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St Francis De Sales recounts the following story. A man openly admitted to his wife that he needed to go to confession, because of the unpleasant things he was saying about people. For his penance, to his surprise, the priest told him to go to the local market, buy a hen, and on his way back home pluck the hen feather by feather and then retrace his steps to collect all the feathers. "But that's impossible" said the man "by now the wind will have blown them far and wide". Exactly, said the priest – it's the same with your unguarded words – you don't know where they've got to by now.

Some wise person once said that when your foot slips you can recover your balance, but when your tongue slips, you can never recall your words. Speaking without thinking is like shooting without aiming. People who use social media or even email often have regrets about something they wrote. Their words can come back to haunt them.

St Paul tells us today that 'love takes no pleasure in another's sins'. Part of the warped pleasure might result in saying or writing derogatory things about a person.

It appears to me from today's Gospel that the people of Nazareth were in this frame of mind when Jesus paid them a surprise visit. Even though initially He was welcomed with open arms, there were some who had misgivings about him. Despite him being one of their own, he didn't share their small-minded tribal approach towards outsiders. I wonder is there a Brexit message here? The root of their problem seemed rather simple - he seemed to have more time for the people of Capernaum, two miles down the road, than for them. This fermented ill-feeling towards Jesus among some of the locals. Then Jesus takes them down a further peg or two in telling them that at the time of Elijah, God chose to heal the Syrian Naaman of leprosy even though he hadn't a drop of Jewish blood in his veins. This didn't

go down well with them at all. Their wariness boils over into anger - nearly leading to murder. Scurrilous talk may not end in cold-blooded murder but we could murder a person's character.

God has given most people the gift of speech but our tongue can be used for good or ill. Like Jesus, it can sometimes get us into trouble, but it's the right kind of trouble when we suffer for speaking up for the truth, as He did. Silence is not always golden. However, in upholding the truth we must guard against staining a person's good name.

Unlike river water, gossip flows both ways. The person who gossips to you will almost certainly do the same about you. Unguarded talk about others is a sin against the eighth commandment, and, if we're honest with ourselves, none of us can claim exemption from it. It need to be a big '*mea culpa*' all round.

Lent, which is fast approaching is a good time to face up to it. St James says that the person who does not offend with his tongue is nearing perfection. But God is merciful and in turning to Him he won't hold our sins against us. May His name be praised?