

The Eighth Sunday of Ordinary Time
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Sirach 27:4-7
<i>Response</i>	Lord, it is good to give thanks to you.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 92:2-3, 13-14, 15-16
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 15:54-58
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Shine like lights in the world as you hold on to the word of life.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 6:39-45

The 8th Sunday in Ordinary Time for Year C brings us to the end of our journey through the (so-called) Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel of Luke 6. And for this Sunday, we end with a kind of series of parables or riddles of Jesus (little short sayings of Jesus) at the end of chapter 6 in Luke's gospel. So let's begin with Luke 6:39-45, and we'll read this gospel, try to unpack it, and then look at the connections with the Old Testament, which are really important in this case. So it says this; as Jesus continues the Sermon on the Plain after making his statements about loving enemies and not judging others and forgiving others and measuring out a good measure to others, he says this:

He also told them a parable: "Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit? A disciple is not above his teacher, but every one when he is fully taught will be like his teacher. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,' when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye.

"For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush. The good man out of the good

treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil man out of his evil treasure produces evil; for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.¹

Okay, a number of things are going on in this section. First, notice that it says there at the beginning: “He also told them a parable” and then said “Can a blind man lead a blind man? Will they not both fall into a pit?” Now when you and I use the word “parable”, we usually think of a short story like the sower (the Parable of the Sower), or maybe the Parable of the Prodigal Son, or the Parable of the Good Samaritan, where you actually (kind of) have a narrative story in which certain elements of the story are symbolic or figurative and represent other elements, and they become the key to unlocking the mystery of the kingdom that’s being taught by that parable. And that’s true – that’s a standard form for Jesus’ parables. But it’s also important to note that some of Jesus’ parables aren’t full length narratives, they’re more like short riddles; short questions. A very brief image that’s meant to make you think or puzzle you, get you curious about the nature of the kingdom or the nature of discipleship. In this case, the Hebrew word for parable, *mashal*, and the plural, *Meshalim*, literally means “parable”, “proverb” or “riddle” – it can be used to refer to any of these. And in this case, Jesus is apparently offering us not an extended parable like the prodigal son or even the sower, what he’s doing is he’s giving us a series of parables that are basically riddles (questions), using images that are figurative for spiritual truths. So in this case he’s laying out a few parables.

The first one is the parable of the two blind men. The basic upshot of this parable is simply this: that those who are spiritually blind cannot lead others. And he goes on to illustrate, well what kind of spiritual blindness is he talking about? He means blind not to the natural sunlight, he’s not talking about natural blindness or physical blindness, he’s talking about people who are blind to their own sinfulness; blind to their own weakness; blind to their own faults. And it’s precisely those kinds of people who tend to do what he just said in the previous verses: which is judge others, condemn others, put a very harsh measure toward others. So the imagery here is really crucial for the spiritual life. If you read any of the mystics or any of the saints – books on the spiritual life (like St. Francis de Sales, for example, his *Introduction to the Devout Life*) — one of the things he’ll talk about early on is self-knowledge. In other words, an important part of the spiritual life is growing in self-

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

knowledge. And growing in self-knowledge means becoming aware of your own sinfulness, ever more aware of your own sinfulness. It's one of the bizarre aspects of reading the lives of the saints, at least for me. After I started reading St Therese's *Story of a Soul*, and she's just condemning herself as a sinner, as the worst of sinners, the greatest of sinners, and you're thinking "okay, you're 24, and you're a little French girl who when into the convent at 15, what could you possibly have done? How can you regard yourself as such a great sinner?" It comes off at first as a (kind of) false piety. It seems like that to us, but the reality is that the reason the saints regard themselves as "so great" sinners, is not because they're morbid, or it's not because they have bad self-esteem, it's because they spiritually aren't as blind as we are. They can see clearly the holiness of God and the greater the light of the holiness of God becomes, the more they become aware of their own sinfulness. So they're not exaggerating. They're speaking the truth but from a vantage point that most of us can't see, because most of us are blind to our own sinfulness and our own faults. So, what Jesus' first thing out here is, everyone knows that if a blind person wants to reach a destination, he doesn't ask another blind person to lead him there because they'll both end up falling into a pit. So the imagery here is that he's trying to call to mind (kind of make us aware of) the reality of our own spiritual blindness.

