

Holy Spirit Province

PROVINCIAL NEWSLETTER

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HELPFUL OR HARMFUL WORDS: SUNDAY 8C

A little boy was saying his bed-time prayers in a very soft voice. 'I can't hear you dear', his mother whispered. Back came his firm reply: 'Wasn't talking to you.' One day the philosopher, Aesop, was asked what is the most useful thing in the world. 'The tongue,' the philosopher replied. 'And what,' they asked, 'is the most harmful thing in the world?' 'The tongue,' he answered once more. A famous duchess once confessed to St Philip Neri in Rome the sin of gossiping. He told her to go home, get a feather pillow, and come back to the steps of the church. When he met her there, he handed her a small knife and asked her to rip open the pillow. As she did, she watched the loose feathers dance round and round the church square and along the adjoining lanes. 'Now go and pick up all those feathers,' Philip said. 'I can't possibly find and collect them all,' she replied. So Philip made his point: 'You have no idea either where your words go, and you can never unsay them.'

I think we would all agree that God's gift of speech, when it is used well - to build up others but not to put them down - is enormously useful. It encourages others, it develops friendships, it promotes sharing and community, and it brings joy. On the other hand, when our words are angry, bitter, sneering, cynical, sarcastic, spiteful, contemptuous and abusive, they can wreck the self-confidence of others, foment hatred and hostility, and even contribute to wrecking a marriage or career.

No wonder then the Wise One states in our First Reading today, 'the test of a person is in conversation'. Jesus too was well aware of the capacity of speech to do good or to do harm. So he has a particularly strong message for any of us with a tendency towards 'foot in mouth disease'.

Before we blurt out anything, Jesus wants us to be careful about how we think and feel about others and how we judge them. So, what a cheek we have if, with our eyes blind to our own faults, acting like big logs in our line of vision, we find fault with our neighbour, whose faults, by comparison, may be like mere specks in the eye! How dare we then proceed to correct them! What hypocrisy!

Many of us find ourselves called to be leaders and guides. We may, e.g. be parents, teachers, and employers, and it's our job and responsibility to set and uphold standards, and to communicate both expectations and limits. But as the saying goes, 'it's not what you say, but the way that you say it', that makes all the difference. When persons receiving our guidance know that we are speaking to them with tact, kindness and generosity, when they see that we are practising what we preach, when they see us as good, genuine and consistent, and when they know that we are for them, not against them, then great progress can be made in leader-follower relationships.

On the other hand, the kind of responsibility for others that is expressed as 'don't do as I do, do as I say', which we frequently hear in arguments and rows on TV between parents and teenagers, gets nowhere.

Much of what Jesus is saying about this can be summed up in his wise words: 'Out of the goodness of the heart, a good person produces good, and out of a malicious heart, an evil person produces evil, for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks.' We cannot afford to contract that kind of 'heart disease', those ways of thinking, feeling and living that leave us with hard hearts and cruel speech to or about other people.

On the other hand, Jesus has not taught that there is never a place for criticism, challenge, confrontation, and correction among his followers. Just that we have the responsibility to be very careful about what we say about others, and how we criticize and condemn them! Building and sharing a 'dirt file' on others and mangling their reputation can, in fact, be very harmful, evil and sinful.

It's appropriate, then, that we give our hearts a regular check-up. I recommend that at the end of each day, we run a little performance review on ourselves. 'How did I go today?', we might ask ourselves. 'Whom did I meet today? What

did I say to her? What did I say to him? Was I helpful or hurtful? Was I friend or foe? We might then round off our reflection (what used to be called an 'examination of conscience') with a prayer. For any inappropriate words, a plea for mercy and forgiveness! For all the good things we said, a prayer of thanksgiving!

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