

8th Sunday of Year

During WW2 my mother was directed to work in the Ekco factory making electrical components. I remember her telling me that despite or perhaps because of the pressure of war some 25% of the components were rejects. They were monitored for defects that could have led to accidents and loss of life not simply a blemished appearance. Our personal failings spoil the image of God in us but also have an effect on others. Both our first reading and the Gospel today point to the need for quality control in our own lives.

*In a shaken sieve the rubbish is left behind,
So too the defects of a man appear in his talk.
The kiln tests the work of the potter,
The test of a man is his conversation.*

This passage has been chosen by the compilers of the lectionary because it links with the final verses of today's gospel:

A good man draws what is good from the store of goodness in his heart; a bad man draws what is bad from the store of badness. For a man's words flow out of what fills his heart.

These words invite us to pause and reflect on our own spoken words and what they tell us about the state of our heart, mind and souls.

What is the most dishonest or untruthful thing you have ever said in your life? How do we square this with claiming to follow the Lord who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. What is the most unkind or hurtful utterance that you have made whether deliberately or out of thoughtlessness? What does that say about how you really see people? What is the most unfair or unjust criticism you have ever given in your speech against another person? How did you come to make that judgement?

Our way of speaking also reveals something of our spiritual state. Do we speak with care and consideration, with courtesy and charity? Or are we careless and indifferent, thoughtless and unfair? How we speak reflects our attitude to others. The same is true for our choice of words. Do we habitually slip into coarse language, using swear-words and blasphemies or vulgar and demeaning terms?

In three days we shall see the beginning of Lent on Ash Wednesday. Lent is a season of grace, a time for discernment and spiritual growth, for reflection and amendment of life. Words may seem small things but they can have a profound impact on ourselves and others. They can have a positive as well as a negative effect. We can correct false impressions. We can apologise for the way we have spoken. We can encourage through praise. We can steer a conversation in a more positive direction. We can be careful to avoid joining in when other use bad coarse or demeaning language.

In today's gospel, Our Lord also uses the image of a good tree producing good fruit and of a bad tree producing rotten fruit. He was inviting his hearers to look at themselves, to judge their own fruit and draw conclusions about their inner state. When part of a tree is rotten, stern pruning may save it. Showing greater care in our conversations and language calls for self-awareness and self-discipline. It may be a more beneficial Lenten exercise than some of the other things that might spring more immediately to mind.