

Sermon by Bradley Opdyke March 10, 2014 to Wesley Uniting Church

Good morning everyone and welcome to our first Sunday in Lent. Our bible readings this morning include the story of Adam and Eve and Christ's temptation in the desert. I hope you all will forgive me because I am going to stray from the lectionary a bit today, because something has been bugging me, and it is an ethical question, so I feel it is an appropriate discussion to have. And in a round about way is one of those 'mountain top' experiences for me, this way I can draw on one of David's themes from last week...

A couple of weeks ago I was reading an article about a book by a man by the name of John Yudkin that was published in 1972 and sort of sank without a trace until just a few years ago. The name of the book was *Pure, White, and Deadly*. With the subtitle 'New facts about the sugar you eat as a cause for heart disease, diabetes, and other killers.'... John Yudkin was a Cambridge graduate and the Professor of Nutrition at Queen Elizabeth College in London. The book was published close to his retirement and represented the culmination of decades of research. What is scary about the Yudkin story is the fact that when he tried to publicize his findings at various meetings he found that the session he was due to speak in would be cancelled and this happened a number of times. Why? Well it turns out a particular soft drink company managed to use the threat of pulling sponsorship to get the talks cancelled. Apparently Yudkin remained an upbeat person and kept at it and ultimately published the book, but unfortunately the book never really took off. In the subsequent 40 years all the consequences that warned about Yudin have come to pass, the exponential increase in type 2 diabetes, heart disease and childhood obesity being the most obvious. He is now being hailed as a bit of a Prophet.

That is example number one, the second example of corporations delaying health warnings, and around the same time is of course the tobacco industry and most people are familiar with that one so I won't belabour the point.

Example number 3 is one that is near and dear to my heart because the hero is a geochemist. His name was Clair Patterson and he was a Professor of Geochemistry at Caltech. He was a very clever guy and specialised in the geochemistry of lead. In fact, he was the one that used Pb-Pb dating to give us the roughly 4 and half billion year age of the Earth that we use today. If we go back to the early 1970s again it was being noted with some alarm in the US that children's blood lead levels had been rising steadily for over a much of the 20th century, lead is a known neurotoxin in children and reduces IQ if concentrations reach high enough levels and people were asking why the dramatic increase? I remember seeing ads on TV, they were trying to blame the lead increase on babies and toddlers chewing paint chips that might be flaking off the window sills who they were sponsored by, I don't know... but I have my suspicions. Clair Patterson knew that he could probably trace the source. Lead from different deposits have different Pb isotope ratios and he measured these isotopes for a living... to cut a longer story short he found that the lead isotope signature in the children's blood matched the lead isotope signature for lead that was used in 'leaded' petrol. The oil company that owned the patent for this additive was furious (it was a monopoly product and making handsome profits) and went to the President of Caltech and demanded he put a muzzle on Prof. Patterson or they would pull their money in the form of grants and donations from the University. The President stood up to them and sent them on their way. Leaded petrol was largely phased out of

use by 1980 in the US, though was available in some areas until 1995. But if it wasn't for Clair Patterson, odds are we might still be blaming raising children's blood lead levels on paint chips...

Of course, as a scientist who studies climate change, particularly with respect to past climates I've become a bit cynical about the role corporations take in forming public opinion, particularly if some information comes along that would negatively impact their profits, and I would put to you that we need a Hippocratic Oath for corporations. One of the best versions of this oath that I've heard is as follows... "As to diseases, make a habit of two things - to help, or at least to do no harm". One would think that circumscribing corporate activities that harm people at both an international and national level would be a no brainer, yet such guidelines do not exist. In the case of tobacco I don't have a problem with these industries going about their business, now that everyone knows the dangers. What bothers me about the sugar issue is that I could have been educated to the dangers of high sugar intake as a young person, but was deprived of that information as a whole generation or two was... depending on how you count your generations. Now that this information is out there, health organisations have moved relatively quickly to lower the recommended limit of sugar to 5 grams of sugar a day. Any guesses as to how many grams a typical can of Coke has... something on the order of 30 grams, enough to make anyone's pancreas scream and the concentration of sugar in the energy drinks that are so popular with students is higher still. Now I have to admit I love my sweets... I have a serious sweet tooth, so this information hurts, but I am changing my lifestyle. I no longer have sugar with my coffee and tea and am limiting other confections to special occasions, sadly though, I think I'm done with large desserts for this lifetime... but it is a temptation, every day. I'm not sure how to approach Halloween without candy... Which is where I can make the Segway back to the bible readings for today. After fasting 40 days and 40 nights, Christ was offered dominion over the world as dictator if he would worship the devil and he refused. Fasting has a long history as a mechanism for getting in touch with ones spiritual side. As we go through Lent I would urge you all to look at your sugar intake and the temptation it represents for us all... but don't stop at Lent, we are going to need to reevaluate our lifestyles as we move into the future and hopefully we can face these temptations as resolutely as Christ did in the Desert.