

Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time—Year C

Whenever Jesus uses strong images in his teachings and parables, remember to focus on the teaching behind the image and not fixate on the image itself. For example, Jesus taught that anyone who became a stumbling block to another, it would be better for them to tie a millstone around their neck and to hurl themselves into the sea. Jesus also taught that one should cut off their hand, or their foot or pluck out their eye if it should cause you to sin. Jesus is not advocating self-amputation or self-mutilation here. He is using strong, even violent imagery here to make a strong point. Besides, the eye, foot or hand does not cause one to sin. It is the self-will that causes one to sin. Our limbs simply co-operate with the will.

Jesus is using strong images to say avoid being a scandal to others, of enabling them to fall into sin and avoid falling into sin yourself by all means at your disposal.

So when we come to this Gospel reading, relating the speck in one's neighbour's eye and the log within one's own eye, it is important not to fixate on this surreal image, but to appreciate the teaching behind the image.

But before we delve into the Gospel Reading, let's explore the First Reading drawn from the Book of Sirach.

The Book of Sirach is the last of the Wisdom Books in the Old Testament. It was written around 200 BC by Jesus Ben Sirach, who lived in Alexandria in a community of diaspora Jews, Jews who lived outside of Israel. The Book of Sirach is a summation of the Israelite Wisdom tradition. The First Reading passage is addressing a mature man, one who has achieved some measure of respect and high status in society. He is reminded that one facet of maintaining wisdom is to have integrity. That integrity is revealed in one's speech. While one can deceive another through one's speech, the deception will eventually be found out. Once one is found to lack integrity, one's character will suffer irreparable harm in the eyes of others.

The Responsorial Psalm continues echoes the insights found in the First Reading, that one must conscientiously use one's speech to express integrity. The Psalm also reminds the reader to use their words to praise God. If one sings praise to

God, proclaims God's kindness and faithfulness, then one will stand fast and flourish. That person will be rightly judged to be a person of integrity by others, as evidenced by their fruitful lives.

In this Gospel, Jesus shows himself to be a wisdom teacher, instructing his disciples with short, wisdom sayings employing memorable examples and word-pictures. The fountainhead of this kind of instruction in Israel was Solomon, David's first "son" or heir. Now Jesus, the ultimate son and heir of David, surpasses Solomon in his ability to teach and communicate wisdom.

There are three topics addressed in our Gospel: the importance of a teacher as a model; the danger of hypocrisy; and the mark of a good person.

First, Jesus stresses the importance of the role of a teacher as model. With few exceptions, students do not surpass their teacher in knowledge and virtue. Therefore, if the teacher is vicious to begin with, there is little hope for the followers. This ought to be instructive for those of us in Western culture, where we often follow the principles taught by famous teachers who were perverse and ignoble in their personal lives. How can we expect society to be elevated by the doctrines of men who themselves were so unsuccessful as human beings?

Secondly, Jesus warns about the danger of falling into hypocrisy, with his metaphors of the beam and the splinter in the eye. One could summarize Jesus' teaching here by saying that *examination of conscience* is necessary before *fraternal correction*. We tend to be blind to our own faults and hyperconscious of others. We are aware of all the mitigating factors that go into our own mistakes, but not those influencing others. That's why patience is in order before judging the actions of others. We need to take care: Is my irritation with my brother or sister due to my own issues, rather than his or hers? I have I provoked my brother to act the way he does by my own misbehavior? Am I not seeing something relevant about this situation due to my own self-interest? St. Josemaria recommended checking with a mature third party who knows you both before making a fraternal correction.

Finally, Jesus advises on how to recognize a good from a bad person, and the key distinguishing mark is very empirical: *their fruits*, which probably means: "their words, deeds, and influence on other people." At the end of the parable Jesus singles out speech as an example of the "fruit" that a person produces: "from the

fullness of the heart the mouth speaks,” but “fruit” is broader than simply words (as we can see from other passages in the Gospel), and includes a person’s deeds and the effect they have on others and the whole community.

St. James seems to expand and expound on Jesus’ teaching in the third chapter of his famous Epistle:

James 3:6 *And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is an unrighteous world among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell. 7 For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by humankind, 8 but no human being can tame the tongue — a restless evil, full of deadly poison. 9 With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. 10 From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so. 11 Does a spring pour forth from the same opening fresh water and brackish? 12 Can a fig tree, my brethren, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.*

The point is, corrupt language is a sign of the corruption of the heart. This is reason for us to pause and reflect. Language reflects the heart, and in turn shapes the heart, which is why Jesus warns that at the judgment we will have to give account of every careless word we’ve spoken. That is a sobering thought, and leads us to reflect: do my words consistently honor God? This would rule out angry, abusive, sarcastic, cutting, mocking, provocative, salacious, ambiguous, and critical kinds of speech.

Because the second commandment forbids only the taking of the name of the Lord in vain, some wrongfully have the idea that only false or vain swearing is a sin, and other kinds of coarse or profane language are not technically sins. This is incorrect: there are many ways to sin with words that do not involve misuse of the name of God or other holy persons.

God created the world through words, and as creatures in the image of God, our words, too, have the power to influence reality. Let’s pray this Sunday for a purification of our hearts through the Holy Spirit, so that our speech, flowing from a pure heart, will be like a life-giving stream of cool fresh water to those who hear it.