You can see this second image, the second parable, is of the disciple and the teacher. He says, "Look, a disciple is not above his teacher. Everyone when he is fully taught will be like his teacher." So he's trying to humble the disciples here, help them realize: "I'm the teacher, you are the students. You're not going to be above me, you're not going to be greater than me, you're not going to have greater spiritual insight than me, but over time you will become like me. So there's a call to imitate Christ. And so one of the most famous works of mystical literature, Thomas Kempis' famous book, *The Imitation of Christ*. I highly recommend it as something that every Christian should read. That famous title, *The Imitation of Christ*, flows right out of this chapter of Luke's gospel. What Jesus is saying is that you are not just called to be a believer. A believer is someone who believes in Jesus and thinks that he's the Messiah, the Son of God - which is important, great, and necessary. But Jesus calls people to be disciples, and in the Greek term (in the Greek language), the word "disciple" is *mathetes*. It's from the Greek verb *manthano*, which means "to learn". So a disciple is a "learner". A disciple is a student. And he is student to a teacher. So Jesus presupposes (this is important) that if you're going to be a Christian (they're not called Christians yet, they will be eventually), if you're going to be a follower of his, then you don't just have to believe

in him, you have to be a student, which means you have to study, you have to study the word of God, you have to study his teachings, and you also have to imitate him, because the disciple is not above the master. The disciple is supposed to imitate the master and learn from the master.

The third parable here is trying to teach us, to help us learn, the virtue of spiritual humility, of spiritual clarity. And he uses this fantastic, very memorable image of (the old translation is) the moat, or the speck, and the log. How many people can see the specks in their neighbor's eye, but they can't see the log in their own eye. Now if you try to depict this physically, think about this for a second, if you've ever gotten a speck out of someone else's eye, imagine if you had a log coming out of your eye, and you were trying to get a speck out of the other person's – you couldn't even get close enough to them to carry it out. It's supposed to be an absurd image. One person has a giant log coming out of his eye, but he's worried about the other person who has a speck; because that's how absurd it is when we have massive faults and massive sins but we get bent out of shape and get worked up about, and we're busy condemning and judging and correcting other people who have minor faults, for their minor sins, for their specks, so-to-speak, spiritually.

And you can imagine, “Who's he talking to? What spiritually blind, spiritually immature people might he be teaching?” Well, he's teaching the Apostles, which, if you walk through the gospels, especially Peter, for example, they're going to manifest this kind of spiritual blindness. Exhibit A is going to be Peter's denial of Christ. He's going to say, “Lord, even if everyone else denies you, I will never deny you.” He is completely unaware of just how weak and cowardly he will turn out to be. Because whereas the others will scatter (which is reprehensible), Peter is going to verbally deny that he even knows Jesus three times. So who's got the speck and who's got the log? In this context here, Jesus is inculcating in the disciples a kind of (the virtue of) humility, but also he's giving them a practical parabolic application of what he earlier said: “Judge not, lest ye be judged.” He's talking about condemning others when you yourself are guilty of it, which, by the way, is the thing Jesus hates the most. He cannot tolerate hypocrisy. If you want to see him use his most vitriolic rhetoric, it's when he's condemning hypocrisy, and that's really what's undergirding this particular teaching here about the speck and the log. So he says, “You hypocrite. First, take the log out of your own eye and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother's eye.”

So he gives a positive point here. The first task you should have is on eliminating your own sins, overcoming your own sinfulness; not going around judging everyone else and condemning everyone else, but focus on your own sin first; otherwise you risk the sin of hypocrisy. And I have to just comment here as a kind of practical application to this: you may have noticed this, you might have seen this before. St. Paul, in one of the letters to Timothy, says, “Don’t ordain as Bishop a person who is a recent convert because he maybe puffed up with pride and fall prey to the devil.” Why is St. Paul beating up on the converts? It seems like he’s picking on them. But he’s not, because what he’s basically manifesting here is a basic rule of spiritual life. Which is that after a person has a conversion to the faith, one of the things that frequently happens is that they leave behind a life of serious sin, of grave sin, and they turn to a life of virtue. They start trying to live a life of virtue. And when that happens, after someone’s conversion, it’s very easy (all of a sudden) for them to see clearly all the sins of their neighbors, people around them. You may have met a zealous convert before (to Christianity) who is really not just excited about the truth, but also really zealous to condemn the world and to condemn others and to condemn the sins, which are rightly condemnable and wrong and it’s true, but it’s animated frequently, it’s a judgment that’s animated not by charity but by pride, because they haven’t grown in self-knowledge enough to see their own sinfulness in a clear light, which would make them be more merciful toward their neighbor.

With that in mind, we’ve got the speck and log parable, the final parable that Jesus gives here is the good tree and the bad tree. So he gives this image here that a good tree does not bear bad fruit and a bad tree doesn’t bear good fruit. And if you’ve ever raised fruit trees, you know what Jesus is talking about. I have some Satsuma trees, unfortunately, I have two bad trees. I hoped one of them would be good, but they’re not. They’re both bad, and they both don’t bear any fruit, and I’m about to cut them down. I’m going to give them one more year (like Jesus says in the gospel) and then they’re coming down because they just aren’t bearing any good fruit. Now is it their fault or mine? Who knows? But in this case Jesus is using the image here of the fact that it’s true, if you have an orchard you’ll know, sometimes you plant twelve trees, one of them just won’t bear fruit. You might treat them all the same, you might give them all the same fertilizer, you might have the same environment, but one of them is not going to bear fruit. And you can’t get the good tree to bear bad fruit and you can’t get the bad tree to bear good fruit, so this becomes an image. Obviously, the good tree represents a good man (or good person) and the bad tree represents a bad person, and the fruit represents virtues and vices.

