

Dignity New York
3 Feb 2019 Homily
“Tell It Like It Is”, by John Falcone

1st Reading: Jeremiah 1:4-5, 17-19

2nd Reading: 1 Cor 12:31-13:13

Gospel: Luke 4:[18-]21-30

When Jesus and his earliest followers were alive, the foremost advocates for public morality were the Roman empire and the philosophical movement known as Stoicism.

The Imperial policy was straightforward: Roman citizens should be law-abiding, self-sacrificing, courageous, and self-controlled; Roman subjects should pay their taxes and count their blessings – or face devastation by Rome’s citizen army.

The Stoic movement was more philosophically focused. Stoics argued that humans must follow the laws of nature if they wish to be happy, and that the laws of nature teach us four key habits, which the Stoics called “virtues”: justice, thoughtfulness, courage, and self-control.

Stoic philosophy was the common-sense moral framework of first-century Mediterranean culture, and it had a tremendous influence on Early Christian values and thought. In the Gospel of Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus and other Christian leaders demonstrate the classic Stoic virtues; in many New Testament letters, leaders-to-be are encouraged to demonstrate this kind of

public morality. When Christianity became Rome's official religion, the four Stoic habits, plus Paul's faith, hope, and love, became the "Seven Cardinal Virtues" of Roman Catholic ethical teaching.

Now, there's nothing wrong with justice, forethought, bravery, and self-control. There's nothing wrong with faith, hope, and love.

But there is also a minority moral tradition that reaches back just as far in Greco-Roman antiquity. This tradition shows up prominently in tonight's readings, and it played a major role in Christian thinking until the church and the Roman government fused into one. That tradition is the Cynic philosophical movement, and its cardinal virtue was "Parrhesia," a Greek word that means "Telling it like it is."

You can see "parrhesia" spelt out on the front page of tonight's bulletin – thanks, Gary, for printing it there. Say it with me, "Parrhesia".

Jesus demonstrates parrhesia in tonight's Gospel reading. He calls out his friends and neighbors for missing the point.

The home town crowd is amazed by Jesus' eloquence; they admire his education. They like his style.

But Jesus is skeptical.

Do they get the message? Do they understand that Good News for the poor means bad news for the financially well-to-do? Do they see that accepting God's favor means risking their own security? Do they grasp, as our own John McNeill taught us, that embracing God's liberty means "taking a big chance on God"?

Jesus is skeptical, it turns out, with good reason: the home town crowd wants razzle-dazzle; they don't want to hear about the last coming first.

The parrhesia that Jesus demonstrates reflects the best of Cynic moral thinking. The Cynic movement was not about being cynical. Their highest value was instead being skeptical.

“Obedience and patriotism are each citizen's God-given duty.” The Cynics were skeptical.

“The present economy offers the best opportunities and the best of all possible worlds.” The Cynics were skeptical.

“Aren't peace and stability the most important social values? Why can't we all just get along?” The Cynics were skeptical.

Like the Cynics, Queer people of faith know a lot about skepticism. Like Jesus, and his earliest followers, Queer people of faith can embrace parrhesia as a virtue and a God-given gift.

As the Cynics understood it, parrhesia is the “democratic” practice of “speaking freely and openly”; the strength to be honest with ourselves and with others; the courage to speak truth to power. Parrhesia is the opposite of flattery. (Marrow)

For early Christians, it was the gift of God's Spirit which gave them the words that they needed when they were persecuted, when they were “dragged before governors and kings” for the sake of the Gospel (Mt 10:18).

Parrhesia also gives us the courage to be honest with ourselves and with God: to confess our shortcomings; to face rock bottom; to stand before God in prayer without fudging or hiding; to stand before God just as I am.

Paul helps us to frame parrhesia as an act of compassion. Parrhesia is not about vindictiveness, self-service, or being cynical. We are called to speak the truth in love.

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I reasoned and acted in childish ways. Now faith, hope, and love call me to parrhesia; to face the truth in all its grit and complexity; to speak the truth and to speak it responsibly.

Jeremiah reminds us that God has our back when we speak truth to power.

I think that tonight's readings call us to speak truly and honestly. We are called to tell it like it is:

- about sex
- about relationships
- about poverty
- about our struggles and the struggles of those whom we love

We are called to be honest with ourselves and to be honest in prayer before God. And we are called to practice that honesty with each other. In the Catholic tradition we used to call that confession. Today, that may be a dead sacrament, but have we found other ways of being honest with real life people – of making our parrhesia more real and concrete?

- Is there anyone in my life with whom I can be fully honest about my sex life and relationships?

- About money?
- About anger?
- About fear?
- About disappointment?

If not, should I be praying for someone like that to come into my life? Where do I get to practice my parrhesia?

Tonight I am praying for the gift of parrhesia. I am praying that opportunities to speak frankly may come to us. And I am praying for the strength and the courage to take up those opportunities, and to make parrhesia happen.

For more information on parrhesia, see Stanley B. Marrow, S.J., "*Parrhêsia* and the New Testament," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* vol. 44 (1982): 431-446.