

Checklist: Conversation, Cultivation, Compassion

8th Sunday of the Year – Cycle C – 3 March 2019

Readings: Sir 27:4-7; 1 Cor 15:54-58; Lk 6:39-45

“The test of a wo/man is in her/his conversation” (Sir 27:5)

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading from the Book of Sirach (Ecclesiasticus) cautions us about our conversations since our speech reveals our character. Ben Sira was a wise and devout Jew who lived in the 2nd century B.C. and was an expert in Mosaic Law. His book provides practical guidelines for righteous living. As human beings we are far superior to animals because of the God-given gift of speech, which enables us to express ourselves meaningfully. Nonetheless, this gift is often misused due to our lack of reflection and restraint. Using picturesque language of everyday life [a sieve], of an ordinary worker [potter], and of nature [fruit tree], Ben Sira instructs us to run our thoughts through a mental sieve, so to say, in order to ensure that only refined thoughts pass through our minds and find expression in the words that proceed from our mouths. Likewise, just as the right combination of clay, water and heat produces sturdy pottery, so must we carefully blend our thoughts, emotions and expressions for good conversations. Furthermore, just as cultivators of trees painstakingly plant, irrigate, apply manure and prune trees to get good fruits, so must a wo/man work towards effective communication since, just as a tree is judged by its fruits, so am I/we judged by my/our words. Ben Sira provides one point on our checklist of character: “The test of a person is in her/his conversation” (v.5).
2. The idea of cultivation of good trees and good fruit reappears in today’s gospel. The parabolic saying: “each tree is known by its own fruit” comes in the second part of the gospel, which is a continuation of evangelist Luke’s ‘Sermon on the Plain’ which we have been reflecting upon the past two Sundays. This is prefaced by Jesus warning his disciples that one blind person cannot lead another, for both will surely fall into a pit. This warning is specially directed to the leaders or ‘guides’ of the community who were prone to finding fault with others rather than being aware of their own faults and failures. By extension, we can surmise that today’s gospel is specially addressed to Christian leaders who must watch their words so that they effectively ‘walk the talk’.
3. Jesus’ use of parables, images and earthy symbols is remarkable. Besides using parables for his teaching, his illustrations from nature – figs and thorns, grapes and bramble bushes – convey his message very effectively to common folk. He also adds a dose of humour and hyperbole by speaking of a tiny speck of dust in another’s eye which hypocrites claim to see and seek to remove, while a huge log or plank is lodged in their own eyes! So, must we not reflect on our own faults and failings, as well as be compassionate when dealing with others? Compassion can be seen as the third item in our checklist. In sum, conversation, cultivation and compassion can be a tripod upon which human life and Christian commitment can be built. Indeed, if we are unaware of our own sins and failings and begin pointing accusing fingers at all those around us, we will be hypocrites. The Greek ‘*hypokrites*’ refers to an actor—one who puts up a show and wears a mask to conceal his real identity!

Reiterating the theme of cultivating good fruit in the Psalm (92):

The metaphor of equating a good tree with good fruit once again appears in the psalm (92), which is a thanksgiving psalm of moral retribution. God is praised for his mighty deeds, especially of rewarding the righteous with a long, fruitful life like that of a ‘palm-tree’ or a ‘Lebanon cedar’. Lest one mistakenly conclude that this “good is rewarded, bad is punished” logic is the sole view in Scripture, one ought also to read psalm 73 or the Book of Job to see that the righteous do not always prosper much as fortune often favours the wicked!

Linking the 2nd Reading with the theme of cultivation:

The second reading from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians culminates with an exhortation: “Keep on working at the Lord’s work always, knowing that, in the Lord, you cannot be labouring in vain.” All of us, Christians—and especially ordained ministers—are called to labour with the Lord in dispelling darkness. We’re called to be cultivators in the Lord’s vineyard producing good fruit and rich harvests despite the forces of destruction and death that threaten our life. This cultivation of words, works and witness must be such so as to enable us to boldly ask: “O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?”

Three Contextual Concerns:

Of the tongue: It’s said, “A dog is such a lovable creature because it wags its tail and not its tongue!” Today, especially before the forthcoming general elections in India, we are swamped with so many lies, loose talk and slander. Do I/we control my/our tongue and think before talking? Pope Francis brands loose talk, especially back-biting, as the ‘terrorism of gossip’.

Of the heart: Jesus says, “the mouth speaks out of the abundance of the heart”. Moreover, during this week we will enter the season of Lent with the first reading of Ash Wednesday exhorting us to respond to God’s invitation in the words of Prophet Joel: “Return to me with all your heart” (2:12). The whole Church, beginning with its leaders, is called to make a sincere ‘*mea culpa*’ for its aberrations, many of which have come to light causing great heartburn among the lay faithful.

Of the eyes: The tendency to see a speck in others’ eyes and be blind to the log entrenched in one’s own eye is very common among those who wield power over others. This leads to one becoming critical, even hypercritical and hypocritical. To look at those who fall or fail due to human frailty with the compassionate eyes of God is to be another Christ in the world, today.

In Lighter Vein:

A friend of Socrates once ran up to him and said, “Have you heard, O Socrates ...” Socrates cut him short and asked, “Have you made sure that what you’re going to tell me is true?” “No!” replied the friend, “I just heard it from others.” Socrates continued, “Is it something good about someone else?” The friend replied, “No, on the contrary ...” Socrates then asked, “Will what you tell me help us to be better persons?” The man said, “No!” Socrates then said, “Friend, let’s not waste our time over things that are neither true, nor good, nor helpful for us.” ... Furthermore, Socrates supposedly said: “Nature has given us two ears, two eyes, and but one tongue – so that we should hear and see more than we speak.”

Let’s check our conversations, beware of our cultivations, and try to be more compassionate.
