

Homily **8th Sunday in Ordinary Time - Year C** (3.3.19)

“A person's words flow out of what fills their heart”,
words taken from Our Lord in the Gospel today.

This is so true, and Jesus really brings to a head all the Old Testament comments on the evil of the tongue and words that are badly used. A person's words flow out of what fills their heart. And I love his imagery of the plank and the splinter. Because I don't know about you, but I find it easier to list the faults of others. Hands up if you do? [good show of hands in the congregation]. Yeah. Not that we have any ourselves, of course, but it's so easy. It's so true, is Jesus' teaching, that we are often blinded to our own faults.

And you know, the New Testament is full of comments about the use of words and how we speak to one another, in the positive and in the negative. And one of the best ones is Saint James, he has a whole section on the evil of the tongue, and he gives lots of images. One of the images I love in particular is, he says:

“The tongue is only a tiny thing in the body, and yet it's like the rudder of a ship. Wherever you steer it, the body goes.”

In other words, it affects everything we do, the tongue. What we say affects what we do, and affects other people. And it made me think about the things we say and utter: words are so important. The word was made flesh and lived among us. And we have to reflect that to others and not the evil word we can so easily proclaim.

And I was thinking where do bad words and arguments come from. And there's lots of sources, and I've highlighted a few.

Uncontrolled anger, it's a terrible thing. Now, my parish priest, who was my first parish priest, was a lovely man. I did adore him, so I don't

want you to take this wrong. He's dead now, so I can say it, because he had a very, very bad temper. And he was Irish. I'm sure that's nothing to do with it, you know. [laughter] And it took me a while to get used to it because you felt flattened when he lost his temper. And you realize how destructive it is. I used to find it destructive, and then I got the measure of it. And I used to know when I came in the house, it didn't happen often, but when he was he was beaming with a strange smile I knew not to engage him. It was all based on when somebody or something had ruffled him up, and the next person he met got it. You know, I don't know whether you're one of those people. And we need to control uncontrolled temper. It's a matter of discipline. Because it's so destructive. It knocks people down, throws them off balance. The words we use can cut to the quick, and indeed the words we use can be uncontrolled too and bear no relation to the incident that happened, and only sow dissension and fear.

My other favourite source of bad words is summed up in a very Yorkshire phrase. Well, you would normally call it

"speaking the truth", but it's not quite like that.

It's the Yorkshire version:

"I speak as I find, Father." [laughter]

I'm sure you've heard that one. And of course, people who speak as they find are not really telling the truth, they're just being nasty and cruel. And I can give you an example. I think people can have **uncontrolled mouths**. I was born with one. And I am now trying to curb it over the last few years. I remember when I was younger, because I often can't help saying what comes into my head when I see something, and I remember somebody saying to me, it made me alert to this flaw,

"You know, the trouble with you," they said,

"is you haven't got a gate on your mouth."

And it made me go away and think, and it's so true, we need to develop a gate on our mouths. Because an open gate, the horse bolts, and we don't know what offense we cause. You know, Father Mark, for those of

you who remember him, being a gentleman and Benedictine-trained, trained in the motto

"good manners are next to holiness", had a lovely way of putting it. He said,

"You know, you should never always tell the truth. The virtue is charity."

And he said,

"So, if your mother or your sister comes down the stairs and says 'What do you think of my dress?', and you think it's hideous, you say, 'Charming, darling.'" [laughter].

Because charity should reign over truth.

The other cause of bad words, and this reveals what's in a person's heart, as Jesus says, is **disliking people**. You know, I've said this before, but you can't help in the main who you like and dislike. It's a matter of chemistry. There are just some people in everybody's life that you can't stand, and it's nothing to do with what they're like, but what we are like. And what comes from our heart is often very cleverly-cloaked bile. You know, the cutting remark, the cutting short because you don't want to engage them. And the sad thing is that this becomes neurological. I was reading a very interesting medical article about people's behaviour. And it was saying: If we have a reaction to someone that's repeated, it forms a neurological link from the brain to the heart to the mouth, and you need to break that neurological link if you're going to stop the bad habit. And this person suggested the only way you can break this link, is by thinking of, conjuring up for yourself, a regular thing you will do, which is an image of a place where you're peaceful or a person who brings you peace, and have that like a flash card in the back of your head, so that when you see the person coming towards you that you dislike, you flash this card in front of you and it breaks the neurological link. It's good practice, and stops you opening your mouth in bad words. It's very important that we recognize how damaging our words can be just because we dislike someone.

