

Look Who's Talking

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: These days it seems that almost everyone is talking. The voices are constantly coming at us from all sides: from the television, the radio, the internet, from social media platforms, from those annoying political phone calls we're constantly getting ... people talking, telling you what you should believe, what you should think about this issue or that, what causes deserve your support, and what you should buy. Yes, everybody is talking; but not everyone has something worthwhile to say.

With so many voices all competing for our attention, wouldn't it be nice to have a filter of some kind, something that would screen out the bad and only let through the good through? That *would* be nice. The trouble is, whom could you trust to do that? I mean, take your typical news story. Two networks, say CNN and Fox, report the exact same story and yet you'd hardly know it was the same story because of the way they spin it one way or the other. Then there's their editing process. One network reports stories that reflect favorably on one side of the political aisle, while the other ignores them – and vice versa. Whom do you trust to really give you the straight scoop – as Joe Friday used to say, “Just the facts, Mam”?

I'm not going to pretend that I have the answer; I'm still trying to figure it out for myself. But I can say that it's a problem as old as human history. Recall that the temptation of our first parents came down to the same question: whose words are you going to trust, the serpent's or the Lord's?

So, it's no surprise that we see the same thing going on in the days of our Lord's earthly ministry. Eight days before the events recorded in today's Gospel, Jesus put a question to his disciples. He asked, “What are people talking about? Who do they think I am?” Mind you, this would have been at a point about half way through his three year ministry. By this time, he was a major celebrity. His fame was widespread as a powerful preacher and performer of miracles. Thousands were flocking to hear him and to be healed of every ailment imaginable. Everyone was talking about him. Jesus' question was, “What are they saying?”

The disciples told him. People were saying all kinds of things: some that Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life after his beheading by King Herod, others that Jesus was Elijah the prophet, or Jeremiah, or some other Old Testament hero returned to earth. And inasmuch as the Jews held these biblical persons in high regard, it means that people were saying very positive things about Jesus. They truly admired him. The problem of course with what they were saying is that they were all wrong.

Jesus then put the question to the disciples. He said, “What about you guys? Who do you say I am?” It was Peter who spoke up on behalf of the group. He said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus confirmed his response. He further told them that this wasn't something they had figured out on their own. No, he told them, this was revealed to you by my Father; that is to say, they were acknowledging God's own testimony about Jesus. But, Jesus told them, I want you to keep a lid on this for the time being. Though the day will come, now is not the time to announce it to the world.

He then went on to say now that you know who I am, let me tell you what I must do. I've got to go to Jerusalem. There I will be rejected by the religious authorities. I will be arrested,

tried and condemned, crucified, and then on the third day rise again from the dead. You, my disciples, must likewise take up your cross and follow me. That day will come too. And finally he told them, some of you standing right here will soon see the coming of the kingdom of God.

These were words well worth hearing – they came straight from the One they confessed to be the Christ. The trouble is that they didn't believe most of what he said. They themselves filtered out the truth. Jesus was talking; but they weren't listening.

Nevertheless, in partial fulfillment of what he had told them about some of them soon seeing the coming kingdom, in today's text we have him leading a select group of disciples, Peter, James, and John, up a high mountain. Upon reaching the summit, the three, weary from the climb, soon drift off into peaceful sleep while Jesus prays a little way off from them. Hmm ... that seems to be a theme. It will happen again the night Jesus is arrested: the disciples sleep while Jesus watches and prays. I believe it has something to do with their spiritual condition – they're not really awake.

While Jesus is praying he is transfigured. For a time it's like the veil is lifted, and the divine light heretofore concealed in his human flesh is allowed to shine forth in all of its dazzling brilliance. Two heavenly visitors appear beside him in glory: Moses and Elijah. They begin speaking with Jesus about his upcoming departure. It's worth noting that the word for departure there is actually "exodus". It means "the way out". But it points to what is really about to happen. The Old Testament exodus was *the* salvation story for God's people. It was when the Lord with mighty works and wonders delivered his chosen people from slavery in Egypt and led them to the Promised Land. As great an event as it was, it only prefigured the greater salvation – the greater exodus – that Jesus was about to fulfill by delivering the Lord's chosen people from the bondage of sin and the fear of death by his own death and resurrection. It points also to how *all* of the Old Testament scriptures, all of the Law and the prophets here represented by Moses and Elijah – *all* of it is about Jesus and his work of salvation for God's people. Now, that would have been a conversation worth hearing: the Lord Jesus and two of the Old Testament saints in glory talking about God's great plan of deliverance. What could be more important or true than that?

