

Sunday 15

At daily Mass last Friday the first reading was from the prophet Hosea who is telling the people of his time that they must return to the Lord. He says to them: "You have collapsed through your guilt." Those are strong words. They say that guilt can destroy a person. Recently the case of a 14 year old black boy, Emmett Till from Chicago, who was killed while visiting relatives in Mississippi in the early 1950s, has been reopened. Two white men, accused of killing him on the evidence of the wife of one of them who said that the boy had made inappropriate remarks to her, were acquitted. But they later admitted that they had killed Emmett, and the woman has now said that her accusations were false. The two men are now dead; the woman is still living. I was wondering if all three of them had collapsed because of their guilt. Something tells me that they didn't. Perhaps they were so blinded by their racism that they didn't value Emmett's life and therefore didn't grasp the evil of their words and action. That is possible. Therefore, we have to be on the lookout for similar situations in our own lives. Are we still racially blind? Do we still not see the evil contained in our words and our actions with respect to race? And we might note that although actions speak louder than words, actions begin with words. We think and talk about what then become actions in our

lives. Our words, our thoughts precede our actions. To prevent evil actions, we must first pay attention to our words, to what we say, and then of course to our thoughts which express themselves in our words and then our actions. An examination of conscience, we have traditionally called such a procedure.

But in this same passage, the prophet Hosea then says to the people collapsed through their guilt that they must return to the Lord, and he says it in this way: “Take with you words, and return to the Lord.” That seems like a strange way of speaking. It treats words as if they were like luggage or clothing or something else physical which we might make sure we have before we set out to do something. “Have I got my keys? Have I got my glasses? My phone?” But words? Words are not things. Yet Hosea describes them here as if they were. “Take with you words,” he tells us when we are preparing ourselves to seek God’s forgiveness. That is a strange way of speaking. Yet what he says makes sense. We do prepare speeches when we are going to talk to someone about something serious. So we do take words with us as if they were things. Otherwise we might get there and end up speechless, or we might be unable to say what we want to say in the way we would ideally like to say it. Or, even worse, we might say the wrong things or the right thing in a wrong, even offensive, way. So

Hosea's phrase is worth our attention: "Take with you words and return to the Lord."

Jewish and Christian faith put great emphasis on words. The phenomenon of the prophet, that is, the person who has experienced a calling from God to speak, is native to Jewish and Christian faith. Both Jews and Christians live from the Word of God. We are people of the book, indeed, in part, the same book. Our readings today also emphasize the word of God and those who must preach it. We are introduced in our first reading to the reluctant prophet, Amos, who was a shepherd and dresser of sycamore trees, but the Lord said to him, "Go, prophesy to my people Israel." The second reading from Ephesians sums up our entire faith as a message God has sent us in the person of Jesus, the Word of God. And in our Gospel for today the Lord Jesus sends out the Twelve to preach repentance and to drive out demons and heal the sick. No doubt, their deeds, their healings, their freeing people from evil spirit, impressed the people more than their words. Yet their words explained what all this good activity meant. Yes, they too had to take words with them.

Would it be right to say that today we are experiencing an increase in the use of words? People have always used words. Indeed,

people are words, or, the other way around, where there are words, there are people. But with the birth of all the tools of modern technology it could be argued that there is now an increase in the use of words. So many people are coming to public speech today and they are so good with this tool, with words. Listen to the people on television. Very few of them are ever at a loss for words. Words overflow. “Where did they get such fluency? we might ask. The answer: Keep talking, that is, keep practicing speaking.

But when all our words are spoken, what do we want them to say? At our deaths we will want our lives to have been a lovely word, a word which told of God’s love for us and which expressed that word in the many words and actions of our lives. But if that is to be true, then here and now we have to exercise a certain care in our use of our language. We all do that. How careful we are with what we say to the members of our family? We don’t want to offend. How often we refrain from saying something which everyone already knows but whose expression would hurt.

However, that is not the case with public speech today. It has ceased to be polite and civil. There has been a breakdown in courtesy and restraint. Sometimes we can see this as simply a matter of manners. We laugh about our own use of words which

our parents would never have used. We think this is a kind of freedom and greater honesty. “We feel this way,” we say. “So why not express our feelings openly, verbally?” But the answer may be: “Because in doing so we might injure another person.”

Let us meet each other conscious of the fact that we are dealing with a human being who is beloved of God, who is, at least from our point of view, our sister and brother in the love of the triune God. Let our treatment of every other person in and through our words express the reverence which is proper for such a precious reality. That may not sound like a very prophetic use of language, for the prophet usually preaches reform and repentance. And yet, given our present situation, such reverence in action and speech may not only be highly unusual but even prophetic because it will ask other to reform their own use of words, in fact, maybe even repent of some of them.