

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)
(Jeremiah 1:4-5.17-19 / Luke 4:21-30)
30.01.2022
Gracious & Clear Words

In his novel *The Plague*, the French philosopher Albert Camus puts the following words on the lips of one of his characters: “All the misfortunes of men and women come from not speaking clearly.”

From somebody who was not a Christian but from a Christian perspective, Camus’ statement is not off the mark. An attentive reading of the story of the first sin, in the book of Genesis (3:1-3), shows us that the dialogue between the serpent and Eve is the key moment when misfortunes began. Both the serpent and Eve distort God’s words and, in so doing, allow chaos to enter into creation.

It has been said many times from this pulpit and yet it is important to say it once again: words matter. What we say, the way we say it impacts upon others for better or for worse. The loss of harmony in our hearts and in the world happens when words are emptied of their meaning, when they become cheap and destructive.

Today, from our two readings, we can draw a lesson about the way we should deal with words.

Firstly we have the prophet Jeremiah who gives us some very important advice: “You shall speak whatever I command you.”

To speak is a privilege, sometimes it is a duty. It is always a responsibility.

For us Christians, who all have been appointed prophets through our baptism, we have to check where our words come from. Do they come from an inner place of self-loathing, from a festering wound, from feelings of bitterness and anger, from personal insecurity or do our words flow from a heart which may have been wounded and which may be afraid but which is nonetheless attuned to God’s voice, a heart which is renewed and inspired by God’s grace?

In all this, Christ is our model because not only is he the Word but, as we are told in our Gospel reading, he speaks “gracious words”, words that are full of grace.

What is grace? It is the gift, the giver and the generous movement of giving. It is the “gift of God which contains all other gifts, the giving of his Son.” (*DBT*, 218) According to St John, in the person of Jesus Christ “grace and truth have come to us.” (Jn 1:17)

So for us to speak gracious words is to speak Christ, to speak words that are rooted in Christ.

Above all, grace within us is a principle of transformation and action. Herein lies the problem. We do not always want to change and act. This is exactly what happened in the story we heard today. The people of the synagogue of Nazareth did not want to change, they were clinging to their narrow and tribal vision of God. They were not ready and willing to accept Jesus as their Messiah. His gracious words were too challenging, too unsettling for these people stuck in the mud of their convictions. They did not allow grace, which found expression in Jesus’ words, to open their hearts to new life.

Jesus’ words can challenge us – in fact most of the time they do – but because they are always full of grace they never disrespect or coerce us. Gracious words have a transformative power not because they impose anything on us but because they invite and show us a new way, a more life-giving way. According to St Peter, we are all heirs of the grace of life (cf. 1P 3:7). And so gracious words are life-giving, life-enhancing. If they close

one door it is in order to open another, if they unsettle us it is in order to lead us to a safer and more secure place, if they uncover what we want to hide it is in order to free us.

Too often in the domain of social media, in the political arena, in the daily gossip we spread here and there, and even in the preaching of some Christian pastors, we hear judgemental, harsh and ungracious words.

It is our responsibility, as Christians, to speak clearly and graciously, words that edify and do not destroy, words which offer comfort and hope, words which strengthen the hearts of all those we meet (cf. 2Th 2:16-17).

At the moment, in our Churches and in our families, there are many fears, challenges, and tensions which need to be verbalised, to be expressed clearly, listened to attentively and dealt with graciously.

Words will not remove the problems but they will certainly help us to relate to them in a different way. Words can open up new horizons and they can give us the energy to move forward.

In the Church, all of us, bishops, priests, lay women and men, and consecrated persons, need to learn anew how to dialogue, how to dispel fears and misunderstandings with wise tongues that bring healing (cf. Prov 12:18). For the good of our Christian communities, and since we want to create a better world, we need to remember the words from the book of Proverbs: "Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones." (16:24)

Since we began our reflection with the first sin and the chaos it produced, it seems appropriate to finish with Pentecost and the harmony the Spirit creates. As persons and as Churches, let us pray for a fresh outpouring of the Spirit that we may speak boldly, clearly and graciously to one another and proclaim to the world a message of faith, hope and love.