

## 'The Fight Between Carnival and Lent'

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The familiar sights of colourful costumes and street parades have been dominating the images coming from the Rio Carnival in recent days; these and other similar festivities around the world will be culminating with Mardi Gras celebrations tomorrow. But this vibrant revelry in the days before Lent has dark origins, explains Oliver Rafferty SJ. What is at the root of the tension between the 'unbridled passion of Carnival' and 'the seriousness and restraint of Lent?'

For most of us, 'Carnival' is something we know about only from accounts we have read in glossy magazines or from television pictures of present day Rio de Janeiro and New Orleans. It seems to be innocent fun, as people dress up and parade through the streets in colourful displays in the run up to Lent. Although there is something exuberant and bubbly about Carnival, in its medieval origins it had an altogether more serious and even, perhaps, darker dimension.

It is not entirely clear where the term Carnival originates. It might be derived from the Latin *carnem levare*, to 'put away flesh meat', but given that lots of meat is actually consumed during Carnival some scholars have looked for its origins in others places. It is suggested that it derives from *carrus navalis*, the boat-shaped cart that was drawn through the streets of ancient Rome in connection with the festival of Saturnalia. Although the festivals of Carnival and Saturnalia have many features in common, historians are loath to make any direct connection between the two feasts. In fact, we find other similar festive occasions in ancient Mesopotamia and even in Judaism, where the festival of Purim has some features of Carnival such as dressing up, concealing identity, and engaging in play and



behaviour which would in other circumstances be considered *outré*.

In the Christian west, Carnival developed between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries in countries such as Spain, Portugal, Germany, France and Italy. The exact duration and nature of the festival varied from region to region. In some places it may

have begun as early as the Epiphany and lasted, intermittently, for forty days as a parallel to the forty days of fast and severity associated with Lent. More usually, Carnival begun on *Quinquagesima* Sunday, the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, and had its high point on Mardi Gras (Fat Tuesday). In northern Europe that day was given the more restrained title of Shrove Tuesday. 'Shrove' is an old English term which means 'to write'. It is probably applied to the idea of confession, because the priest would write out the penance of the person confessing his sins. This also harkens back to the old Irish penitentials where lists of appropriate penances were matched with particular sins. The practice survived in Ireland until the nineteenth century whereby individuals were examined by a catechist before making their confession, and if the catechist judged that they had sufficient knowledge of Christian doctrine he would give them a signed paper to present to the priest.

In some cultures, Mardi Gras highlighted the exuberant aspects of Carnival. By contrast, Shrove Tuesday emphasised the fact that people are to enter Lent having confessed their sins and being shriven by a priest. It could well be that the place given to the confession of sins was an attempt by the clergy to restrain the more licentious aspects of Carnival and to introduce a note of seriousness as the revellers were about to enter the season of Lent.

Tension between Carnival and Lent is perhaps a feature of the festival from its very inception in the Middle Ages. But Carnival's significance was not simply as a contrast to the solemnity of Lent. Its most important social function was as a highly ritualised challenge to the established order of Church and State. Although elements such as excessive eating and drinking were part and parcel of the festivities, they were not necessarily the most important. Carnival represented an alternative to the fixed hierarchy of values in society and a desire to invert societal and ecclesiastical norms. This was often done under the cover of anonymity and hence the need for the dressing up and masking of participants. This essential element gave individuals freedom to indulge in chaotic displays of anarchic behaviour which sought to undermine the sanctimonious seriousness of 'normal' life. Under concealment of the mask, standard conduct was set aside and people engaged in activities that would conventionally be forbidden and normally be regarded as criminal or sinful.

The idea of social inversion was present from the days of Saturnalias, where slaves sat down with their masters and ate with them, and abused them and the absurdities of domestic life. That event was presided over by a 'king of chaos', whose commands, even the most outrageous of which, had to be obeyed. One of his roles was to encourage unbridled licentiousness, gluttony, drunkenness and disorder. However, there was a price to be paid: in some instances the king of chaos was sacrificed at the end of the festival to indicate that conventional order had been restored. Many of these features were preserved in medieval Carnival. The Carnival king had much the same role as the king of chaos, and that was to encourage excess. However, his rule was not ended by death but by the burning of an effigy, or sometimes the burial of a model, with the hint of a resurrection twelve months later. The Carnival king also represents the idea that the fool can be the ruler. Such a trope was a commonplace in other

medieval festivals such as the Feast of Fools or the Feast of Innocence, where we find the 'king of fools' or the 'boy bishop'. Not unlike as in Carnival these individuals led the way in parodying societal norms, in this case mocking the activities of rulers and bishops.

A fundamental motif of Carnival was setting aside the stratification that came about with dogmatic religion and a rigid monarchical political system, both of which could appear far removed from everyday life. This ritualised and controlled spectacle offered the possibility to both challenge and invert the social order. After the excess of Carnival, Lent gave the opportunity to contemplate in a sombre way the limits of the experimental, and to meditate on the fixed realities of heaven, hell, death and judgement. But the purpose of Carnival was to demonstrate that those solemn motifs were not the only considerations in how human beings lived their lives. Equally, the temporary abandonment of conventional human norms was an indication of what the individual and society would be like if such norms, both spiritual and societal, did not exist. The resulting chaos might initially seem attractive and fun, but it could not long endure as a way of living one's life.

