

Abide in Christ

The Power of the Word

By MOST REVEREND JOHN C. WESTER, ARCHBISHOP OF SANTA FE

“In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.” These beautiful words begin the Gospel of John and remind us of the power of the word of God whose breath hovered over the waters and created life out of nothing. Of course, we Christians believe that the Word of God is Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, in whom and for whom and through whom all things came to be. We also believe that Christ continues His work of creation as the Body of Christ continues to grow through the proclamation of the Word and through the witness we give by building up the Kingdom of God through the words that come from our mouths.



Archbishop John C. Wester

Our words are powerful. God made us in His image and likeness and the breath that forms our words can also bring new life. Sadly, they can also tear down and destroy. Do we really appreciate the power of our words, for good or ill? As Edward Bulwer-Lytton said in 1839, in his historical play *Cardinal Richelieu*, “The pen is mightier than the sword.” As Catholics, we have an even greater investment in our words. At baptism, Christ commissions us to proclaim the word of God throughout our lives. We are to be living embodiments of the word of God, speaking words of forgiveness, healing and love. Whether we like it or not, our words are far more important than we often realize.

Quite some time ago, a psychological study underscored the power of our words. Some psychologists formed three groups of students at random, telling the first group that they were quite intelligent, the second that they were of average intelligence and the third that they were not that bright. They then administered the same test to all three groups and as you might expect, the first group did really well while the second group received average scores and the third group mostly failed the test.

It seems to me that it is now more important than ever that we reflect on the power of our words. People use words

in the public square today that are demeaning of others, negative, destructive and insulting. Instead of using the power of the word to build others up we choose to put them down, sometimes with tragic consequences as evidenced in those who have committed suicide after being bullied online in the social media. Moreover, it is not just the words we use with others. What we say to ourselves in the inner recesses of our minds, our “self-talk,” can be very revealing. When I make a mistake, what do I say to myself, “You big dummy” or “Oh well, I’ll do better next time.” The words I use in these situations can lead to even more mistakes in the future or a more positive outcome and a better self-image.

Psalm 141:3 gives us a beautiful little prayer to say before speaking to others or ourselves: “Set a guard over my mouth, Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.” What a beautiful prayer, asking God to help us to reflect on the words that we use and to give us the grace to say the good things people need to hear. As St. Paul says in Ephesians, “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. (Ephesians 4:29) All of us have said things that we wish we could take back. It would be nice to have a “five second delay switch” on our mouths! Asking God “to watch over the door of my lips” might make such a switch unnecessary.

Of course, there are special moments in our lives when we are very conscious of our words such as when parents name a child or when vows are spoken in marriage ceremonies, religious professions or ordinations. We are a bit more careful when we take an oath of office or swear to tell the truth or give somebody our word. However, we are less cautious in the ordinary parlance of our day and it is then that we need to ask God’s help before we speak. So often, we use words carelessly or without realizing the power that they have. At other times, when we could say something edifying, we choose not to because of jealousy, vindictiveness or just carelessness. Letting the power of those words lie fallow can be just as tragic as uttering words that hurt others. In any case, we do well to think twice before uttering our words. As Rudyard Kipling once said, “Words are, of course, the most powerful drug used by mankind.”

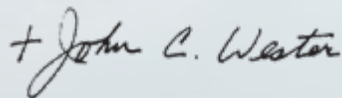
I often refer to the example of a couple who were having an argument. At one point, the husband spoke harshly to

his wife, belittling her and demeaning her. She said to him, "Did you say that because you love me or because you want to hurt me?" He responded, "What kind of a stupid question is that?" and then walked away. Several days later, he approached his wife and said, "You asked me a question the other day and I never answered you. The truth is that I wanted to hurt you and I am sorry. I love you and I ask for your forgiveness." Here we see the power of words to tear down and to build up. The choice is ours. I sometimes see people with a wristband that says, "What Would Jesus Do?" Perhaps another should be worn on the other wrist: "What Would Jesus Say?" Allowing our words to blend with those of Christ would certainly unleash the power of love, forgiveness, healing and encouragement in a way that could really change the world.

This Fathers' Day we honor our fathers whose words did so much to make us who we are. I hope that they were for us words of encouragement, wise words that helped us to understand a little better the mysteries of life, words that assured sons and daughters that life is worth living, that there is hope and that forgiveness brings new life. We thank our dads, and all parents, this Fathers' Day for uttering those words and pray that all of our fathers will strive to do the same.

In the beginning was the Word, and that Word echoes down through the ages, creating anew the human spirit and giving life to all. As Isaiah says in chapter 55:11: "The word that goes out from the mouth of God will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it." That purpose seeks to find an echo in our words, words that give voice to the presence of Christ in our midst, the Word of God, achieving its purpose of building up his Body, the Church, and furthering his Kingdom.

Sincerely yours in the Lord,



Most Rev. John C. Wester,
Archbishop of Santa Fe



His Mercy
Endures Forever