

Trinity XII – 27 August 2023

“He hath done all things well; he maketh both the deaf to hear, and the dumb to speak.”

+In the Name of the Father...

There is a certain amount of irony, almost an uncomfortable irony, between the Collect, prayed at the beginning of this morning’s mass, and the Gospel lesson we just heard. As you may remember, the Collect starts out, “Almighty and everlasting God, who art always more ready to hear than we to pray...” Of course, the Book of Common Prayer (even the blessed edition of 1928) had not yet been conceived when Our Lord left Tyre and Sidon, arriving in the presence of one man who was both deaf and mute. What would that man have thought had he heard such a prayer? Perhaps he would have laughed to himself, as God *had* to be more ready to hear than he was to pray, because he could not pray in any audible way. Surely one does

not have to pray “out loud” in order for one’s prayers to be heard by God, but this man must have wished he could pray and praise as other men, as much as talk with his friends and family.

The irony continues: Christ performs this physical miracle of healing a man who can neither hear nor speak, and then tells the company that they shouldn’t tell anyone! Now let’s say I had some form of physical deformity, whether from birth or caused later in life. We’ll say one of my hands is deformed and Christ heals it. I’ll want to show and tell everyone. But here, this man has not previously been able to speak, so in a sense the fact that he *can* tell his friends and neighbors is the news! The whole scene is reminiscent of what many of us go through as parents: we work patiently with our infant children in an attempt to teach them how to speak. We roll our lips together very deliberately forming the “m” and carefully say, “ma-ma.” The process continues with other words until one day the realization sets

in that there has not been a moment of solitude in the house save when the child is actually sleeping and one is tempted to ask, “Can’t you be quiet for just five minutes?!”

Christ was not yet ready to proclaim Himself to the world, and consequently asked for some privacy, even if he was unable to get it. Nevertheless, it brings up an issue that has plagued mankind since the beginning of time: the trouble our mouths can make for us. Solomon tells us in the book of Ecclesiastes: “Give not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin.” Sins of the mouth (I’ll call them for lack of a better title) can take many forms: gossip, lying, slander, overreacting. Physical wounds will heal eventually, but the wounds caused by a sharp tongue can stay around much longer and are not forgotten nearly as quickly. Often times these sins are not planned out, but happen in the heat of the moment. We know it’s wrong to lie, but all of a sudden we are caught in a situation that doesn’t make us appear to others in the light

we would like. “Surely a little white lie won’t hurt this situation,” we rationalize to ourselves. Even more prevalent in the church than lying seems to be gossip. I remember as my family and I prepared to leave Southern California after my curacy, the different parishioners who came up to me to confirm rumors they had heard from whatever source. Is it true that you are pregnant? No. Is it true that you are going to Colorado? No. Is it true that you are going to Wisconsin? No. Is it true that you are going to Boston? No. *Boston?! I never could figure out that one.*

Now I realize that the members of this parish may still not know me that well, but hopefully you now know that all of my preaching is directed as much at me as anyone else. I wish I could tell you that clergy are above gossiping and that everything that comes out of our mouths is as pure as new fallen snow, but I suspect that you would not believe me anyway. We fall into the trap as easily as anybody else,

although you might be happy to know it's more often about our brother clergy than it is our parishioners. Who got in trouble with his bishop? Who left what parish? Where is he now? Why did he go? Did he drive the organist out or was he really going to retire anyway?

When I was a student at Nashotah House, we had poker night once a week. We met in a small, dimly-lit room in one of the dorms, affectionately known as the "smoke room". No, it had nothing to do with incense, but was decorated with an eclectic array of items: a photograph of John Henry Cardinal Newman was next to one of Thomas Cranmer. An empty bottle of ginger ale sat proudly next to an empty bottle of gin. A catalogue of high-end cigars was placed carefully in a magazine rack (whose origin seemed a mystery to everyone – even the decorators of the room) next to a Wippell's catalogue. (Please pardon me if I tell you what you already know – but Wippell is an English company who makes liturgical vestments and

other regalia for the clergy.) We gathered once a week to play poker and solve the problems of the House, the Church and of course, the world. What started out as deep theological discussions, or at least had the potential to become such, sometimes devolved into less-than-honourable conversation regarding the faculty and the students who were not present at the game. Sure, it could be argued that we were just letting off steam. It could be argued that those we were talking about never heard what we were saying. But what if they had? Some of our words could have hurt much more than many physical afflictions. One of the regular attendees was ordained a priest shortly after I was but lasted only a year. The last I heard he was working on a farm in Ohio. Did the poker's group lack of charity for others hurt this young man's vocation to the priesthood? I hope not, but I'll never know for sure.

So here we are over ten years later where clever speech, backbiting and yellow journalism are as much a part of American society as ever. Am I fighting an uphill battle? Absolutely. As you may have noticed I am a devotee of church history, and because of that I am fond of saying that there is no “golden age” of church history. There was no time when everything in the Church was perfect. That’s “big-C” the Church, nor in any one parish either. Even Our Lord couldn’t get his followers to do what He wanted when He was there to direct them, as we heard in today’s Gospel. What makes us think it will be any easier without Him? My point is that with Christianity it’s always been and always will be an uphill battle.

But that is not to say we can’t or shouldn’t try! Let’s make a deal: We’ll start small: In our relatively small parish that almost no one in the city has heard of, we’ll follow the advice of the Proverbs: “He that keepeth his mouth keepeth his soul.” If we can do that, if we can love

one another and those in our neighborhood, we'll have to add on and have additional services to make room for everyone who will want to come and be a part of this parish!

You can accuse me of a lot of things, refusing to put down a challenge is not one of them! No lying, no gossiping and no backbiting – in 21st century America. Can we do it? Yes, but only by the grace of God. May we keep our mouths, in order that we may keep our souls, when it is necessary. But may we also be like the man who was healed, and be totally unable to contain our excitement about the love of Christ, for a world in such desperate need of it.

+In the Name...