

Eighth Sunday *per annum*
Year C, 2025

Sir 27:4-7

1 Cor 15:54-58

Ps 103

Lk 6:39-45

The mouth speaks

The mouth speaks. These are the final words of the Lord Jesus in the gospel passage that we have just heard. *The mouth speaks.* Indeed it does. Jesus is channeling the wisdom passed down through the generations in works like the Book of Wisdom, and Proverbs, and Sirach, from which our first reading was taken. The wisdom literature of the Old Testament is full of admonitions about speech. But the wisdom that Jesus wishes to give his disciples is contextualized by the words that came right before: *from the fullness of the heart.* If the heart is full of goodness, the mouth will speak goodness. If the heart is full of evil, then the mouth will speak evil.

The lesson is plain enough for a child to understand: I know what is in your heart by the way you speak, by what you speak. If what you speak is foulness and falsehood, if it is rancor and resentment, if it is hostility and anger, if it is foolishness and disinformation, then I know that these things are in your heart. Rotten fruit from a rotten tree. Not my words. Jesus's words.

But if what you speak is gentleness and truth, if it is peaceable and kind, if it is useful and necessary, if it is joyfulness and gratitude, then I know that these things are in your heart. Good fruit from a good tree. Again, not my words.

In the letters of the New Testament, written by Paul and John, and James and Peter, we are not surprised to find echoes of the Master's teachings on speech. For instance, here is one passage from St Paul, from his letter to the Ephesians: *No foul language should come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for needed edification, that it may impart grace to those who hear* (4:29). No bad words. Stop saying bad words. Say only what builds up, only what is necessary for building up. Sometimes that means saying hard things, correcting. But we must do so in a way that *imparts grace to those who hear*. Otherwise, with angry or contemptuous words, they will not hear the message, only the judgment.

As if to complete his teaching about not using *foul language*, St Paul continues with these words: *All bitterness, fury, anger, shouting, and reviling must be removed from you, along with all malice. And be kind to one another, compassionate, forgiving one another as God has forgiven you in Christ* (4:31-32). Shouting and reviling, bitter, furious, angry speech: Christian disciples must remove these from their lives, along with malice, which is ill will. *From the fullness of the heart...*

In the letter of James, who is following the teaching of his Master, the Lord Jesus, we read the following in the first chapter, as if to highlight its importance: *everyone should be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath, for the wrath of a man does not accomplish the righteousness of God* (1:19-20).

You don't even have to be Christian for the wisdom and truth of these words to make sense. God, if we'd only shut up! And stop listening to people who won't shut up! There would be so much more peace, so much more harmony, so much more patience and good will. And we'd get so much more done, worthy and worthwhile things.

Implicit in what James writes is that we should be wary of listening to those who are slow to hear (anyone but themselves and only what they want to hear), quick to speak (especially of themselves and often without proper reflection), and easily roused to anger (which means, reviling and resentment and mockery). So, here insert your favorite preacher, podcaster, pundit, or politician, especially if they never challenge you, but play to your prejudices because they want your money, your attention, or your vote. To the degree that anyone who talks wants or needs something from you, to that same degree you should be ... circumspect, attentive.

A few verses later, James writes: *If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, his religion is vain (1:26).* The tongue makes possible the gift of speech, given to mankind for a dual purpose: to praise the holiness of God and to speak his truth. Any use of the gift of speech that cannot be referred to these two purposes, even if not precisely sinful, is not a truly worthy use of that gift. Here is the question we should ask ourselves, even before we speak: *will what I am about to say be pleasing before God?*

In our speaking, we sometimes have a duty, as pastors, as parents, as Christian disciples, to say hard things, to speak directly and *plainly without any figures of speech* (John 16:29), even to say things that may be unpleasant for those to whom we are speaking. Those who have a responsibility to speak, must speak, plainly, speaking *the truth in love* (Eph 4:15). James's admonition does not apply to such speech.

Rather, he is referring to undisciplined talk, to wild and rambling, to intemperate or immoderate speech. Hence the image of the tongue being *bridled*. The bridle is the headgear used to control a horse, consisting of buckled straps to which the bit and reins are attached so that the horse moves in a disciplined fashion, according to the directions of its rider, controlled and purposeful. A bridled horse under the control of its rider does not wander wildly or roam freely wherever its pleasure might take it.

From Psalm 32 we hear these words: "*Do not be like a horse or mule, without understanding; with bit and bridle their temper is curbed, else they will not come to you*" (v 9).

So let's identify some faulty or even sinful types of speech that must be brought under control, especially for the religious person, for whom the undisciplined, unbridled tongue makes his religious aspirations, mere pretensions, empty show.

