

## **St Mary Abbots, Matins**

Trinity 6 2021

Ecclesiasticus 4:11-31

Romans 15:14-29

The late Sir Dennis Thatcher once famously advised his daughter Carol, *'Better keep your mouth shut and be thought a fool than open it and remove all doubt.'*

Sir Denis must I think have taken our first reading from Ecclesiasticus as his model. *'Be not hasty in thy tongue, and in thy deeds slack and remiss.'*

We are used to thinking of hypocrisy as meaning not living up to what you preach. The assumption is that it is easy to speak high and lofty words, but harder to live them out.

Whereas the converse is also often true. We might seem kind and generous to people in person and in our deeds, but then gossip about them behind their back, for no greater motive than to show that we are in the know.

I remember trying to teach a lesson to our school children in Catford. I gave two children tins of squirty cream, and got them to race down the aisle of our church squirting the cream as they went (onto some kitchen towel, in case you are fearing too much for this church once whole school assemblies start again..).

I then asked them to race back the other way, putting the cream back into the tins.

Of course they could not. And this was rather a crude illustration of the way we cannot put our words back where they came from.

We live in a time of words spoken, or more often tweeted, in haste, and repented of at leisure.

A friend of mine recently advertised for an associate priest, including the ability to tweet in the advertisement. It can of course be a great tool, but in a world where everyone seems to be speaking constantly, and in which there is a seeming pressure to give your view on whichever wave

of moral outrage is sweeping the country or world at the time, the quality of what is said somehow seems less important.

There seems little place for wisdom.

And yet wisdom comes not from having verbal diarrhoea, but from listening: *'Whoso giveth ear unto her shall judge the nations: and he that attendeth unto her shall dwell securely.'*

And wisdom is a characterisation and personification of God. So, for those of you rather fed up by some recent theologians calling God 'her', here we find a very old example of it: and Lady Wisdom is indeed related to what we Christians later started to call the Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity.

But to become wise ourselves means to listen first attentively to God, and indeed to others, and to guard our tongue; to weigh up when to speak; to consider our words before speaking them.

As Saint Benedict put it in his rule for monks:

"Death and life are in the power of the tongue." For to speak and to teach becomes the master, to be silent and to listen beseems the disciple. And so if anything has to be asked of the superior let it be asked with all humility and with reverent subjection.

But all manner of buffoonery and idle, mirth-provoking words we adjudge should be perpetually restrained in every place; and for such discourse we permit not the disciple to open his mouth.

This may sound harsh, and not a lot of fun. But how many of us, when in full flow at a dinner party, find ourselves spouting nonsense, or stories about others which we can't resist amusing the assembled company with, but which are cutting or unkind, unable to hold our tongue? We try to hold back, but if a story is funny or, we think, witty, we can't resist the fleeting acclaim that comes from being thought amusing or clever in that moment. And out tumbles the, often tried and tested, anecdote, mocking one unable to defend his- or herself.

You can tell I speak from experience, often repenting even as I speak, but nevertheless unable to stop myself.

While perhaps seeming rather a slight sin on its face, such unkindness is I think one of the most invidious kinds, and manifests a distinct lack of wisdom, in the sense in which the word is used in our reading.

People may indeed find us amusing, but should we not instead strive to be thought of as kind, as loving, as Christian?

We may think of our church attendance as making us Christian, and yet it is these habits of living, that might seem small in and of themselves, but that really define us as followers of Jesus.

And they are habits: the more we practice them, the more they grow and begin to shape us, and to make us into kinder, more loving people.

That is why Saint Benedict wrote a rule, so that by following it, the hearts of his monks would grow to follow their actions. Our attitudes and priorities might shape how we act on one level, but our actions also shape the inclinations of our heart. It goes both ways

All of this does not mean that we should simply remain silent in general of course. Many of us will know John Stuart Mill's line, that 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.'

Or, as we hear in Ecclesiasticus, '*refrain not to speak, when there is occasion to do good, and hide not thy wisdom in her beauty.*'

While we should speak carefully, when we know in our heart, in our conscience, that we should challenge, we must show courage and speak.

In other words, all of this is about judgment, which one might use as an alternative word to wisdom. The word judgment might seem a morally neutral word, and much of the advice we are given in Ecclesiasticus can just seem like a stream of proverbs – handy tips to lead a happy life.

But exercising judgment in speech, and learning to listen more than to speak, and to choose our words with discernment, is I think part of what it is to be holy.

And holiness is not just for monks.

We are all called to holiness, like it or not, and forming habits of holy living brings its rewards.

*'For at the first she [wisdom] will ... torment him with her discipline, until she may trust his soul, and try him by her laws.*

*Then will she return the straight way unto him, and comfort him, and shew him her secrets.'*

And in case you are still not convinced that such careful speech is for you, we are reminded that the exercise of judgment in our words is nothing less than the search, little by little, conversation by conversation, and encounter by encounter, for truth.

*'Strive for the truth unto death, and the Lord shall fight for thee.'*

Amen

**Fr Christopher Rogers**