

Sunday 4C

A man once shared with his wife that he had been saying unkind things about someone and that he needed to go to confession, which he did. For his penance 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. "You must be 'off your trolley" said the man "by now the wind will have scattered them all over the place, making them impossible to find". Exactly, said the priest – it's the same with your unkind 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't recall your words. Speaking without thinking is like shooting without aiming. In this context we hear of people who use social media who bitterly regret what they wrote.

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 uncharitably about others and even become oblivious to the harm it can sometimes cause.

It appears to me from today's Gospel that the people of Nazareth were speaking without love when Jesus paid them a surprise visit. Even though initially He 'won the approval of all', tittle-tattle among the locals soon put paid to that. 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. The green eyed monster of jealousy reared its ugly head. 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 made his immediate audience 'see red'. Their jealousy boils over into anger - nearly leading

to murder. Scandalous talk may not end in cold-blooded murder but we could murder a person's good name.

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 speak up for the truth, as He did. Silence is not always golden. However, in standing by the truth we must never take away 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. Irresponsible talk about others is a sin against the eighth commandment, and, if we're honest, we could all beat our breast and say '*mea culpa*'. Lent, which is just around the corner, is a good time to face up to it. Like any sin all we have to do is turn away from it and receive God's mercy.

A good motto for any Christian community is that we shouldn't say anything behind a person's back that we wouldn't say to their face. As St James says: 'The person who does not offend with his tongue is well on the road to perfection. Let's take his words to heart.'