First we can identify *idle talk*. Conversation, even light banter, small talk, and chit-chat can be a pleasant thing among acquaintances

and even pleasing to God. But by idle talk I mean that near pathological need to fill any moment of quiet with talk, lest, in the quiet, one has to face oneself and one's God. Not necessarily sinful, it can quickly lead to sin, as it dulls the heart and mind of the idle talker and wearies to no end those who are, often enough, the unwilling targets of such nervous yammering. And idle talk does the same to those who cannot bear silence, who seem to have ears addicted to talk, even if the talkers don't know what they're talking about.

Second, there is *gossip*, by which I mean something quite specific. Gossip is the exchange of otherwise innocent or ordinary information about others or situations – the Johnsons got a new car; my boss is taking her family on a trip; our friend Mary just got a cancer diagnosis; the construction at work is going way over budget – but mostly for the purpose of demonstrating that we are in the know. By gossip, I am trying to show off the excellence of my position, that I know something that others don't, that I have access to information that is somehow privileged or exclusive, that I'm in the know, and now so are you, thanks to me. All that I say may be perfectly true, but my motivation is vainglory, empty pride. And to the degree that my idle chatter is meant to show that I'm in the know, it becomes sinful, gossip.

Third, there is the sin of *detraction*, whereby we reveal, without warrant and need, others' faults, failings, or sins. What we are saying is perfectly true, but we are out of bounds in saying it at all.

Sometimes we have a duty to reveal other's problems or faults to responsible parties – usually to superiors or to someone who is in a position to help or to correct (parents, family, spouses, etc.) – but the sin of detraction occurs when without real need we reveal others' faults.

Fourth, there is the detestable sin of *calumny*. By calumny, we knowingly and maliciously say false things about others in order to harm them or their reputations. Calumny is almost always a mortal sin because of its offense against both truth and charity. And woe to those who repeat calumnious speech, who are eager to believe it, who through negligence and laziness take no pains to question it or to discover the truth of things, and who out of human respect allow it to go uncorrected, to be spoken in their presence. Social media – most non-print media – is basically a cesspool of calumny. And woe to those who cannot tell the difference between a swimming pool and a cesspool. Be advised.

Finally, there is *criticism*, a word derived from the Greek, meaning “able to make judgments.” So criticism necessarily entails making a judgment of some sort. Criticism, judgment, has a positive sense: it is merely the ability to distinguish one thing from another – a teacher and a student; a splinter and a wooden beam; good fruit and bad fruit; truth and lies; and so on. Criticism though can reveal a critical spirit, and so lead us to misuse the gift of speech. “Consider the source,” my mother used to say. Which is another way of saying, “consider the critic.” Be on guard not only as to

what is being said – is it true, is it helpful, is it warranted, is reasonable, balanced, objective? – but also be on guard as to what might be motivating the critic in their harsh appraisals or in their too enthusiastic praises. For criticism can cut both ways ... bitter condemnation and excessive praise. Criticism – especially in its more insistent, vehement, and strident tones (whether condemning or praising) – is not necessarily a sign of great critical aptitude, of the ability to understand, discern, and judge well, but is often a tell-tale of ignorance, small-mindedness, and ill will that masks its shortcomings through verbosity and rhetorical excess.

In all these things – idle talk, gossip, detraction, calumny, criticism – we need to bridle the tongue, for they are the rotten fruit that betrays the fullness of a rotten heart.

My pastoral advise, based on the Scriptures: Stop talking. Stop listening to *talkers*. Talkers ... those who without credential or mandate seem to revel in stirring up worry, fear, and anger with their pointless palaver, their pet theories, and their penchant for the apocalyptic that only disturb the peace of mind and heart of those who have the misfortune of listening to them (Acts 15:24).

He who has ears to hear, let him hear, says our Lord often in the gospels. Nowhere, though, does Jesus say, *he who has a tongue to speak, let him speak*. Nowhere. And this, too, should give us pause.

Well, I've just done a lot of talking. It is time, then, that I pause and stop talking, so that you can better hear and listen to God. Most of

what I've said has been a reflection on the gospel and a few verses in the first chapter of the letter of James. But if you want to read and understand what James really thinks about this topic, open to chapter three, where in just twelve short verses, he brings down fire and brimstone on the tongue and on the abuses of speech.

From the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks.

Therefore, do not lie to those who trust you, and be wary of trusting those who lie to you. In Proverbs 17:26 we read that *those who speak sparingly are truly wise, and those who are careful in their speech are intelligent.* And remember that fools talk; cowards are silent; but the wise listen. Be wise, then, and let your mouth not speak, unless in your heart there is a *store of goodness.*