

6th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)  
(Ecclesiasticus 15:15-20 / Matthew 5:17-37)  
16.02.2020  
*Words & Actions*

Today, at first, our long Gospel reading looks like a challenge: there are so many things in it that we may wonder what its central theme is. It seems to me that the question which runs through the whole text and gives it its coherence is how we deal with words and how they relate to our actions.

Jesus' words which we have heard pronounced are part of a long commentary on the commandments. Jesus invites us to reflect on whether or not what we do is in accord with what we say, whether or not what we do or say means anything at all.

The first thing Jesus does is to give their full meaning to the words we have received from God as commandments. We have to go deeper than the literal meaning of the words. The best example is "you must not kill" which, according to Jesus implies, firstly, that we must not be angry with our brothers and sisters and that, secondly, we must not insult any of them. Yes, it is clear for Jesus – and it should be for us – that we can kill people in many subtle and pernicious ways.

Then when we are clear about the meaning of our words, Jesus invites us to look at how we live. Here the famous statement about "bringing your offering to the altar" is a huge challenge for all of us today. In his letter to Titus, St Paul warns us against "idle talkers and deceivers" who "profess to know God, but deny him by their actions" (1:10.16). St Paul is insightful and really spot on! What does it mean to worship the Lord, to claim that we are in communion with him while we are not in communion with those around us?

We claim to be followers of Christ, we say that we are Catholic and yet it happens that we do not really live in accord with Jesus' words. Do we really know what it means to be a Christian? Do we really believe that reconciliation with one another stands at the heart of our faith and conditions our relationship with God?

There are also in today's Gospel strong words about adultery: "If a man looks at a woman lustfully he has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Here Jesus operates a shift from a perspective where the emphasis is only on the physical sexual act of adultery to the way in which we look at one another and respect others as persons and not as objects. There is no doubt that Jesus' interpretation of the commandment makes things more demanding for us but it compels us to go deeper in our relationship with one another.

The last verses which deal with oaths and swearing may sound a bit outdated. Yet they speak about truthfulness. Before Matthew's Gospel was written, in his second letter to the Corinthians, St Paul writes: "Do I make my plans according to ordinary human standards, ready to say 'Yes, yes' and 'No, no' at the same time? As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been 'Yes and No.'" (1:17-20)

The ideal is that we should never need an oath to support the truth of anything we say. Our character and the trust we inspire should make an oath completely unnecessary. St Clement of Alexandria believed that the lives of Christians should inspire such confidence that nobody should ask an oath from them. The trustworthiness of our statements should be guaranteed by the eloquence of our lives. And here the word *life* reminds us that we communicate not only with words but also with actions.

Our Gospel reading expresses a truth which has often been mentioned from this pulpit: words matter. What we say, with our words or with our way of living matter because

we tend to become what we communicate. Our words and actions shape our lives and the way we relate to others and to the world. On 27<sup>th</sup> January 2016, on the occasion of the International Day of Commemoration in Memory of the Victims of the Holocaust, the Director General of UNESCO declared: “The history of the Holocaust reminds us that there are words that can kill (...). Seventy years later, in the era of the Internet and social media, the power of propaganda is more devastating than ever.” (Irina Bokova)

The main problem does not lie in the fact that our actions do not always match up to our words. None of us is able to maintain a perfect coherence between our words and our actions. This should not frighten us altogether. The main question is not which one of words or actions matter most. Sometimes our words are truer than our actions and sometimes our actions reveal more than our words.

The challenge is to strive for truth and honesty, to persevere in speaking and acting in ways that are intentional and real. When words and actions are meaningless, when words are disconnected from action, then there is loss of trust and a break down in relationships. We have to be aware that the loss of meaning in words and in actions produces tensions and conflicts. At the moment, in our society and in our Churches, in politics, in our communities and families, there are too many words and actions which do not foster communion, mutual understanding and harmony simply because we do not care for what we say and do.

According to a Christian Orthodox theologian “what makes the human being fully human is loving relationship” (*Violence...*, p. 94). As Christians, it is our duty to be attentive to speak and to act in ways that build up relationships in trust and in respect. Let us make every endeavour to put meaning into our words and our actions. Let us promote sincerity in words and integrity in actions. Let us live in “sincerity and truth” (1Co 5:8).