

**Homily**  
**Watch What You Say**  
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**September 15, 2024**

**Lord, give me the confidence in the power of your Gospel. Grant me clarity in understanding and proclaiming the truths of your Word.**

**Please be seated.**

**Good morning to you all in the pews and those watching at home.**

**Today's readings made me think of the tongue and its dual nature.**

**The concept of the tongue has a rich and varied history in literature. It serves as the symbol of speech, connection, reason, wit, and expression. It is also a symbol of power, corruption, coercion, deceit, hypocrisy, falsehood, and destruction.**

**All cultures depict the tongue reflecting the complexities of human interaction, the potency of words, the ethical implications of speech.**

**Biblical references are many. In the Book of Proverbs 18:21 it says that "Death and life are in the power of the tongue," meaning that words can influence life and death. In today's Epistle, James addresses the dual nature of the tongue, capable of both blessing and cursing. He likens the tongue to a small rudder that steers a large ship, its power coming not from its size but from its awesome capabilities.**

Anatomically speaking, the tongue is not one muscle but a conglomeration of eight separate muscles. Unlike other muscles the tongue muscles do not develop around a supporting bone. Instead, the tongue muscles intertwine to create a flexible matrix, known as a muscular hydrostat. You know of another muscular hydrostat – an octopus tentacle. This analogy seems apt as tentacles symbolize reach and control, the ability to grasp and manipulate, suggesting power and influence. In horror genres, tentacles evoke a sense of danger, of potential harm.

I recently returned from a choir residency at St. Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin. In 1713, Jonathan Swift was appointed Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, a position he held until his death. He published his major works during this time. Swift, known as a gifted satirist, used satire in his works such as Gulliver's Travels to expose the misuse of language by the powerful, showing how the tongue could be used to manipulate and deceive, and how the tongue contributed to the moral failings of individuals and institutions. However, this did not deter Swift from giving 2-hour sermons, which, according to our tour guide, was typical of Swift. And Swift did not hesitate to awaken those who nodded off, apparently another role for the Cathedral's vergers.

In today's Gospel, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Tongues are wagging, and Jesus wants to know what conclusions people are coming to. Some of the disciples repeat the rumors: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Jesus then asks, "who do you say I am?" It is Peter, without hesitation, not influenced by hearsay, who announces, "You are the Messiah, the son of the Living God." Jesus calls Peter blessed because the Father had revealed this truth to him.

Jesus then commands the disciples not to tell anyone about him. Jesus is aware of the mischief of man's tongue and the probable misinterpretation and misunderstanding of his identity. He wanted total control over the reveal of his identity to make sure the unfolding of his destiny was according to God's timetable. And, as he continued to teach, he did not want to deal with unnecessary confrontations which would dilute his message. By keeping his identity under his control, he remained in charge of His mission, a mission that was not political, as some people had surmised, but spiritual.

Jesus then reveals to his disciples what God's plan is for him: to be derided, scorned, scourged, crucified, only then to rise again.

When Peter acknowledged Jesus as The Messiah, I would imagine he foresaw a future with his Lord always being at his side in the temporal world. When he hears what will really happen, he takes Jesus aside and rebukes him, that such a fate cannot happen. Peter thought his words could redirect Jesus' path based upon his belief that Jesus' calling was dedicated to human needs in the temporal world.

**This time, Peter's words do not elicit a blessing but the harshest of rebukes as Jesus cries out, "Get Behind Me, Satan!"**

**Peter's focus was on his own desires and plans, not on God's. Jesus' rebuke was severe to teach a lesson of the dangers of being tempted to live according to man's will and desires, not God's, to bend to man's reasoning, turning a deaf ear to what God is trying to tell us.**

**Another way to view Jesus' crying out against Satan, the embodiment of temptation, is that Peter's words tempt him. Jesus did not tell the disciples what he wanted to happen but what had to happen if he remained true to his mission of spiritual and communal awakening among God's people. Jesus knew the only way he would not die is if he veered from his path. Remember, in the Garden he asks, "may this cup be taken from me?" Ultimately, Jesus surrenders to God's will, undeterred by any words to the contrary, undeterred by any pull from the temporal world.**

**As Jesus did, we must stand strong against the temptation ringing in our ears and put Satan behind us, to listen and hear God's plan for humanity not our plans. There is so much chatter out there that tells us to focus on our careers, possessions, security, social standing, all the things of this world, losing sight of God's plan for us.**

How do we hear God speaking to us, to divine what his plan is for us, to hear him amid the world's cacophony? Consider the poem, "Silence," by Rumi, the 13th-century Persian poet:

"Silence is the language of God,  
all else is poor translation."

The quieter you become,  
the more you are able to hear.  
In silence, there is eloquence.  
Stop weaving, and watch how the pattern improves."

In this poem Rumi suggests that the tongue, while powerful, can sometimes fall short in conveying the deeper truths that silence might reveal, indicating a reverence for the unspoken over the spoken.

Howard Thurman, the distinguished African American theologian, wrote about what he called the "Great Silence."

I ask that you close your eyes and listen to his words:

"There is the rest of detachment and withdrawal when the spirit moves into the depths of the region of the Great Silence, where world weariness is washed away and blurred vision is once again prepared for the focus of the long view where seeking and finding are so united that failure and frustration, real though they are, are no longer felt to be ultimately real.

Here the Presence of God is sensed as an all-pervasive aliveness which materializes into concreteness of communion: the reality of prayer. Here God speaks without words and the self listens without ears. Here at last, glimpses of the meaning of all things and the meaning of one's own life are seen with all their strivings. To

accept this is one meaning of the good line, “Rest in the Lord — O, rest in the Lord.”

**Heed Wisdom: those who listen will be secure and will live at ease.**

**Let us harness the strength and determination to keep our tongues still, to hear God speak to us as we move forward in his service. Amen.**