



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

8th Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year C-March 3rd 2019

Readings: Ecclesiasticus 27: 4-7, Psalm 91, 1 Paul 15: 54-58,

Luke 6: 39-45

A year or two back I travelled up to visit an old friend who was dying. He was my age and succumbing to an unholy alliance of cancer and dementia. As we sat by his hospital bed words came and went – some fluently, some lost to his control. He was trying to describe a memorable piece of bowling (Bill was a top cricket coach) and the correct words abandoned him as he tried to describe the ever arcing subtleties of the flight. His hands went up again and again heavenward. While he wrestled with the desertion of his vocabulary, I chipped in, ‘That’s where we are all trying to get to, Bill, Heaven.’ Bill paused, heaved a sigh, looked straight at Sara who was with me and said straight, clear and without hesitation, ‘I see he’s still a smartarse then.’ Laughter rang round the hospital ward. An old friend, he hadn’t missed a trick. I was chastised and reminded that a facility with words isn’t a guarantee of wisdom or veracity.

Today’s readings take us to the core of the dangers of language. My life has been a long love affair with words, their quality, tone, meaning, effect, symphonic power, provocative juxtaposition and their ability to invoke the best and the worst, to evoke the full range of our humanity. They are a supreme gift of our communion one with another and a

potential weapon of our disintegration and mutual misery. Sit down and read the Beatitudes of Christ and you will be lifted Heavenward. Read the anti-semitic rantings of Martin Luther and his philosophical successor at the Nuremberg Rallies and you will be sucked into a maelstrom of darkness and a glimpse of Hell. Words are power. How could it be otherwise when Scripture tells us that everything was created by the Word of God. The same holy texts teach us that everything can be redeemed by the Word of God incarnate, Jesus Christ, Our Lord.

Words matter. How we use them is important.

‘The defects of a man appear in his talk’. ‘A man’s words betray what he feels’. ‘The test of a man is his conversation’.

The Apostle James describes the tongue is like the rudder of a ship – small but determinative. Like a tiny spark that can set a forest ablaze – incendiary out of all proportion. A pest that is full of poison and hard to control. The same tongue blesses God and curses the man made in his image. We need self control and we need accuracy and we need benevolent intention.

Much of today’s conversations are made up of clichéd vagueness. The incessant use of the words ‘like’ and ‘so’ and ‘kind of’ and ‘you know’, coupled with the raising of the voice implying a question and general assent. Sentences without content. ‘So I’m kind of like you know thinking maybe like Jesus is not as like amazing maybe as you know.....’ Endless unfinished sentences simply imply an assent to the cultural norm with which it would be foolish to disagree. The use of words to conform to the spirit of the age.

Political conversations seldom go deeper than headlines.

'Backstop', 'Crisis', 'Catastrophe' 'Cliff edge' 'Hard line'. We have heard these a million times with little detail underpinning the conclusions and the almost complete abolition of informed reflection. The industrial production of words to obfuscate and obscure the essential reality.

Responses today must be instant. Thus we find a social media which is cruel and dismissive and wounding in its general currency. The use of words to attack and demean and, in some tragic cases, to destroy.

Jesus reminds us that we all know what is wrong with the other bloke. The idiot has got a bit of sawdust in his eye and can't see straight – a not unfamiliar image for a boy brought up in a carpenter's shop. But just before we go and point this out to him and offer to put him straight, Jesus says, we need to get the ruddy great log out of our own eye. Self awareness, self criticism is the key to being useful to others. The plank of our prejudice, stupidity, self importance needs to be dealt with first. Knowing what is wrong with other people is not the first step on the road to wisdom- knowing our own handicaps is.

Our use of words indicates who we are. Do we use them for the good of man? My old boss, the late Dean of St. Alban's Abbey, Peter Moore, used to seethe beside me if he heard a negative sermon. 'Aedificare' – he would hiss. 'Build them up.' I thought of this the other day when a radio programme on business reported the finding that, for every negative comment we made to another person, it would take five positive comments to begin to undo the damage. This was true in business relations with staff as it was in marriage apparently.

That is not to say we must be bland but it is a reminder of how damaging the tongue can be and how much more is achieved by the ministry of

encouragement. I will take constructive criticism from someone whom I know loves me. Our conversations spring from the heart and that heart must reflect the love of God and his intentions for Man. A man will respond to the offer of help with his splinter if he has witnessed the removal of your plank. He will not trust his sight to a man whose perception is terminally impeded by a veritable floorboard of unexamined error.

I preach to myself when I say, think today of how you can reduce the critic in you and become the builder up of others. Think today of the value of reflecting before you speak. Think today of the power of your words to build up or undermine. And remember, 'The Man who thinks with his mouth is a fool.'