

The Tongue: James 3:1-12 & Mark 8:27-38

May the words of my tongue and the meditation of all our hearts
Be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

In the 13th century, there lived a humble saint named Anthony of Padua.¹ He was a Portuguese Franciscan, serving at a rural hermitage in Italy. It was there that he discovered he had a gift with words. The occasion was a joint ordination service for both Dominicans and Franciscans, and by some mishap, no one was scheduled to preach. There was a spell of awkwardness in the service, as you can imagine, and much posturing over who should take the pulpit.

But finally, it was decided that Anthony, the quiet priest from Portugal, should give a short homily after the readings. Let me tell you, the monks that day got more than they bargained for. The humble Anthony opened his mouth, and lo and behold, the man could *preach*. His words rang like thunder and stunned his brothers, and from that day on, his fame as a preacher spread through all the land.

Over the years, Anthony's audiences swelled and swelled, finally reaching numbers of nearly 30,000. It was said that his sermons brought so many of his listeners to tears and repentance that the priests were always shorthanded to hear confessions and assign penance.

Anthony wasn't just a popular, charismatic preacher, however. He was also a mighty defender of orthodoxy. His superiors sent him on special preaching missions to vanquish heresies, and Anthony toppled the local heretics one by one, such that he gained himself the nickname *Malleus Hereticorum*, "Hammer of the Heretics."

As you can imagine, the great "Hammer of the Heretics" was not always welcome in regions where heresy held sway. On one such preaching mission to the Italian coast, the crowds were especially stubborn and hotheaded. After hours of preaching to throngs of obstinate sinners, Anthony was led by the Holy Spirit down to the seashore, where the Spirit suggested Anthony try preaching to the fish instead.

In the tradition of his master, St. Francis, Anthony gave the fish everything he had. He shouted, "Listen to the Word of God, O ye fishes of the sea," and to his surprise, they listened! Great schools and swarms of fish arose from the deep and gathered in the shallow waters around him. By the time Anthony was done preaching, the fish were praising God, waving their fins and bowing in reverence before their Maker. And wouldn't you know it, when the heretics saw the greatness of this miracle, they quickly forsook their sinful ways and turned to God.

After years of performing miracles and preaching the good news of Christ, Anthony was so famous that even the Pope heard him preach. Then it was that Pope Gregory IX gave Anthony his second nickname, "the Ark of the Covenant," for the words that came from his mouth were like outpourings from the Holy of Holies.

Sadly, Anthony was only thirty-six years old when he died. After his burial, the Franciscans built an elaborate cathedral in his honor, and the construction took thirty years. When they dug up Anthony's remains to transport them to the cathedral vault, St.

¹ Anthony's stories from: "St. Anthony of Padua," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1907). Additional details from *The Little Flowers of St. Francis of Assisi*, 15th century.

Bonaventure was there witnessing the events. And what he saw was an incredible thing. Over thirty years, Anthony's flesh and bones had rotted, nearly to dust, but something remained. His tongue was still intact, it was red and fleshy and almost pulsing with life, like the thing had never died at all. And so Bonaventure, in shock and awe, grasped the undead tongue in his hands, gave it a resounding kiss, and cried out, "O Blessed Tongue that always praised the Lord, and made others bless Him, now it is evident what great merit thou hast before God!"

Now pause. I want you to hold this image of Bonaventure in your mind, elevating the tongue, praising the tongue, holding the gift of eternal life in his hands. Keep an eye on him, don't lose him, but turn with me and see what St. James is doing with the tongue. Mark the contrast. Instead of exalting the tongue for its glory, James treats the tongue as a disease, as a poison, even a fire from hell.

In Anthony's story the tongue is venerated as a power for good, and in James's teaching, it is damned as a power for evil. In both instances, with Anthony and with James, the tongue is lifted out from among the members of the body and made a spectacle. It is singled out as a force to be reckoned with.

