

The Eight Commandment

St Philip Nery, a 16th century saint, tells us the following story. A man once went to confession and confessed that he had been talking uncharitably about others. For his penance the priest told him to go to the local market, buy a hen, and on his way back pluck the hen feather by feather. He did that and returned to the priest. The priest praised his obedience, but added: 'there is one more thing which I want you to do.' Go back and collect all the feathers. The man was dumbfounded. By now, 'he said', the wind will have scattered them all over the place, making them impossible to find. Exactly, said the priest - you don't know where your mean words about others have ended up either.

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.

St Paul tells us today: 'if I have all the eloquence of men or of angels but **speak without love** I am simply a gong booming or a cymbal clashing'. We could easily slip into the habit, of speaking without love and become oblivious to it.

It appears to me from today's Gospel that the people of Nazareth were sneering at Jesus behind his back when he paid them a visit. Even though initially He 'won the approval of all' his honeymoon was short lived - all because of a few wagging tongues. The root cause of their discomfort was that he seemed to have more time for the people of Capernaum, two miles down the road, than for them. They thought they were the 'bee's knees' and towards the end of the gospel today Jesus took them down a peg or two. That enraged them.

God has given most people the gift of speech but your tongue can be used for good or ill. Like Jesus, it can sometimes get you into trouble, but it's the right kind of trouble when used to point out a few home truths to people. We know that the Cardinal got himself into hot water this week by reiterating the Church's stance on problematic adoption issues but he exonerated himself by speaking up for the truth. Here he used his words wisely. That's in contrast to the Big Brother TV personality, Jade Goody, who, the previous week, came out with an unguarded remark which caused such uproar. But before we fall into the same trap and start condemning her, we could ask ourselves the following question: If all our day to day conversations were broadcast on TV, I

wonder would we want to run away and hide especially if our words were used to pull others down behind their backs.

Loose irresponsible talk about others is a sin against the eight Commandments and, if we are honest, we've all been guilty of it. In this context it is no harm to remember that, unlike river water, gossip flows both ways. The person who tattles to you is almost certain to do the same about you. Lose lips sink ships. So beware.

A good motto for any Christian community is that we shouldn't say anything behind a person's back that we can't say to their face. That should apply to all our relationships. We aim to use our God-given faculty of speech to uplift, affirm and help build friendships, not discord, between people. As St James says: 'The person who does not offend with his tongue is well on the way to perfection'. Let's take his words to heart.

QUESTIONS

- 1. Does the group think that social media has a lot to answer for in spreading malicious gossip about people? Discuss*
- 2. Is there a thin line between unjustly criticising the Church and using less than complimentary words when challenging those in positions of authority within the Church? Discuss*
- 3. When a whispering campaign is going on about a person in a position of authority who seems on the outside to be compromising his/her position, should we just ignore it in the name of 'charity'? Discuss!*
- 4. Are there times when we need to be economical with the Truth? Discuss*