

Homily
February 27, 2022
8th Sunday in Ordinary Time
23:17 – 32:27

“For from the fullness of the heart, the mouth speaks.” A short, profound line concluding our Gospel today. It will guide this reflection.

The Book of Sirach from which our First Reading came, was written somewhere between 200 and 175 BC by a respected teacher. His name was Jesus, son of Eleazar, son of Sirach. He wrote down a collection of sayings, short and to-the-point proverbs and some other reflections. His purpose was to encourage his fellow Jews in that time to be faithful to the traditions of Judaism in the face of Hellenistic philosophy running rampant at the time. This was at the same time around that era when the Greek king Antiochus Epiphanes, a brutal ruler who tried to stamp out Judaism and all other religions by making everybody a Greek. If you want to read about that, go to the Book of Maccabees, First and Second. It tells of that very difficult time.

Well, Sirach was originally written in Hebrew. But a grandson, 50 years later, took those writings (and it may seem odd that he translated them into Greek) because Greek was the language beyond Israel. And by doing so, the wisdom of this sage spread.

In the first two centuries after the resurrection of Jesus – you know, that OTHER Jesus, the son of Mary, the son of Joseph, the son of God – the Church fathers declared the Book of Sirach to be a part of the Old Testament canon and it remains there yet today. It became over the centuries a major source of ethical and moral teaching for the Church. In fact, at one point it was known through the Latin word, “Ecclesiasticus.” Those of us who are older remember that name from the Douay-Rheims Bible translation. Basically it means, “The Church Book,” from the Greek *ecclesia*, the community.

Now our reading today comes from a section of Sirach that addresses personal integrity in the life of the community. The four sayings we’ve heard today are concerned with human speech.

But before we look at each of them for a moment, a clarification about the second saying. There seems to be a disagreement among the translators of the second half of the second saying. The New American Bible Revised Edition, which we proclaim every week, says, “So in tribulation is the test of the just.” But the Jerusalem Bible by contrast says, “The test of a man is in his conversation.” That fits so much better with all four of these sayings about speech.

I'm not a translator, but I like that one better.

The four sayings – a quick summary:

A person's faults appear in his or her speech, just as useless material is left behind
in a strainer.

A person's conversation tests the person, just as firing tests the piece of pottery.

And that firing will show the cracks.

Speech reveals what is in a person's mind, just as fruit reveals the kind of care
the tree has had.

And finally – Do not judge somebody until he or she speaks, because it's from
their speech that you learn what people really are.

All four of these sayings really make the same point. Speaking involves risks. Speaking reveals our innermost character. We should be careful in our speech.

In our Gospel passage from Luke, Jesus makes the same point. He seems to recast what Sirach has already said 200 years before. The way a person speaks tells what kind of person he or she is.

The wisdom of Sirach and of Jesus the Christ is echoed in the number of passages in the New Testament, as in James Chapter 3, "If anyone does not fall short in speech, he is a perfect man." I've never met a perfect man or a perfect woman in their speech. Have you?

2,200 years after Jesus, son of Eleazar, son of Sirach, and two thousand years after Jesus Christ, we know today the wisdom they shared is true.

Now, I am sure each of us here has had the experience of saying something we wish we hadn't said. Yes? Perhaps we didn't speak clearly and then we had to backtrack to make clear that what we said just didn't come out right. So let me try again. Okay?

Or perhaps we regret what we have said because it revealed parts of ourselves that we would rather stay hidden. It quickly goes through our mind, "What must others think of me now? How do I repair the bad impression I just left?" Hmm.

Or perhaps we were in an argument or fight with someone whom we love and said things hastily and in anger, revealing in a hurtful way grudges, unresolved issues, irrational blame, or never-spoken fears digging away at us.

Sadly, today we have so many platforms from which to broadcast our speech: text messages, voicemails, emails, Facebook posts, Instagram...(disdainfully) *Twitter*. These electronic platforms seem to encourage us to “hold forth,” to just say whatever comes to mind, to voice our emotions, our ideas – what we think -- leaving in the wake of our words too often: hurt, pain, doubt, even alienation.

Perhaps at no other time in our history, my brothers and sisters, do we need the wisdom of our ancestors in faith to be our own, especially about our speaking...whatever form it takes.

And perhaps we can use the season of Lent, which begins this Wednesday, to silence some of our noisy speech that reveals aspects of us that need conversion, that do harm to others.

Perhaps we can turn them off for a time, one or more of these platforms, and enjoy the quiet with the Lord.

And in doing so, the proverb just might become our own:

“For from the fullness of the heart, the mouth speaks.”