James, of course, is fascinated by the paradox of the tongue: it is so small, so weak, and yet it holds a power in vast disproportion to its size. No other member of the body can so disrupt or deceive its fellow members. No hand can lead the foot astray; no ear can force the nose into submission. But the tongue can damn them all! "It is placed among our members as a *world* of iniquity," James says. "It stains the *whole* body" (3:6). Like a bit in the mouth, or a rudder in a boat, it can shift the course of the whole, it can forge worlds and shape destinies (3:3-4). It can build kingdoms of truth as well as kingdoms of lies.

And that is the tongue's second great paradox: it pours out blessing as well as curse (3:9-10). It can make war as well as peace; it can breed ill as well as good. It can damn, as in James, or, in Anthony's case, the tongue can be so deified by holy speech that it receives an early taste of eternal life. It's a contrast as real as the difference between fresh water and salt water. One brings life and health, the other brings thirst and death. Did you know that 97% of the world's water is salt water?² That means that fresh water is a tiny minority, a great exception to the rule. The same is true for the tongue. The tongue's instinct, if we might call the tongue a beast, its instinct is to spoil the waters and to poison every drop of goodness that would come out of the mouth.

So this is perhaps the truest thing James says about the tongue: "*No one can tame the tongue*" (3:8). We may tame birds, we may tame beasts, but the tongue knows no master (3:7-8). This school of ours³ is a dangerous place, because not only do we let the tongue out for frequent exercise, but we let the tongue tread in the regions of *theos logos*, speech about God. So beware, you teachers in our midst, for the tongue in your mouth will cause you to be judged with greater strictness (3:1)! And beware, you students, who make an idol out of speaking well and hammering down heresies, your tongue is full of poison (3:9). Our tongues are wagging in places where angels fear to tread, and we must take great care lest we blaspheme.

But as we know, the dangers of the tongue are no new problem. The tongue's

² Internet.

³ Duke Divinity School.

bifurcated nature has a long history in the church. On the one hand we have St. Anthony as an icon of what the tongue can be at its best; and on the other side, we have the Apostle Peter from our Gospel reading, who is an icon of what the tongue can be when it wags untamed. For how is it, friends, that Peter can speak two impossibly different things, even within the same story? How is it that Peter's mouth might contain both the declaration that Jesus is the Messiah, and contain the rebuke that denies Jesus his cross?

"Who do people say that I am?" Jesus asks (Mk 8:27). What sorts of waters are spilling from the tongues of the crowds?

"Some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, or a great prophet" (8:28). They're not so far off. A little salty maybe, but the water's nearly palatable.

"But who do you say that I am?" (8:29). What sorts of waters have been seeping into your hearts since you followed after me?

"You are the Messiah," Peter says (8:29). Holy of Holies! The drink of angels has reached his mouth, the river flowing from the throne of God!

"You are the Messiah." We call Peter's words the Great Confession. But it was only half of a confession, really. His tongue only knew the half it wanted to know. Jesus had to show Peter the tortured underbelly of Peter's words; that the full confession would go like this: "You are the Messiah, *that is*, the Messiah who must suffer, and be rejected, and be killed. You are the Messiah *with a cross*. And you will rise again" (8:31).

When Peter heard the second half of that confession, coming from Jesus' own mouth, Peter's tongue lost its grip on the words of heaven and was gripped instead by the powers of hell. "And so Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him," Mark says (8:32). And how does Jesus respond?

"Get behind me Satan," he says, "for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (8:33). You are speaking, Peter, the very words of Satan, and they have no place in the mission of God's son.

Peter's mouth is flowing with mixed waters, with brackish half-truths. And it will happen again and again. "Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you," he says (Mk 14:31). "I swear to God, I do not know the man," he says (Mk 14:71). No one can tame the tongue, no one. For the tongue is a beast, and its instinct is the way of death.

