

SACRED LANGUAGE

No language is more sacred, than words of thanksgiving in times of distress.

Չկա ավելի սուրբ լեզու, քան այն, որ գիտի վշտերի մեջ գոհուլթիւն հայտնել

When the coronavirus crisis began over a month ago, this saying from 14th century Armenian churchman Barsegh Mashkevoratsi was among the first thing I recalled and shared with you. Truly there is a sacred power, a spiritual growth that can come by speaking of good and speaking of God in the mystery of suffering and distress. In today's assigned readings, the Apostles James and John seem to agree, affirming that our choice of words is a most significant factor in allowing God to turn around any evil, including this global pandemic, into something good. First James warns us about our tongue's tendency to increase evil, and then John reminds us of the great creative power of words spoken in love. So when it comes to the stewardship of our tongue and words there are two simple steps. Step one; refrain from bad words. Step two; use good ones. This may seem simple, but what is most simple is often also the most profound.

Beginning with James, he wants to make sure we never underestimate the power of the tongue, of our words to destroy. One misplaced word can break the spirit of a young person, it can demoralize a volunteer, it can set off an argument with your spouse. So volatile and powerful is the tongue, wrote James, that "No human being can tame the tongue." (Ja 3:8). But even if the tongue cannot be fully tamed, it can be guarded and restrained. That's what we commit to practice in our lives at Chrismation, when the priest signs a cross over our lips and says; "This seal in the name of Jesus Christ be for you a guardian for your mouth and a strong door for your lips."

What does this look like in our daily lives, to have a door on our lips and a guard on our words? It's of course to refrain from gossip and directly hurting others with words. But it is much more subtle than that. Often we should refrain from saying anything, because we don't have the full story and must listen to find it! Our former President Harry Truman had a discipline that we would all probably benefit from applying today. Any letters that the President had written in anger had to sit on his desk for 24 hours before getting mailed. If at the end of that "cooling off" period-after he had talked to others and God-he still felt the same sentiments, he would send the letter. But by the end of his life, Truman's unmailed letters filled a large desk drawer! Do you have a place for unsent letters, emails or texts? I certainly do. And in this age of instant communication-never mind 24 hours-24 minutes of restraint might spare us much heartache! Our tongues, our pens and our keyboards should more often fall silent, as we pray to God for humility and communicate with others to hear their side of the story.

So step one in being good stewards of the power of our words is to refrain from using them for evil. Step two is to use words for good, as God uses them. Let's see what today's reading from John has to say about this; "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, the glory of the Only-begotten from the father, full of grace and truth (Jn 1:1,14)." John here traces the power of words back to their source, bringing us back to Genesis where God spoke the world into existence with his Word. When God said, "Let there be..." there was! Godly words don't just describe, they create! And remember that God didn't just form the world with His Word, He also reformed it. That's why we call Jesus the Word, because just like our words explain our hearts and minds to others, so Jesus was sent to explain-to reveal-his Father's heart and mind to the world. And if ever there was an example of the power of offering words of thanksgiving in times of distress it was from Jesus, who loved his fickle disciples to the end and forgave his executors from the cross. Today, we can tap into the power of Jesus' example, offering words of hope and thanksgiving in a world reeling with anxiety and despair.

And so let us do our part to turn the trial of this time into blessing by carefully choosing our words to not condemn, but rather to reveal the heart of God, the heart of true love to the world. If we can, we join a sacred conversation which continues to form, reform and transform the world. Because good words to our child, to our spouse, to our neighbor, to our enemy, don't just describe good, they actually create it. And with all the bad news in the world today, we desperately need to convey the good news, the *Avedis*, which is the essence of our faith; that evil and darkness cannot overcome the Word of God, a sacred language that we speak, we do and mysteriously become, now and always; amen.