And another one, which is not as serious, but nevertheless damaging is **misunderstanding**. If misunderstanding isn't corrected, the words that flow can become terrible. And my favourite example is emails. I can't stand emails. How do you know the tone of an email?

'Are you going to London?'

Well, what does that mean? Is he telling you off?

'Are you going to London again?'

Or, is it seeking information? Or, is it,

'Have you made up your mind, or are you still uncertain?'

Because unlike a nicely designed letter or a conversation, electronic communication so often leads to misunderstanding rather than information. And I can give you an example, an innocent one. When I first developed sleep apnoea, and it was just diagnosed, and the machine that I have to wear to see how bad my sleep apnoea was, this is when you stop breathing and the body wakes you up, even though you don't recognize it, to make you breathe. And you can have a heart attack if it's not treated long-term. And when I was tested for it, the consultant told me that I woke up 24 times that night to make me breathe and I wasn't conscious of waking up once. It just jolts you. And of course, it makes you very tired because you don't get REM sleep. And I remember, at the time, when I was dealing with the emails, which I hate, I was giving quick answers. And I remember the last administrator before we had the Bishop of the diocese, John Wilson sent me something and I just wrote back very quickly:

'It's such and such and such and such. Richard.'

And I must have done this to him twice, because I then got an email off him that said,

'I find your emails very rude,' though they weren't meant to be. And then I suddenly realized looking back, I didn't put 'Dear so-and-so,' or any polite statement like 'I hope you are well' - You know, a no tone with it. So I wrote back immediately and apologized and said,

"This is one of the results of my sleep apnoea."

And I got a beautiful email back saying,

"Thanks for being so honest."

But if we don't do that when there's misunderstanding, we take umbrage, our words go back to them with anger and you start the vicious circle of violence, because words can create violence.

And the last one on the list [I haven't mentioned salaciousness or bad language, because I know none of you do that] [laughter] No. The next one on my list is **gossip**. And I think it's one of the worst. Gossip's a terrible thing. I don't know why we do it. It's probably to feel better than the person we're gossiping about, or maybe we love giving tittle-tattle information, and it's destructive and it kills. We've all seen a lot on telly recently of abusive, controlling behaviour. Well, I think gossip is near to that, because gossip is about having control and power over others.

Calumny and detraction. Calumny is, of course, telling lies or twisting the truth about a person, and detraction is telling the truth. No, truth isn't a virtue. Don't you think truth is a virtue in its own right. Charity is the virtue. It's whether people have a right to that truth, or whether that truth would be uncharitable. Because truth is a virtue only when it's about the good of the other. So telling the truth to darken somebody's name, a truth you found out about their past or whatever, this is murder. It's murder of a character. And it is possible to overcome the habit of gossip by good discipline. My Uncle Joe, my mother's brother, I used to admire him. He was a great man. And if anybody came up to him and said,

"Have you heard about so-and-so?" he would say,

"Look, if you're not going to say anything good about them, I don't want to know."

Now, wasn't that brave? Could you imagine saying that to people you know? He said it nicely. He said,

"Look, if you've not got a nice thing to say about them, I don't want to hear it. Thanks."

Now, I think that was courageous and Christian.

And the reason I raise this about what we say, because it's all in the Gospel today in the readings, is because it struck me looking at these readings, a very frightening phrase of our Lord. And if you believe in God and Jesus' teaching, then you need to take heed when examining yourself. Because Jesus says elsewhere

'you will have to answer for every idle word you utter'.