

THE TONGUE IS A FIRE. Sept. 16th, 2012.

On Wednesday, the US Ambassador to Libya, J. Christopher Stevens was killed, along with three other Americans, during protests outside the US Consulate in Benghazi. A group of Moslem Libyans were demonstrating against an American movie which they considered to be insulting their revered prophet Mohammed. An extremist militia Islamist group Ansar al Sharia fanned the flames of this protest into a raging inferno which has spread like wildfire to American Embassies and Consulates in over 20 countries all over the Moslem world. James was right in his Epistle to say that the tongue is a fire! What we say, both in public and private, matters and can have devastating consequences. To emphasize his point, James mentions the word "fire" four times in just two short verses! He writes: "How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire. The tongue is a fire, setting on fire the cycle of nature, and set on fire by hell."

The tongue is powerful. Our politicians know that, which is why millions of dollars are being tragically wasted on presidential campaign ads and expensive meals where candidates speak. The candidate who can convince the most voters will win and become our President, whether his words are true or not. Thankfully, we can use the website factcheck.org to ascertain whether what we hear is the truth, a distortion or a downright lie.

In his letter, James warns church teachers who, like politicians are in a position of power, to be careful how they use their tongues. He cautions them that they also are under authority, and thus will be judged more severely for any abusive use of their tongue. If we are parents, bosses, teachers, police officers, judges, priests (point at self!), preachers (point at self), we need to watch what we say, for our words can exert a very strong effect on those in our care. One school teacher once told my brother-in-law that he would never amount to anything, which severely discouraged him. Even if we are not in a position of authority, as children and youth, what we say with our tongues can make or break friendships, and cause lasting wounds. In his excellent book on marriage *The Five Love Languages*, Gary Chapman writes for some spouses or partners, words can be an extremely meaningful way of conveying the love we feel. If our husband, wife or partner hears some kind word of appreciation, a genuine compliment, a tender expression it can really lift the person's mood if words are their primary love language. A loving note left on the bed, a kind email or text or voicemail can make all the difference in the world between someone having a lousy day or a happy day.

Our tongues can not only influence others, but also really impact ourselves. What we say to ourselves is powerful, and can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we say that nobody loves us, and we will never be good enough, we will sap our joy and energy by such negative words. The resulting depressing mood will in turn make us less attractive to others, resulting in our worst fear being realized of nobody loving us. As Smoky the Bear said " Only YOU can prevent forest fires!" As has been written, children learn what they live. If we were constantly criticized as a child or by a spouse in a previous

marriage, we may need professional help in overcoming the lack of confidence and fear of failure we may feel. Unless God helps us break the negative cycle, we may well end up inflicting the same wounds on our own children, our new spouse or our coworkers. In *The Pilgrim's Progress*, John Bunyan writes of the character Talkative that he was a "saint at work and a devil at home." How much easier it can be to speak kindly to those we do not know, and yet be ill as hornets in what we say to those we should love best.

It is helpful to reflect on what we experienced from other's tongues in our family of origin and perhaps at school. How do we need to be changed in the way we use our tongues now that we reflect the love and goodness of Jesus Christ as we follow Him? For some of us who are tongue-tied for various reasons, we can ask God to help free our tongues so that we speak up for ourselves if someone puts us down, and communicate with calm confidence what is in our hearts and minds in a healthy way.

The tongue is a fire. And fire can actually be good or bad. How wonderful it is in the chilly fall and winter, to sit in front of a controlled log fire, and enjoy its warmth. Such a fire can help us to feel relaxed, cozy, protected and thankful. This is the good use of the tongue, the tongue that speaks the truth in love, conveying the tenderness and affection of our loving Father-God in Heaven, who sees us each one as uniquely precious and beloved. Then, on the other hand, there is the other kind of fire, one that is out of control, that destroys homes, burns down neighborhoods, charring everything we knew and loved, everything that was good, precious and cherished. We have seen these fires this summer raging through Colorado and California. The tongue is a fire.

God knows the power of our tongues, for good and for evil. That is why He sent His only Son to live amongst us as the living, speaking Word made flesh. Jesus used His tongue for good, to encourage those who felt despised and rejected by the religious authorities of His time, to speak words of healing, to strengthen the faith of those who felt abandoned by God. Jesus always spoke the truth in love, however difficult, and however painful the consequences to Himself. Unlike some politicians, Jesus did not flatter to deceive. That is why in our Gospel reading, he tells any who would follow Him that they must deny themselves and take up the cross, and be willing to lose their lives for His sake. As one commentator writes, "Jesus was never glib, making what is difficult sound easy, or what is mysterious sound plain. He did not make the Gospel sound like the South Beach diet: "try it and see how good it makes you feel." Jesus was not all about appearances, telling half-truths, exaggerating His credentials, and padding His resume. He addressed people directly, rebuking them for their good, as he did Peter, rather than gossiping behind their backs. He was unafraid to speak truth to power when necessary, to confront the religious rulers about their hypocrisy and their abuse of power for their own selfish gain.

All of this is very convicting isn't it, if we are truly honest with ourselves. Just as Jesus called us 2 weeks ago to examine our hearts and acknowledge where we need cleansing and transforming, so Jesus today challenges us to take a careful look at how we use our tongues. Can others come to us in trust, knowing that the fire of our tongues is controlled and safe, and that they will be warmed with God's genuine love for

them? Can people trust us to speak the truth in love when necessary, to warn and admonish in all humility for their own growth in holiness, aware that we also are imperfect and fallible?

Lennie Spitale, in his book *Understanding Prison Inside and Out*, warns volunteers never to speak negatively about anyone, no matter how secure you feel with the person to whom you are speaking. He says: (p.152) "Prison is a very small world. Sights are taken easily; mountains can be made out of molehills. Always be conscious of the actual words you are using...and be conscious of what it may sound like to others." Sounds like good advice in church congregations too. Churches are fishbowls, just as prisons are, where careless words can cause great damage.

In February 1940, at the beginning of the 2nd World War, the British government produced a series of posters, warning the general public to watch their tongues, that they did not unwittingly give information to enemy sympathizers. The posters bore the slogan: "Careless talk costs lives." The tongue is a fire. Today, we can be careful not to fan the flames of hatred and prejudice by using our tongues to offend and insult, as the American movie maker did which has so angered the Moslem world. Instead we can use our tongues for good, as Jesus did, to proclaim God's Kingdom of healing, peace and justice. In that way, all can come and be warmed by the controlled fire of God's great love for each one of us. Amen.