cheeks, his mouth smarting, goes on defiantly munching on the raw yellow onion, one bitter bite at a time.

One really feels torn between laughing at the child’s incredible stubbornness and grieving for his pain. But there really is a spiritual theme to pick up on here: what this toddler does is a sharp reminder of what sin is, and why we must heed Jesus’ call: “Repent, and believe in the Gospel!”

A lot of the sin we commit, brothers and sisters, is really dumb. Friends, family, teachers and mentors have warned us that this or that behavior is not a good thing to do, or to say, or to think. They kindly warned us, “This ain’t an apple, honey!”, but we chomp away. And even when we realize how bitter our act is, even when tears are streaming down our cheeks, we stubbornly go on munching, pretending everything is OK.

Well, everything is not OK. Some things we do really are harmful to us and to others. Some of them taste bitter even as we commit them: when you gossip, the sweetness of sharing secrets about someone else barely conceals the bitterness of not holding your peace. When you start shooting at students and staff at a school with an AR-15, I’m pretty sure that, even as you are murdering them, you realize how evil your crime. When you steal, or shoot up, or cheat on your spouse, even in the passion of the moment, you know you shouldn’t, and that this is going to have consequences, perhaps for the rest of your life.

Sin is really dumb, brothers and sisters. But we do it all the time, all of us. Some of the stuff we do is more serious; some, less. Some of it is like chewing and eating a bunch of fresh hot red peppers; some of it is only like biting into a purple onion: it only smarts a little. But our bodies are not made for that! We are made to enjoy the sweetness of real apples, not the saltiness of our tears!

It doesn’t take a Christian to know this: anybody who’s got even a barely awoken moral conscience realizes that sin is bad, even though all of us deny it most of the time. (Well, we deny it when we’re the ones sinning, because we’re often pretty good at picking up on other people’s sins and berating them...) So what good news is God bringing today?

The good news is that our tears don’t have the final say. Our God resolved a long time ago,

back in Noah's days, that He would not let us drown in our sin and sorrow; He established a covenant with all of humanity to rescue us from the salted sea of our sadness and signal us his saving love through the rainbow in the clouds. He invited us to trade the gray waters of our doom for a joyful, multicolored bow.

But Jesus came to teach us even more than that: by shedding His own blood and water for our sins, He won the battle over evil, sin, and death. We may not fully realize it yet, but Jesus has saved us! When the waters of the sacrament of baptism ran over our head and body, God redeemed us personally from sin and sorrow. If we accept His grace, we as Church are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people". (1 Pet 2:9) Indeed, Christ, "put to death in the flesh, has been brought to life in the Spirit" (1 Pet 3:18) He came to us who were locked "in prison" and saved us in baptism, joyfully lifting us up in his resurrection to share with Him in heaven at the right hand of God (see 1 Pet 3:19...22). Through the waters of baptism, our tears are tenderly washed away. We are saved.

But what about the sins we commit after baptism? You know the answer: we have the wonderful sacrament of reconciliation to restore us to our full baptismal life in all its purity. When we come forth and tell the priest about the onions we have dumbly been chewing on, Christ takes them away and gives us a basket of honest-to-God, sweet-tasting apples!

So many of you, brothers and sisters, already come for regular confession. You're doing a great job, keep it up! I now appeal to the rest of you who have lagged off from confession: please let go of those onions, fess up, and let yourselves be reconciled to God! Jesus loves you so much He gave His life for you! All He wants is to go on giving you the very best. Listen today to His joyful call: "Repent, and believe in the Gospel!" Because if you do listen to Him, even if you are hanging from the Cross, you can hear Him say: "Today, you will be with me in paradise!"

Fr. Nicolas Steeves, SJ

Visiting priest