Good fruit are virtues, bad fruit are vices. And so what he says here is that you will know the tree by its fruit, because the good man (this is interesting), out of the good treasure of his heart, produces good, and the evil man, out of the evil treasure, produces evil. Now pause there.

We've seen Jesus use the image of treasure a lot in the gospels. "Build up your treasure in Heaven. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." So you have this image (often time) of a treasury; a kind of deposit. And he uses that image for spiritual wealth, for spiritual merit or spiritual treasures. And what's interesting about this is that in both cases, the treasure is located in the heart. It's the good treasure of his heart that produces good. Now in context here, you've probably heard people say, "You'll know the tree by its fruit." What fruit specifically though, in this version of the parable, is Jesus focusing on? He's focusing it on our words, what we say. For he says (at the end), "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks." So there's a direct connection between our heart and our mouth. So the vices and the virtues in this context that Jesus is using are vicious words or virtuous words; sinning with our mouths, sinning with our tongues. In context that makes sense because what's the whole Sermon on the Plain, the second half of it all been about? Judging others, condemning others, blessing those who curse us, praying for those who persecute us. So all of those things are things that we do with the mouth, and Jesus (notice this), in the Sermon on the Plain, as he's trying to get the disciples to learn what it means to imitate him, notice, he doesn't spend the whole sermon talking about the sins of the flesh (not that those aren't important), but he's first talking about the sins of the tongue, because it's out of the mouth that the abundance of the heart speaks. And because in the Sermon on the Mount he's going after the human heart he wants to transform the heart, the first thing he has to deal with is transforming our mouths, transforming what we say.

And I can't help but (once again), just think about contemporary applications of this in light of our context today where we have social media, which is basically a gigantic international platform where people can say things to one another, say things to people they don't know (right?), without any kind of the normal repercussions that would follow in human conversation face-to-face. So what happens is people say things they shouldn't say. They say things rashly. They make judgments rashly. And my own experience of this, as I (kind of) entered that world and try to navigate it is, oftentimes I've been very saddened and disheartened by the kinds of things that I see Christians saying in the world of social media. Even people who,

like Christian leaders that you might have a great respect for, when they are speaking off the cuff in this (kind of) social media context, reveal judgments and condemnations which really (at least in my opinion) seem to be at odds with a (kind of) reserve in discretion that Jesus is calling for in the Sermon on the Mount: not to make rash judgments, not to make condemnations. And it's disturbing because if Jesus is right (which he always is), and it's out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks, then if Christians are tearing one another to pieces verbally, then where are our hearts? Have we really been formed by Jesus' Sermon on the Plain? Are we imitating the master here as he teaches the disciples to grow in self-knowledge of our sinfulness? Not to run around, taking specks out of everyone else's eyes, when we still have our own logs to deal with? It's very easy to hate other people's sin with passion. It's much more difficult to learn to hate your own sin far more than you hate anyone else's. And that's really what Jesus is trying to teach us to do.

With that in mind then, where is Jesus getting all these ideas about the heart and the mouth? Well I mean, obviously, he's the word so he knows them as the truth, but it is interesting that in the Catholic Old Testament, in the book of Sirach, we have similar imagery, similar parables, similar riddles, parabolic type teaching about speech and the fruits of one's mind.

So in Sirach 27:4-7, we read these words:

When a sieve is shaken, the refuse remains;
so a man's filth remains in his thoughts.
The kiln tests the potter's vessels;
so the test of a man is in his reasoning.
The fruit discloses the cultivation of a tree;
so the expression of a thought discloses the
cultivation of a man's mind.
Do not praise a man before you hear him reason,
for this is the test of men.

If you have the New American Bible you might notice the translation's a little bit different there. That's one of the things about Sirach, there are some ambiguities about some of the language and whether you're translating it from Hebrew or from Greek and different copies and whatnot, but in any case, let me just walk through the images real quick.

First, it uses the image of a sieve and refuse, which is basically, again, you're sifting through the grain (like you have the husks and stuff like that). When the sieve is shaken, the husks remain and the husks are like the filth in a man's thoughts or a man's mind.

The second image is of a kiln, where you're firing a potter's vessel. In this case the two translations are really different. The Revised Standard Version says "the test of a man is his thoughts, his reasoning", but the New American Bible says "the test of a man is in tribulation." In either case, the image is of someone being put to the test. So if you really want to know the essence of a person, you have to look at what happens after they pass through the fire: either the test of tribulation or the test of listening to that person speak. The speech reveals the heart of a man.

