

REDEEMING SPEECH 2

St Mary's Barnes - Sunday 15th September 2024

DOUBT

In the 2008 film 'Doubt',
a priest called Father Brendan,
tells this story in a sermon:

*"There was once a woman called Mrs O'Rourke who went to Confession and said,
'Bless me Father for I have sinned'.*

The priest replied:

'What are your sins Mrs O'Rourke?'

'Father (she said) I have been a gossip and said slanderous things.'

'That is very serious, and this is your penance:

You must go back home,

take a feather pillow from your bed

and a knife from your kitchen

and you must climb onto the roof of your house.

I want you to cut open the pillow with the knife

and shake out the feathers over the town

and watch them blow out into the country beyond.

When you have done that, come back and see me.'

'So Mrs O'Rourke went home

and did exactly what Fr Brendan had asked her to do.

She cut the pillow open

and watched the feathers fly out far and wide.

Then she went back to the priest and said:

'I have done what you asked

and now I've come back Father,

as you told me to.'

'Now, (said the priest),

to finish your penance,

I want you to go

and collect up every single one of those feathers.'

'But I can't possibly do that!'

Cried Mrs O'Rourke,

they are all over the town and the country, far and wide.'

'Each of your words Mrs O Rourke,

is like one of those feathers.

Words of slander and gossip once spoken travel far and wide,

and cannot be gathered in again.'

* * *

JAMES and PAUL

The letter of James makes the same point using a different metaphor:

'How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire.'

In the film, the story is especially powerful because the priest telling it has been accused of child abuse, and we do not know whether it is true or false. He may be telling the story to cover up his guilt, or to express his innocence.

The theme of speech - how to speak truthfully and rightly about each other is a recurring theme of the epistle of James, almost certainly because that's what was NOT happening among some of the early Christians - and what we say and how we say it has the power to destroy a community.

BISHOP BUTLER

An 18th century Bishop of London, Joseph Butler,

Wrote a sermon called *'On the government of the tongue'*.

In which he describes the tendency of human beings to talk a lot, and say things that are untrue or hurtful. He writes:

'It is true, that they who are addicted to this folly [of talking loosely], could choose to confine themselves to trifles and indifferent subjects, and so intend only to be guilty of being impertinent: but as they cannot go on forever taking of nothing, as common matters will not afford a sufficient fund for perpetual discourse: when subjects of this kind are exhausted, they will go on to defamation, scandal, divulging of secrets, and their own secrets as well as those of others, anything rather than be silent ... it is like a torrent which must and will flow ... the tongue used in such a manner is like a sword in the hand of madman; it is employed at random, and for the most part does world of mischief.'

THE MEANING OF WORDS

I suppose Bishop Butler made an impression on me,
Because I am known to talk quite a lot!

As a child, the teachers were also telling me to stop talking in class;
and I come from a talkative family,
we were always interested in words and their meanings.

My Greek father was a translator,
And always telling me the origin of words.

Whilst my French mother could never quite find the ... *'mot juste'*
for what she wanted to say,
and was always getting English expressions wrong.
She would suddenly declare:

'Two birds in the bush are not worth crying over!'

To the general bemusement of others,
And the great amusement of her family!

But I suppose what all this did teach me,
Was that words are important
Both *what* we say and *how* say it.

Likewise St Paul says in Ephesians is concerned with the truthfulness of speech
when he says *'let no-one deceive you with empty words'*.

And St James in his epistle reflects on the *morality* of words when he observes
that with the tongue we both bless and curse those made in the likeness of God.

'THEY'RE EATING THE PETS'

These perennial questions,
Take on a particular urgency,
In our world today,
where false rumours
Shared on X by a random person in Cumbria,
can start a racist riot a hundred miles away.

And where a presidential candidate for the United States can declare on
television that immigrant Haitians in Ohio are 'eating cats and dogs'.
Even though there's no evidence of this whatsoever,
- yet just the saying of it is enough to make some people believe it.

Strange and sinister things happens to language,
When it is used for advertising and propaganda.
Headlines and soundbites distort our language,
The separation of words from evidence and fact,
makes them cheap, meaningless and immoral.

TRUTH ITSELF SPEAKS TRULY

The letter of James addresses a question about speech,
relevant to all human beings,
but perhaps especially for Christians,
because we believe in a God who has communicated himself,
In Jesus Christ,
the Word of God.

And we are searching for a new way of communicating,
That reflects the self-communication of God in Jesus Christ.
As Christians, we are trying to find a language,
And a way of speaking,
That 'fits' the reality of our faith,
And resonates with divine purpose.

We might call it the redemption of speech itself.
As one poet puts it:

'Truth itself speaks truly/or else there's nothing true'

This is rather a daunting task,
And partly for that reason,
many Christians have encouraged as little speech as possible.

The Rule of St Benedict says:

'So important is silence that permission to speak should be seldom granted'

SILENCE and LOVE

In today's Gospel

Our Lord - rather confusingly - both invites the disciples to say who he is
And then orders them not to tell anyone.

Perhaps because to discover the identity of Jesus,
Is a truth so awesome,
it should stun us into silence.

Only a few moments later,

Jesus harshly rebukes Peter for saying the *wrong* thing,

Because what he says is not consistent with his confession of who Jesus is.

Ironically, for a sermon on speaking,

I have already said too much.

I shall therefore finish with some practical advice -

After the first time I ever preached a sermon,
the Priest at that church gave me some feedback about what to say:
'Ask yourself three questions' he said:

Is it true?

Is it kind?

Is it necessary?

I think these are good rules to judge all our speech.

In our Christian quest to find a language that resonates with the reality of God's
love for us and what we believe about Jesus.

For if our discourse is shaped by love, then it will have both meaning and truth.