



The Holy Spirit Province NEWSLETTER

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HELPFUL OR HARMFUL WORDS: 8TH SUNDAY C

Ecclesiasticus 27:4-7; 1 Corinthians 15:54-58; Luke 6: 39-45

A little boy was saying his bedtime 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,' he 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 - is enormously useful. It encourages people, 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 selfconfidence of others, foment resentment, hatred and hostility, and even contribute to wrecking a marriage or career. Facebook, Twitter, Tik Tok, and Instagram users, let's be careful with our messages, then!

It's no wonder that 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 faults acting like big logs in our line of vision, we find fault with our neighbour, whose faults, by comparison, are like mere specks in the eye! And how dare we then proceed to correct them!

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 so much what you say, but how 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 realize that we are for them, not against them, great progress can be made in leader-follower, parent-child, teacher-student, employer-employee 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, either 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 to and about others, and how we criticize and correct them! Building and sharing a 'dirt file' on others and mangling their reputation can be particularly 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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