

Summer is a great time to be alive. The weather is usually kinder than in winter, lush green growth surrounds us and the vivid colours paint a wonderful picture of nature at its best. People seem more at ease and less stressed with so many activities on hold until autumn. Each of us listen to the stories of adventure from those who were away on holidays whether they were nearby in tents and trailers or far away to distant places. We may also tell of our own adventures. In all, summer is a wonderful time of the year.

The scripture lesson read from Matthew 15 reminds us once again about the care we need to take with what we say and how we say it. Jesus was very clear about the importance of our words, for words once delivered can not be taken back. Once uttered, our words enter the ears of those around us. They have impact, often pleasurable but equally often hurtful.

You recall the words in St. John's Gospel, chapter 1, verse 1 which said: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." This Word, referring to Jesus, was the word of God promised to his people, the Messiah who would come into the world and make a profound difference. The point here is that once God gave his word, the word had power and took form and was with him from the beginning of time. More than that, this word was God himself.

We too can not separate our words from ourselves. Once we have said the word, we can not deny it was ever said for it contains the essence of ourselves. One writer claims that our words give a glimpse into our very soul. So, the biblical warning to watch and take care in what we say has validity even today. What comes out of our mouth has more power than what goes in.

Through most of history, there have been taboos about what you eat, in other words what goes into our bodies. Different cultures and faiths would abstain from some food or other as being forbidden as evil, unhealthy or untouchable.

The Jews who desired to be faithful to God turned to the Book of Leviticus in the Old Testament for guidance. Here were the many food rules and the rules about ritual washing and right action. The Pharisees and the Sadducees took to heart all that was written there and tried hard to follow what was prescribed as necessary to find salvation. This Book of Leviticus is the same book many of our Christian brothers and sisters have used and continue to quote to hold back the equal place for women in society, the forbidding of inter-racial marriage, the abuse on gays and lesbians, and the retention of the death penalty.

Jesus was very well aware of the importance of the first five books of the scriptures of which Leviticus is one book. These five books were so sacred to Jews. We need to remember that Jesus himself was a Jew and knew in detail these scriptures. We know he was well versed in these scriptures for the gospels often mention Jesus speaking in the synagogues and holding forth in sermons which spell bound even those who disliked him.

Jesus had admiration for those who tried so hard to follow the rules but he shook his head at the outcome. What he saw was wide gulfs created between the perceived true believers and the general public. Separation was the only way for the followers of the law to insure they were not contaminated by the weakness of those around them.

These religious followers looked at the actions of Jesus and they were appalled. How can you eat with sinners, they asked? How can you sit with those who have not ritually washed their hands before eating? Why do you waste your time on those who clearly are not blessed and do not make any effort to follow the rules?

In reply, Jesus spoke of the importance of what comes out of the mouth rather than what goes in the mouth.

Barclay, the great biblical commentator, wrote this about the Pharisees and Jesus' opposing points of view. He writes: "Here is the clash and the collision; here is the contest between two kinds of religion and two kinds of worship. To the Scribes and Pharisees religion was the observance of certain outward rules and regulations and rituals, such as the correct way to wash the hands before eating; it was the strict observance of a legalistic outlook on all life. To Jesus religion was a thing which had its seat in the heart; it was a thing which issued in compassion and kindness, which are above and beyond the law. To the Scribes and Pharisees worship was ritual, ceremony law; to Jesus worship was the clean heart and the loving life."

Jesus did upset the faithful of his day. Once and for all Jesus states very clearly that what matters is not the state of a man or woman's ritual observance, but the state of a man or woman's heart. Religion to Jesus can never be founded on any ceremonies or ritual; religion must always be founded on personal relationships between men and women and God.

To Jesus, it was far too easy to believe one could obtain God's approval by abstaining from certain foods and washing the hands in a certain way. Far harder was to love the unlovely and the unlovable, and to help the needy at the cost of one's own time and money and comfort and pleasure.

Like the Pharisees and the Scribes 2000 years ago, we too need to learn this lesson. To go to church regularly, to give generously to good causes, to be a part of a bible class are all important external things. They are means to our religion, a support to it, but they are not themselves religion. Religion consists in personal relationships and in our attitude to God and to our fellowman.

A man can have a faultless life in external things but have the bitterest and most evil thoughts within his heart. To Jesus, no external observances can atone for a heart where pride and bitterness and lust holds sway.

To Jesus, the part of men and women that matters is the heart. Remember his words when he said: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8).

What matters to God is not so much how we act, but why we act; not so much what we actually do, but what we wish in our hearts to do. The ancient church writer Aquinas said it this way: “Man sees the deed, but God sees the intention.”

In Jesus’ teaching, man and woman can call himself or herself good only when his or her heart is pure. That very fact is the end of pride. We know we can never fully overcome pride; thus the reason why each one of us can only say: “God be merciful to me a sinner.”

Jesus you recall in the reading spoke of what comes out of our mouth being more key than what goes in. Do not spend so much of your time avoiding this or that food so as to remain pure. Consider more what comes out of that mouth, Jesus urged the righteous.

All of us have lived to regret something we said to someone. How often we wish we had held back and not said it that way. The fact remains that we can not get it back. In fact, the words we said once in the open and in the hearing of others takes on power. Also, these words once released may be interpreted in different ways by hearers. Politicians know this fact and are quick to say you must have misunderstood me or even that I did not say what you claim I said. If you watch the news especially on CNN, you will see how each word uttered by Barack Obama or John McCain is carefully dissected and analyzed. Most of us could not live up to this tight scrutiny.

What we say and how we say it does provide a mirror into our heart and often speaks louder than the words we utter themselves.

For many of us, this caution to be careful with what we say needs to be reinforced every day.

This last weekend, I attended a 50<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary of a first cousin. My siblings from Vancouver, Ontario and Winnipeg attended and we held a sibling reunion after which was very enjoyable. At both events, stories were told and often centred around what our parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, school chums, etc. had said. These usually brought along gales of laughter as we told the stories which were becoming legend to us and our families. What struck me was the interpretation placed on some of these utterances by different people. It became apparent that though we all heard the same words, we did not always interpret them in the same way. Some heard words in jest, some heard words of sarcasm and hurt, some heard nastiness and others heard far more than we had heard. Clearly, words not only have power but they can evoke a multitude of reactions, some positive, others negative.

A story to illustrate: I had an old aunt I loved dearly who was perhaps oversensitive about what she heard. She had no children and had decided to leave her things to her many nieces, nieces of her husband as well as her own side. Under everything she owned was a piece of tape which had on it the name of the person who was to receive the piece upon her demise. After a family get together, wedding, funeral, shower, whatever, she usually came home peeved by one niece or another and proceeded to rip off their name from the

bottom of the items designated for them. I lived with her for a time in university and I witnessed this often. What did so and so do I asked to so displease you? Always, it was something she had said. When I asked what she had said, she would quote something which appeared to be ok to me but infuriated her. Words: they do have power and we never know the consequence of what we say. It is like a ripple on the pond when we throw in a stone.

This does not suggest we should never speak. All it reiterates is that words have power and we need to be sensitive to this. By the way, in time my aunt forgot the incident and the niece's name usually went back under the item.

Jesus told the religious leaders to concentrate less on what went into the mouth and spend more time on what came out and the separation it caused between people.

Concentrate more on your heart, feed your soul, value others and recognize that God is the creator of all, values all people, loves all people, and waits in anticipation to their coming to him in adoration and grateful thanks.

Rev. Gary Magarrell