

Sunday 8

Have you ever heard Cardinal O'Malley talk? If you have, then you know that God gave him a wonderful voice. It is deep and pleasant and full, a pleasure to listen to even if you don't know what he is saying. Those of us who have enjoyed his voice can therefore understand why the Book of Proverbs claims: “. . . pleasing speech gains a reputation for learning . . .” And again, “Pleasing words are a honeycomb, sweet to the taste and invigorating to the bones” (16:21-24).

Our first reading today from the Book of Sirach tells us that our speech also discloses the bent of our minds, and it makes use of an unusual image to describe this revelatory power of words. It says: “When a sieve is shaken, the husks appear; so do one's faults when one speaks.” That same thought we find in today's Gospel. There we read, “. . . from the fullness of the heart the mouth speaks.” So words reveal our hearts and our faults.

But speech and hearing are not the only senses talked about in today's readings. Our gospel today concentrates on sight, pointing out what is obvious, that blind people cannot guide other blind people. Then it moves to another image connected with seeing, an

image which familiar to all of us, that of the splinter and the beam in the eye. By means of this image the Lord teaches us that we are often like people who have a beam blocking their vision but can still see a splinter, that is, a tiny fault, in their neighbor's eye.

Perhaps we have overlooked fact that the God revealed in the Jewish scriptures and in our Gospels has chosen to reveal Himself to us by using images taken from ordinary life and based on our five senses of hearing, seeing, tasting, touching and smelling. If God had chosen otherwise, we all might have been forced to become philosophers and to listen to long, involved arguments. But God has fit the lesson to the learners. We are body and soul. So God has chosen to speak to us through images based on our everyday physical lives.

“Praise no one before he speaks, for it is then that people are tested.” So our first reading from Sirach teaches us this morning. Isn't that our own experience? Suppose we meet a stranger who has not yet opened his or her mouth. We size them up. How old are they? What do their clothes reveal about their work or place in life? We form an initial impression. And then the person begins to speak, and our initial impression is either confirmed or denied.

But even when the person has spoken, the most important question remains unanswered: Is what the person says true? Does it reflect his or her actual situation and beliefs? And then we compare this person's beliefs and views with our own, thinking of course that our own are correct and hoping that we are not like the people the Lord spoke about in today's gospel. That is, we hope that a beam in our own eye is not preventing us from seeing this other person correctly, even if we think we see a splinter or two in his or her speech.

So much of our lives depends on our view of other people and of their view of us, and so much of this depends on the words which we exchange with each other. Indeed, we live and move and have our being in a house of words. Words, words, words. That is especially true with respect to those in public life. We listen to what they say and then evaluate them and their views on the basis of what they have said.

It would be interesting to know how many people took time out this past week to listen to Michael Cohen, the former aid to President Trump. Many of us did because the situation is so dramatic. Here is a man who is going to jail for having lied. The fact that he had lied meant for many taking part in this hearing that

he should not be believed at all. And so they really did not solicit information from him but simply told him that they did not believe him because he was a liar. But others, realizing that he had abandoned his previous starting-point, the defense of the president, sought to understand what he had done and why.

Whatever the situation is with Mr. Cohen, it is clear that we as followers of the Lord are bound to do two things in our everyday lives. First, we must attempt to remove whatever prevents us from seeing things clearly. Secondly, we must look to our motivations, to our own intentions. If they are good, our words will be good; if they are evil, so too will our words be.” In Mat 5:37 the Lord says: “Let your ‘yes’ mean ‘yes’ and your ‘no’ mean ‘no’. Anything more is from the evil one.”

“Physician, cure thyself,” the world will say to us as a church, or at least, to the bishops and priests of our church. If our words were not true, then neither were our hearts. There were beams in our eyes. May the master physician help us to remove them from our eyes, and then may our words reveal the bent of our minds now turned to truth and openness.