

Sermon, 20th August 2023, Romans 11 + Matthew 15
(“with the drawing of this love, and the voice of this calling”)

*May I dare to speak in the Name of our loving Lord,
one God, Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer. Amen.*

What is coming out of your mouth? Listen to yourself? Hark at him... Our language and culture have several common phrases about how we talk, and how it can defile or define us. Christ is of course correct when he reminds us that food goes into the stomach, but our words come from our head and our heart. It's a question of character. St James rightly says that the same spring can't give both salt and fresh water – if we curse our neighbour blue from Monday to Saturday, but bless them on Sunday, then we are not where we should be with a God who is love. Christ calls us to clean the inside of the cup – to inner cleanliness.

We should be measured, not by what goes in our mouth, but by what comes out. Sermons about the preacher's holiday can be frustrating for some of us; but, when I was in the Middle East *for work*, I heard a Muslim sermon on a taxi-driver's radio, which could have been very Anglican – calm, wise words about how what we post and share online can now outlive our mortal bodies, and all that remains for some is what we've said on Facebook! Our online “profile” can sometimes reflect our real spiritual profile all too accurately – we are called toward consistent, Christ-like character. One of the Saviour's great gifts to us, His integrity, is that His words, actions and character all agree – they line up with, and proceed from, who He is – He is the Word that proceeds from the Father's mouth. How can we improve what comes out of our mouth? “Garbage in, garbage out” – if you feed yourself with a diet of tabloid rage, then peace and love may not be paramount in your speech. If you surround yourself, online or in person, with “loud and aggressive persons, who are vexatious to the spirit”, then the company you keep will not be spiritually elevating! Ryle (with a Y!), first Bishop of Liverpool, wrote a generally excellent book on holiness, sadly marred by an anti-Catholic rant in the middle – but much of his other advice remains sound about ordinary, day-to-day “righteousness of life”; we need to not be dumping rubbish into our “spirit river”, but to be nourishing our souls with what we read, watch and hear, with whom we converse, on what topics, and in what way. Is what comes out of your mouth redolent of Kingdom values of justice, mercy, compassion, trust in God, hope and love? This can be difficult for diffident Anglicans who would rather suffer all the pains of hell than be publicly or socially embarrassed!

We are washed, we are justified, we are sanctified: we were washed in Baptism (later Confirmed, for many of us); justified once for all by Christ's death; but the process of sanctification is, for most of us, still a work in

progress! We are called to a religion of the heart – God sees the heart – to a steadfast focus on the Spirit of God in Christ, to habitual recollection of God, to align our will with that of God. Michael Crawford said before several catastrophes in the sitcom *Some Mothers Do 'Ave 'Em*, “every day, in every way, I am getting better and better”. Can each of us say that? We are called to consistent intent, and to ongoing spiritual improvement, no matter how small the steps. At Evensong we are invited to accompany the minister “with a pure heart and humble voice unto the throne of the heavenly grace”: not bad counsel for the rest of our week either.

Writer Richard Rohr reminds us that Christ calls us to follow Him, not simply believe this or that, but to follow His example and Way of life – Rohr protests that the Church has often made our faith about believing and belonging, captive to Credal conformity, instead of being about the lifelong spiritual journey of improvement and transformation of each of us into the likeness of Christ. Christ reminds us that our faith is not one of outward religious observance, but about the light and living water that can pour through us into the lives of those we serve. “O God, make clean our hearts within us – and take not Thy Holy Spirit from us”.

Rohr’s book *Falling upward – a spirituality for the two halves of life* contains many wise words about how much of our initial work of career, home and family, may only be the first step, the framework, for the wider maturity, humility, flexibility and love that should grow from it. Much that has required great effort is, I’m sorry to say, often only the beginning of our true journey of upward growth back towards Christ, of knowing ourselves to be forgiven, and drawn onwards; as St Paul reminds us this morning, the gifts and calling of God to each of us, and as a Church, are irrevocable.

As we move from being fed by God’s Word toward being fed by His Sacrament, let me leave the last word of our journey this morning to George Herbert:

*Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back, Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning If I lack'd anything.*

‘A guest,’ I answer’d, ‘worthy to be here.’ Love said, ‘You shall be he.’

‘I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear, I cannot look on Thee.’

Love took my hand and smiling did reply, ‘Who made the eyes but I?’

‘Truth, Lord; but I have marr’d them:

let my shame Go where it doth deserve.’

‘And know you not,’ says Love, ‘Who bore the blame?’

‘My dear, then I will serve.’

‘You must sit down,’ says Love, ‘and taste my meat.’ So I did sit and eat.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Amen.