The reversals and mixing of roles, the confusion and crossover of gender involving transvestism, the calling into question of political, social and ecclesiastical authority, social identity and language itself, were all amalgamated into a grand meta-narrative about what truly constitutes reality for the human person, which in the context of Carnival takes places in a world that had been turned upside down.

Another important aspect of Carnival and its excesses was its communal dimension. The activities that were engaged in were not the solitary pleasures of self-satisfied individual indulgence, but human extravagance lived out on a grand scale in the midst of the community from whom, like God, nothing is hidden. This also found expression in some places in the development of songs for the festival, songs aimed against certain types of professions such as goldsmiths, or songs intended to make fun of social realities such as young women married to old and rich husbands.

If the point of Carnival was unrestrained freedom for the individual and the community, it was also seen as a turning point in the year and a reminder of turning points in human existence in general. The cycle of joy

and sorrow, of life and death is mirrored in the unbridled passion of Carnival which gives way to the seriousness and restraint of Lent. All the things that marked Carnival were abandoned in the holy season: meat, eggs, dairy products, alcohol were all given up, sexual activity was discouraged and marriages forbidden. But Carnival also gave rise to the expression of the more sinister aspects of human nature: the anarchical aspects were associated with violence, the neglect of the poor and marginalised; and the grotesque and deformed were celebrated. In the Roman Carnival the procession necessitated every participant carrying a candle, and the object was to try to snuff out the candles of others as a reminder of death. It is said that children in particular delighted in extinguishing the candles of their parents, declaring as they did, 'you're dead now'. Some social historians, however, are struck by the fact that more demonic aspects of Carnival were intended to confront 'hypocritical' society with its unacknowledged darker side.

Be that as it may, in some respects the Church tried to confront the grosser aspects of Carnival. Although in the Middle Ages it never forbade the feast, it did in time try to modify it. Whilst Pope Paul II (1464-71) especially loved Carnival, some of his successors looked askance at it, with Pope Sixtus V (1585-90) being most notable in this respect. But he lived of course at the height of the Counter-Reformation, when the Church was keen to reform the more superstitious and outlandish aspects of Catholic mores and practice. Such an outlook represents a great departure from an early fifteenth-century treatise from the faculty of theology at the University of Paris. There it was argued that Carnival served to release the vapours of indiscipline that built up in the human spirit throughout the year, and therefore Carnival actually assisted order in Church and society.

The Renaissance tried to emphasise the more artistic aspects of Carnival, and costumes began to conform to recognised types such as the harlequin. The masked ball was intended to reduce the more raffish elements, and parades of floats replaced rowdier street processions. This marks a transition to Carnival as a spectator sport for the multitude, whereas in the Middle Ages Carnival was not something people watched, it was something that they lived. These sanitising tendencies would be exacerbated by the Enlightenment, and nineteenth-century secular intellectuals would repud-

iate the irrational and disordered aspects of Carnival in terms worthy of any seventeenth-century puritan divine. Nor is it without significance that the subversive motifs of Carnival would cause Mussolini to abolish the Carnival of Venice in Fascist Italy

In 1559, Pieter Bruegel the Elder painted a splendid representation of the themes discussed above in his ['The Fight Between Carnival and Lent'](#). This in itself was a favourite tale of the Middle Ages: 'The Conflict between the foods of Carnival and Lent'. In Bruegel's painting, Carnival and Lent joust. King Carnival, on the left hand side of the picture, is rolled along astride a large barrel of beer. His lance is a spit with a pig's head and other meats, and a pie is on his head as a cap. On the right 'Lady Lent' is an emaciated nun pulled along by a friar and a pious lay woman. Her lance is a long wooden paddle with fish, and her head is crowned with a beehive, a symbol for the Church. The order and restraint of the right hand side of the picture is in contrast to the chaos and debauchery of the left. Taken together both sides represent the totality of human experience. At first glance, the Carnival side is the more attractive of the representations; nevertheless, human pleasure cannot last forever, whereas the fruit of Lent is to endure for eternity. Furthermore overindulgence gives rise to sickness for at least one of the characters.

Bruegel's intention, however, was not to denounce Carnival, nor even to posit that Lent is the better of the two, but rather to suggest that Carnival and Lent are the natural extremes of human experience; each has its own proper sphere, place and season. Life contains both. But our eyes are also drawn to two figures, husband and wife, in the centre of the painting. They do not appear to belong to either Carnival or Lent. Their path is illuminated by a 'fool' dressed in costume who carries a light although it is still daytime. Perhaps they represent moderation in the face of the human extremes: models of what we should strive for in life, neither weighed down by asceticism nor given to dissipation. But there is perhaps also a hint that even here all is not well. The lighted path on which they trod is not particularly narrow (Matt 7:14), and the 'fool' who leads them appears to be veering towards Carnival – perhaps the 'natural' tendency of the human condition.

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