

## 4C

*St Philip Neri 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 his relatives. He was a humble man. For his penance, to his surprise, St Philip had 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 all over the place". Exactly, said the priest – it's the same with your defamatory talk – you don't know where your words have ended up by now. That gave him a bit of a jolt.*

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. The wish they'd never pressed that 'send' button.

St Paul tells us today that 'love takes no pleasure in another's sins'. We can only take pleasure in another's sins if we're envious of them in the first place or have something in for them.

It appears to me from today's Gospel that the people of Nazareth were in this sorry frame of mind when Jesus paid them a surprise visit. Even though initially He was welcomed, it was short-lived when Jesus told them a few home truths. Despite him being one of their own, he didn't share their small-minded tribal approach towards outsiders. This attitude is alien to the gospel mandate to love our neighbour. The root of their problem seemed rather simple - he seemed to have more time for the people of Capernaum, thirty miles away, than for them. News travels fast. 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 it could undermine a person's character or tarnish their reputation.

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 character.

Unlike river water, gossip flows both ways. The person who gossips to you is almost certain to gossip 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.

*Lent, which is fast approaching is a good time to face up to it. Jesus takes no pleasure in anyone's sins. On the contrary there's 'joy in heaven' when 'a sinner repents'. Let's not let that joy go begging.*