

It's strange what we remember. Weird things, random things, made up things. And not always the important things like significant-other's birthdays, wedding anniversaries, where we put the car keys, or indeed, where we parked the car. Yes, there are some key facts locked away in the grey matter, secure at least until the grey hairs turn white and everything goes south, but lots and lots of the storage space in our skulls is dedicated to remembering things like a suit of clothes stitched from curtains (yes, me too), a once recurrent nightmare, a snatch of irrelevant conversation from 1986, a particularly delicious cup of tea at a Christmas party, the pattern of light on the ceiling of a childhood bedroom, snatches of TV shows; on and on and on: none of it useful to remember and apparently just clogging up the grey stuff. Until that is, you're desperately scrabbling round for an illustrative anecdote to start a sermon and hey presto! you understand how useful it is to have that haphazard hoarder in your head. I was struggling to put finger to keyboard when writing this for today until the bugle sounded and over the hill galloped the cavalry in the shape of the memory of a joke from a long lapsed TV stand-up comedy routine. That's the sort of stuff my brain thinks I need to remember. Facetiousness it seems is locked into my psyche.

I don't remember who the comedian was but I do remember the joke. Bit like these sermons- you don't remember the theology, but you do remember the 'humour'. So, the stand up routine I remembered was from the time there was a lot of debate about whether gay men should be allowed to serve in the army. Amazingly that time is very much in living memory. The joke was something like this:

'I don't understand why the military doesn't want gay men serving. All the gay men I've met know at least twenty ways to kill a man using just their wit.'

The original was, shall we say, more anatomical and thus less repeatable in church but a lot funnier. Still, caustic wit is indeed one of our superpowers, that and being fabulous with soft furnishings which has less valuable military applications but does make for better barracks.

Enough about me, let us skitterback a couple of centuries to the person widely regarded by historians as the worst Prime Minister this country has ever had. No, Boris Johnson isn't older than he looks, he's still working on that record. We're talking Lord North, PM from 1770 to 1782, the man who lost Mad King George America and thus the chap indirectly responsible for Donald Trump. It's not the peer's career I wish to relate today, but the record of an exchange that occurred

between Lord North and someone trying to get into his good books at the opera in Covent Garden.

‘Who is that ugly lady in the box opposite?’ Lord North was asked by his fellow opera-goer.

“That sir” the PM replied “is my wife”

“No, no,” said the mortified sycophant “I meant the dreadful monster sitting next to her.”

“That,” said North “is my daughter.”

An object lesson in when to stop digging, and a splendid illustration of today’s second reading from the Letter of St James, and the pernicious power of the tongue. Though nobody ever died from the direct effects of rainbow wit, it is wielded as a highly effective defence against hostility and even violence. Trust me, sometimes the lashing of the tongue can avert a raised fist. The pen may be mightier than the sword, but the tongue is deadliest of all. And yet, how little we respect the offensive weapon nestling beneath our palate, how cavalier we are when we wield the whetted blade of our words. It’s like driving a car. We do it so often we rarely remember what a danger that metal missile is and what a perilous activity we are undertaking.

Regardless of the dangers, we simply can’t stop talking. And fair enough, we would cease to be us if we shut up, we would be little more than belligerent apes if the cat got our tongue, howling at the moon instead of serenading our beloved. It takes a lot for us to be comfortable with even companionable silence: we simply can’t stop talking. We can no more voluntarily stop prattling than we can stop breathing. We use our tongues to name and bless (as we will do today) and also to insult and curse; we use them to inform and misinform, to amuse and to curry favour, to make friends and to make enemies- the list of the uses of chatter is endless; most of what gives our lives their glorious meaningful depth and complexity is lubricated by the lick of our tongues. We simply can’t stop talking. However essential some of our twittering may be, much of the time our talking is just something to do; as we pay attention to the one who’s talking it’s also a way of guaranteeing we’re centre of attention. Some of us want to be there. We simply can’t stop talking, it is unrealistic to expect us to do so, and so much would be lost if we suddenly all... stopped.

But what all of us *can* do is try to be more conscious of what we say, in a short sentence we can be kind. We can be, but it's surprisingly difficult.

As Christians there are two reasons we should be trying to be more careful in what we say. The most obvious one is that we are called to love our neighbours *and* our enemies; we are called to recognise Christ in our siblings, and there's not much love being demonstrated if we're regularly subjecting each other to a good tongue-lashing. As I said that's the obvious bit, but there's more. There are some kinds of talk that can be extraordinarily corrosive to Christian communities. Saint Benedict, the founder of Western Monasticism highlights in his Rule how damaging is what he calls 'murmuring'. We're not dealing with the obvious slanging-match mode here but that quiet background noise of complaining, backbiting and bitching that besets all places where two or three or more gather, and it can be so much more destructive because it's often treated as just part of the wallpaper, the hum of the fridge; we are so used to it being there that we don't notice it, or the serious damage it does. Perhaps the only times we realise is when we see someone who has recently joined us recoiling: they expected better from followers of Christ, that's not what we saw and worse, we'd long since forgotten the murmur was even there.

'Murmuring' is patently not something unique to Christian gatherings- it's endemic to all human communities. Pretty much everybody whatever their faith or lack thereof would agree that the world complains constantly and it would be a better place if we grumbled less and were kinder in what we say to each other. So that's the first reason to think before we speak

For Christians however, there is an even more important reason to watch our tongues, a reason why words matter so much more than we realise and it's this:

The heart of our faith is Jesus, the Divine Word, the self-communication of God.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.*

The Christian journey, the journey which begins for Clementine today, is the process of becoming filled with the Living Word, the emptying of ourselves of everything we have to say and our learning to listen to and eventually to join the Divine conversation. We can't be part of one conversation if we're still busy with another.

The Christian journey is not, let me stress, about us shutting up and withdrawing from the world. It's about us slowly, so very slowly, bringing those two conversations—the human and the Divine— together, bringing flesh to the Word, and the Word to the flesh, incarnating the Word in our own world. By the end of the journey— and only then— *our* talk will fall silent in the presence of the Word and all the words on our tongue will be the Word.

You don't learn a new language straight away. For a while you will speak the new words in the accent of your mother tongue. But start now, keep practising and one day you'll speak like a local. No longer tongue-tied, you will speak the language of heaven.