

St Mary's Church, Dorchester, Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> January 2025 i.e. 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Epiphany.

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

For the last couple of years I've been reading around a subject that I've never knowingly studied before. The more I learn about it, the more relevant it seems to almost everything we do, and certainly everything we say. The subject I'm interested in is called "rhetoric".

These days we don't use the word "rhetoric" very much. When we do we tend to use it negatively. We say that an argument is "empty rhetoric" when it seems idle, when it doesn't get us anywhere. We especially use the word "rhetoric" to flag up speech which we think is deceptive or harmful. It was a surprise to me to learn that rhetoric was a main part of the curriculum of Western civilisation from the time of the Ancient Greeks until fairly recently. But rhetoric clearly meant something very different in those past ages to what we mean by it now. So what is rhetoric, and why do I think it's worth talking about?

Well, in brief, rhetoric is the art of communicating in a way that builds community. Every time I speak, I am imagining a listener; and the better I am at imagining who my listener is the more likely I am to be understood. By repeatedly talking in a certain way I can also affect my listeners, I can persuade them, for example, or alienate them. By the same token my listener is able to affect me: by showing me who they are and what they value, my listener can influence the way I speak. To be a good speaker is also to be a good listener; and it follows that you can't be a good communicator without a community around you.

Every time we communicate we are building a community. But it doesn't follow that every communication will succeed, or that the community we make will be a healthy community. We all know how easy it is to be misunderstood, and to misunderstand, even when we're trying really hard. Sometimes it feels like you and the other person are talking a different language, and no matter how much you try you end up making things worse. And that's before you get into situations where one or other party isn't really trying; or, where at least one party actually wants the communication to fail. To have any chance at making a healthy, happy community together, we have to be wise to all of this. However consciously, we have to be students of rhetoric.

In each of our three Bible readings today we observe people building community through the way they communicate. Our first reading, from the book of Nehemiah, describes how, after many years of exile, the Jewish people began the difficult work of rebuilding. The exiles felt that the physical work of rebuilding had to go alongside the cultural and spiritual work of learning to be God's people again. So they ask this priest Ezra to read to them from the Law which Moses had been given, which they had largely forgotten in the years of exile. And as they hear the Law, they feel sad: they can't help but notice the ways in which they have fallen short of their calling. The bit of communication in all of this which really struck me was the way Nehemiah, and Ezra, and the Levites repeatedly tell the people not to be sad:

“Do not mourn or weep... for this day is holy to our Lord; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.” [Nehemiah 8:9, 10]

I hear an echo of this in our second reading, from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Paul is trying really hard to build up the Church in Corinth. Earlier in the letter he had some very challenging things to say; but here he is trying to encourage them and console them. He imagines some of his audience reading what he says about the body of Christ, and saying to themselves: “Because I am not [like these other members of the body] I do not belong to the body.” [1 Cor. 12:15] To these Paul says, “The body does not consist of one member but of many,” [v.14]; and again, “If all were a single member, where would the body be?” [v.19]. What makes one member suffer causes the whole body to suffer; what makes one member rejoice causes every member to rejoice [v.26]. So no Christian can ever say to another, “I have no need of you.” [v.21]

In our Gospel reading Jesus gives one of the most powerful speeches of his whole ministry. It is also one of the most badly misunderstood speeches of his ministry. It starts well enough: Jesus quotes from the prophecy of Isaiah, and finishes with a dramatic personal claim: “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” [Luke 4:21].

If we only ever read scripture in the chunks given to us by our lectionary that is where we would leave the story. But the story doesn't end there. It is almost possible to pinpoint the exact moment where everything changes. Just after our Gospel finishes, in a single verse, the whole atmosphere of that synagogue in Nazareth seems to shift:

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.

They said, “Is not this Joseph's son?” [v.22]

You can be amazed at something because you really like it; you can also be amazed at something because it wasn't what you were expecting, and it makes you uncomfortable. Each of the Gospel writers, in their own way, suggest that something about this final question – “Is not this Joseph's son?” – something about that amounts to a rejection of Jesus and of his “gracious words”. In Luke's account, Jesus sees the brittleness of their enthusiasm for him and his message. He makes a brief prophecy foreshadowing his crucifixion – “Doctor, cure yourself!” [v.23, cf. 23:39] – and things spiral out of control to the point where the crowd is ready to throw him off a cliff.

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I've said that rhetoric is about building community as much as it is about speaking well. So what kind of community is suggested by all of this? And how is Jesus a model for us, as we try to learn the rhetoric of the kingdom? There are lots of things I could say here, but I'm going to focus on two of them. Both are to do with challenge: the way we challenge other people, and the way we challenge ourselves.

If on the surface our readings seem to be a message of comfort, the element of challenge is never far away. In this Gospel reading, as in other places, Jesus is unwilling to settle for anything less than total understanding, total engagement. In his dialogue with the devil in the wilderness he has already shown that his goal is not to be praised, not to be a celebrity or a figurehead. He is clear in himself and among his closest friends that following him will be a kind of death for anyone who chooses it. In another place he says,

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!  
[Luke 12:51]

The kind of community implied by this is a community where people are unafraid to challenge and be challenged. Challenge is what makes repentance possible; it's what makes forgiveness possible.

However, challenging other people is only part of the story. Jesus says in another place that it's very easy to focus on other people's speech and behaviour: to remove the speck in your neighbour's eye and ignore the log in your own. So what about that log? To be in Jesus' community means asking ourselves: Would I challenge this behaviour if I saw someone else doing it? I can no more tolerate

dangerous or self-indulgent behaviour in myself than I can in another person. What affects me will affect other people too: we are a body, as Paul says, and what causes one member to suffer causes all of us to suffer.

I'm sure that you'll hear more from me about rhetoric at some point. I feel that I will always have more to learn about communicating in a way that builds community. There are as many opportunities to learn as there are people to speak to, people to listen to.

In our speaking and our listening may we grow in the image of the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.