I think that if that's the correct translation, then it leads directly into the next image, which is really the one that the Church has chosen this for: the image of the fruit and the tree. So here, Sirach is anticipating Jesus by using the image of a fruit and of a tree as a symbol or a figure for a person's words. So just like the fruit reveals the goodness of a tree, so the words reveal someone's mind, the nature of the mind. And that's great advice that he gives at the end there, Sirach is one of my favorite books in the Old Testament. It is full of fantastic advice, which is "don't praise someone until you've heard him reason; until you've heard him speak at length."

Just by way of a contemporary application, this makes me think about the fact that sometimes you'll see a person, whether it's a political figure or an actor or an actress or artist, whatever it might be, and you're impressed by the appearances. You're impressed by either their fame, or by their political power, or their wealth, or whatever it might be, they appear one way. But then when you hear them speak, it can change the way you evaluate them; it can change what you think of them. There can be a difference between the appearance (the outward appearance) and then the inward reality, and the way that you get at the inward reality is through a person's mind and through their heart, and the way that's expressed is through their mouth, through their words. So don't judge someone just by appearances, but listen to what they say, and that will give you a clue as to the nature of their mind and of their heart.

With that in mind then you can see the Old Testament anticipates what Jesus is saying in the New Testament, and in this case the bridge between them is Psalm 92. It is just a beautiful psalm of praise that is good to give thanks to the lord, and it's

good to praise his name. Now why would the Church take that doxology and put it into the middle? Well it's real simple. If out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks, then what happens to our hearts when we use our mouths to praise God, to praise his name, to worship him? What happens? It ends up (actually) working the other direction too. Not only does, "out of the abundance of our heart do our mouths speak", but "as our mouths speak, so will our hearts be shaped." And so if a person spends their life reciting the words of the Psalms, singing praise to God in the Mass, what that's going to do is actually affect the way we think and the way we choose with our will. It's going to shape our hearts. So there's a motion here (in the responsorial psalm) that's really crucial. The Church has an old saying, *Lex orandi, lex credendi*, the law of prayer is the law of faith (or the law of belief). In other words, as you worship, so will you believe. And the same thing's true of our speech. As we speak, so will we act. If we put holy words of blessing and praise on our lips, it's going to help us grow in the virtue of living like Christ and imitating God. And I think that's why that responsorial psalm is chosen for today. That's a really powerful insight. It is good to give thanks to the lord and praise his name, not just because he deserves it but because we need it.

Finally, I'd like to close with two quotes from *The Living Tradition* of the Church, two Church fathers (both of them doctors of the Church): Cyril of Alexandria and then the Venerable Bede. In Cyril of Alexandria's commentary on St. Luke, he gives an insight into that spiritual pride that we were talking about with regard to the specks and the logs. Let me read what St. Cyril of Alexandria says:

With compelling arguments [Jesus] persuades us that we should not want to judge other, but should rather examine our own hearts, and strive to expel the passions seated in them, asking this grace from God. He it is who heals the contrite of heart and frees us from our spiritual disorders. If your own sins are greater and worse than other people's, why do you censure them, and neglect what concerns yourself? *This precept, then, is essential for all who wish to live a holy life, and particularly for those who have undertaken the instruction of others.*²

So notice, what Cyril says is an essential precept for living a life of holiness is realizing that you do not censure other people before you take care of your own sins.

² Cyril of Alexandria, *On Saint Luke* 6; trans. E. Barnecut, p. 85

To do so is an act of spiritual hypocrisy. So first thing's first, the first order of business is to work on your own growth and virtue before you run around condemning others.

By contrast (or slightly differently), the Venerable Bede, in his homilies on the gospels focuses on the image of good and bad fruit. And he says this:

Do you want to know which are the bad trees and what are the bad fruits? The apostle teaches us: “fornication, impurity, self-indulgence, idolatry, sorcery, malice, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, conflict, factions, envy, murder, drunkenness, arousing, and things of this sort” (Gal 5:19-21)

Paul calls those the works of the flesh. The Venerable Bede says these are the fruits Jesus is talking about. He continues

He subsequently lists the fruits of a good tree. He says, “The fruit, however, of the Spirit, is charity, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, faith, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22-23)³

So, something to think about, if you want to examine your conscience (and one way of examining your conscience is using the Ten Commandments), another way is to use St. Paul, Galatians 5, the works of the flesh and the fruits of the spirit. What do you see in your own life? Where are there “works of the flesh” that need to be rooted out and where are there fruits of the spirit that need to be cultivated so that we can grow in virtue like Christ?

³ Bede, Homilies on the Gospels 2.25