And how for us? How is it that *our* tongues might at once proclaim Jesus is the Messiah, and at once speak in ways that suggest he is no Messiah to us at all? How are blessing and cursing both in our mouths? They should not be, but they are (Jm 3:10). With all our work training our tongues to speak well, even still, they are beasts untamed; even still, they are monsters fit to kill. The tongue is a fire among its members, and has little hope, but for God's help. It was St. Augustine, who said, "If no man can tame the tongue, we must have recourse to God, that He may tame it." "Let *God* be sought," he says, "that *man* may be tamed."⁴

And how does God tame us? How does God tame the tongue? How does God take a fumbling man like Peter, a simple monk like Anthony, even fools like us, and renew the tongue into a thing of glory?

God tames the tongue by the very things that the tongue was made to do: speaking and tasting. *Speaking and tasting*.

Take Peter for example. His tongue is not tamed until after Jesus is gone. Peter waits until the day of Pentecost, and then he is given a new tongue. A tongue of fire from

⁴ St. Augustine, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/160305.htm>.

on high burns away the old tongue in Peter's mouth, and not with the brackish fires of hell, but with the angelic fires of purgation (Acts 2:3). One tongue gives way to another. And so, with his tongue made new, Peter preaches a sermon in Acts 2, the likes of which Anthony of Padua would have envied. In the sermon, Peter's great confession is finally crowned with its true glory, that Jesus is the Messiah, *and* he is the Messiah who dies and rises again (2:22-24, 31-32).

That is the moment of true victory for the tongue. That is the victory for Peter and that is the victory for us, to learn that the reason we are given a tongue at all – *is to proclaim that Jesus Christ is the Messiah of God.*

Now pay close attention here. The tongue is healed *so that* it might confess Jesus Christ, but the tongue is also healed *in* the confessing, *by* confessing that Jesus is the Christ. Jesus, the name that is above every name, will cause every knee to bow, and every *tongue* to confess (Phil. 2:10-11). *The name of Jesus tames the tongue.*

We may or may not get a blast of Pentecost fire, but we will get fire nonetheless. It will be a slow smoldering in our jowls. God will burn the old tongue out of our mouths as we speak the Good News about Jesus Christ. His name is fuel for the fire; the more we speak it, the more we are made new.

But the tongue is tamed not only by *proclaiming* that Jesus is the Messiah. The tongue must also *taste* that Jesus is the Messiah. This old tongue will be burned away by more than a fire of words, for Jesus said, "Take and eat. This is my Body, and this is my blood."

There's one more story I need to tell you about Anthony of Padua. He was on another of his preaching tours amongst the heretics, hammering away at their profane doctrines, when he encountered a stubborn horse. The beast was untamed and wild. While it lived in captivity, it refused to eat its food, and it answered to no master. But Anthony, being a priest, was carrying pieces of the reserved sacrament, the very Body and Blood of Christ. Led by the Spirit, he took out the sacred food and held it before the wild horse. And as if stricken, the beast bowed low before the sacrament, and resisted no more. It took its bridle with no complaint.

Do you see? It was the holy food that tamed the beast. And our tongues are not so different. They are given to speak the truth of Christ, yes, but they are meant to taste it as well. In bread and wine our tongues are mastered. What else can quench the fires of death and hell but the body of Jesus Christ himself? What else can undo the poison of sin but the blood that flows through his veins?

And so we taste him, we let him run over our tongues. He once said, "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you have no life within you" (Jn 6:53). Is it so hard to believe that unless we taste him, our tongues will not know the words of eternal life? He is the taste above all tastes. Truly, unless we taste him, our tongues will hunger for unholy foods, will thirst for unsavory drinks. Only his body can tame the hellish insanities of the tongue.

And so we must speak his name. We must taste his flesh. By these things God tames the tongue. The tongue was not made to curse and kill; it was made to praise and bless. So let us take up the mantle of Peter, the Apostle who confessed the Messiah, and the mantle of Anthony, the Ark of the Covenant, whose tongue spoke its way to unending life. And let us go forth into the world with holy fires in our mouths, so that our tongues may find healing even as they say, "You are the Messiah." Amen.