

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT, 2025

“Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak, say to those whose hearts are frightened: ‘Be strong, fear not! Here is your God, He comes with vindication, with divine recompense He comes to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, the ears of the deaf be cleared; then will the lame leap like a stag, then the tongue of the mute will sing.’” (From today Lesson, or “First Reading”, Isaiah 35: 3-6)

It strikes me that in this list of the effects that the Lord’s coming will have on His people, strength is first, and talking is last. Talking is there, and it is important. Talking has its place, yet strength is more important. There are, of course, different kinds of strength, physical, intellectual, and spiritual. For talk to be truly effective, it has to be backed up by some kind of strength. St. James gives the famous warning, “Everyone should be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath.” (James 1:19). I think that being “quick to hear and slow to speak” means building up strength first, and then speaking on the basis of that strength.

Strength has a “voice”, so to speak, all its own. I know a man, now entering middle age, who was a rather wonderful teenager. His natural physical endowment was such that, once he started working deliberately on strength building, he got large and strong very quickly, tall and powerfully built before he even turned 16. The boy’s father feared that the boy’s size and strength would tempt him to bullying, so the dad made a point of teaching his boy that his size and strength made him a shepherd, someone to protect people and not push them around. The kid took that lesson to heart. When he saw some bullying going on, he would just go over, cross his big arms across his thick chest, and glare. No words. His strength spoke.

The first thing, then, is to do the hard work of building up some real strength, physical, intellectual, and spiritual. Only after that work is done, do we have any business speaking. Without the right kind of strength behind them, there is something unreal about our words.

People often speak in an unreal way, with words not backed by knowledge, experience, or power. All I know about war, for example, I only know by reading lots of history, taking a few classes, and listening to some experienced people; but that reading and listening is enough to make me irritated with people who speak too easily about what the United States government and military should or should not have done in World War II. That is a fair topic for discussion - but you had better know a fair amount about the subject before you start talking about it. I remember from nearly four decades ago taking a difficult graduate course on American nuclear strategy. One graduate course didn’t make me an expert, but it did enable me to recognize when people talking about that subject, and sometimes piously talking about it, simply didn’t know what they were talking about. That lack of knowledge made their words, even their pious words, unreal. Knowledge really is a kind of power, as the saying goes. With God’s help, do the hard work of building up the strength of knowledge, and only then speak out.

Examples could be multiplied. Routinely, in old fashioned newspapers and new fashioned podcasts, people express strong opinions about politics, church affairs, morality, and theology. They talk confidently about what the government or the Church should do on a particular subject, without having done the hard work of building up their own knowledge about the subject. Not knowing much about deep and difficult subjects, their confident speech only

reveals their prejudices, or simply repeats what they heard someone else say. Their many words are painfully unreal.

Now, there is such a thing as plain, old common sense. Someone with solid common sense is never entirely helpless on any subject. If you are in a position where you have to make a decision and don't have much real knowledge about the matter at hand, you can consult an expert or two and then use your solid common sense to make a decision. That same common sense, however, even as it helps you do what you have to do, cautions you against speaking out unless you have to. You don't need to have expert knowledge to plan your own and your family's meals, for example. All you need is common sense and a little bit - a little bit - of expert advice. On the other hand, common sense and a little bit of expert advice doesn't make you an expert yourself. Plan your own and your family's meals, but don't make speeches about it.

I use that example to make the simple point that we don't need to rely on experts to run our daily lives, but at the same time shouldn't appoint ourselves teachers unless we really do have some fairly deep knowledge about the subject we intend to teach.

We don't need to have expert knowledge in matters of theology and the Church to start developing a relationship with the Lord through prayer. On the other hand, we shouldn't talk about such Christian doctrines as original sin, actual sin, the true divinity and true humanity of Jesus Christ, the atonement for human sins accomplished by Jesus Christ, and the saving effects of Baptism, etc., unless we actually have done some serious studying from good sources. Words, however sincere, that are not accompanied by knowledge are necessarily unreal, and sometimes dangerously so.

Not all knowledge comes from books, of course. There is very real and powerful knowledge that comes from experience. In general, frankly, young Christians should be hesitant about preaching Christianity until they have, with God's help, developed the kind of spiritual strength that only experience, prayed about and reflected upon, can give. Sincere and genuinely religious people can speak unreal words until they come to know something about the realities of human life. Profound spiritual strength comes from passing through sorrows, and worry, and self sacrifice, with God. It is a plain fact that all experience teaches us something, and that experience accompanied by sincere listening to God and prayer teaches us true wisdom. Such wisdom is life saving strength, and should be shared. To share it, however, we must first have it. Again, the first thing is, with God's help, to build up genuine strength. Then, we can speak real and not unreal words.

Well, if one point of this homily is not talking too much, I suppose I should move to my conclusion now.

Let's all talk less, and build up our strength more. Exercising, studying, and praying, let us build up our strength. Let us avoid idle talk about matters of which are mostly ignorant. Let us stop trying to seem clever and original. Let us aim and actually knowing something, and then only speaking about what we know. Let us mean what we say, and say what we mean. Particularly, let us receive the truths of the Christian Faith with reverence and speak of them with proper caution.

Let us pray to God for the will to build up genuine strength, particularly in matters of the spirit.

May our spiritual strength then be a source of blessing to all around us.
Amen.