Unfortunately, as we heard, the three disciples sleep through most of it. Coming awake and shaking out the cobwebs from their minds, they only manage to catch the tail end of it. Even then, it's doubtful that they understood or took to heart much of what they heard.

Still, the sight is impressive. The disciples are in holy awe; so much so that as Moses and Elijah are saying their farewells and preparing to leave Jesus, Peter pipes up. He means to prolong this glorious scene – perhaps indefinitely. Why, we could make this a holy shrine. People could make pilgrimages here to see Jesus glorified, and Moses and Elijah too. The possibilities are endless. This is going to be great. People will be blown away.

He proposes erecting three shelters to house Jesus so that he and his two heavenly guests can stay here – though why Moses and Elijah would want to stay is beyond me. I'm guessing that their accommodations in heaven are decidedly more comfortable than a tent on a mountain top in Galilee. But more to the point, look who's talking. Look who is directing how things ought to be, what Jesus should do, how this whole Christian faith ought to work and be understood: it's Peter, not Jesus.

Now, you may protest that I'm being a little hard on him. You say at least his heart is in the right place. He means well enough. But that is precisely the problem. Sin is so easy to

identify. You know when you or someone else is doing something that violates a command of God. It's obvious. What's much harder to see is that because of our sinful condition even our best efforts to please the Lord and do what we think is right is equally offensive to the Lord. Think about it: what was the problem with the Pharisees? They came up with their own rules on top of God's Law; rules on the rules by which following scrupulously, they imagined themselves to be righteous in their own right and thereby missed the call of God to repent and to trust in the Savior he sent them in his Son, Jesus. They were doing the talking. They weren't listening to Jesus.

Or take the western Church at the time of the Reformation. People had come up with all kinds of ways to please the Lord: shave your head, take vows of celibacy and poverty, enter a monastery or convent, fast and pray constantly, and thereby earn great rewards in heaven. That's just a fraction of it: pilgrimages to sacred sites, indulgences, the veneration of saints and their relics ... on and on went the list of supposedly good deeds that pleased the Lord. The problem was that people were talking. They weren't listening to Jesus. They weren't trusting in him and the righteousness he imputes by faith in him. They were trusting in themselves and what they were saying and doing.

It's a perpetual problem in the Church; one that we see alive and well today, perhaps most obviously in the whole contemporary praise and worship mentality that has infected the minds of so many. The basic notion is that the main purpose of our regular gatherings is to give to the Lord the glory, honor, and worship due his name. I've got something God wants. It's my job to give it to him. And boy, don't that make him happy? So, listen up, Lord; I've got something to tell you. Look at me. Look who's talking.

Nope. You've got nothing but your sin. The only thing worthwhile you have to say to the Lord is "I'm sorry. I repent. For Christ's sake, forgive me – yes, even for the sin of thinking that I *can* do something to please you." And sure, after you hear those words of peace and comfort from the Lord of your forgiveness, some praise and thanksgiving is appropriate. But it's a response to what the Lord has said. Our part first and foremost is to listen to him.

We see this played out in today's lesson. As Peter is babbling on proposing his form of manmade religion, the mountaintop is swiftly engulfed in a cloud. The disciples, feeling the presence of the absolute divine holiness, are filled with terror. Peter, mercifully, shuts his mouth. He stops talking. And the three listen in rapt attention to the voice of the Father, "This is my Son, my Chosen One; *listen to him!*"

It's good advice. The best. And so we do listen. We look at the One who is talking. We look at Jesus and we hear what he has to say; what he has to say when he tells us, "I have chosen you; you are mine"; when he says, "I died for your sin and rose again"; when he says, "I forgive you all your sins"; when he says, "Take, eat, this is my body given for you. Take, drink, this is my blood shed for you"; when he says, "Because I live, you also will live"; when he says, "Take up your cross and follow me; yes, hear my voice and follow me through life, through death, to life everlasting." And the only thing we have to say at that point is "Amen. I believe." May the Lord make it so for each of us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!