

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, 14th July 2019

“And whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council” (Mt 5:22) – I hope you haven’t called anyone “Raca” lately – No, I’m sure you haven’t! It is hardly a word you would normally come across, nor indeed one you would usually use for insulting someone. In fact, it is a bit of a mystery as to why “Raca” is in St Matthew’s Gospel in the first place: why an Aramaic word was included in the original Greek text of the Gospel, and which as such has consequently been passed on, through the Latin, into the English.

There is, however, the suggestion that, apart from the obvious benefit of preserving an Aramaic expression of Christ in the Gospel, the readers of St Matthew would have nevertheless understood “ῥακά (Raca)” because it might have been commonly known, as a term of abuse of course, in Syria, where Aramaic as well as Greek was spoken and where the Gospel was supposed to have been written. The evangelist might also have preserved the original Aramaic word simply because he thought that it was untranslatable, or at least nuanced in such a way as to be best left untouched. And because the Greek of the Gospel kept “Raca” the Latin and some English translations, even including some modern ones, have duly followed suit.

Yet, although the original audience of St Matthew’s Gospel might have been familiar with the term “Raca”, and it is indeed wonderful to have an original Aramaic word, it still needs a bit of explaining for us today who, it goes without saying, do not live in first-century Syria. Well, ῥακά (*raka*) is as such the transliteration (namely, the transferring of the letters of a word from one alphabet to another) of the Aramaic ܪܝܩܐ (*reka*) into Greek, just as “Raca” (with a ‘c’) is the transliteration of the Greek into Latin, since Latin does not tend, unlike Greek, to use a ‘k’. The Aramaic word ܪܝܩܐ (*reka*) itself means ‘empty head’, ‘empty-headed’; ‘numbskull’, in other words.

“And whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council. And whosoever shall say, Thou Fool, shall be in danger of hell fire” (Mt 5:22) – If there is a “danger” of being judged, and probably punished, by calling someone “Raca” (Numbskull), there is that much greater “danger” posed by “hell fire” through calling them “Fool” – But is there any real difference between “Numbskull” and “Fool”? The word “Fool” here is a translation of the Latin “*fatue*”, and yet if we were to hear it in the original Greek we would in fact hear a word we would be very familiar with; and, naturally enough, a quite insulting word: Μωρέ (“Moron”)!

“Raca” and “Moron” both imply someone considered to be rather ‘stupid’: the former being a ‘numbskull’ and ‘empty-headed’; and the latter, “Moron”, ‘dull in understanding’. The Greek term μωρός (*mōrós*), ‘dull’, was introduced into the English language, only relatively recently, just over a hundred years ago, by an American psychologist so as to describe someone with a mental age between eight and twelve. Using ‘moron’ in this way unsurprisingly ceased within psychology and psychiatry when ‘moron’ became popular as an insult, along with imbecile and idiot: so that what was meant to be a technical term has ended up being what the Gospel had already understood it to be: a blatant insult!

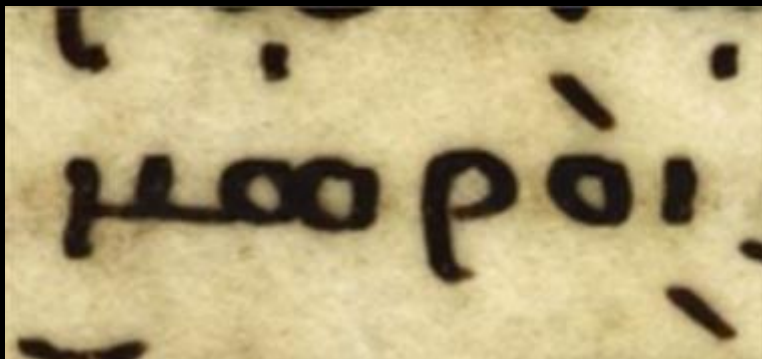
“Raca” and “Moron”, as terms of abuse (one Aramaic, the other Greek), amount pretty much to the same thing: yet why the disparity between being “in danger of the council” with one and “in danger of hell fire” (Mt 5:22) with the other? Well, it is perhaps because the first denotes the judgment: “the council” (literally, “the Sanhedrin”); and the other the punishment: “hell fire”, in the order of the juridical process, though as a consequence of both insults, which (as we have just said) are as such identical, albeit expressed in two different languages. It seems, therefore, that we do not have to do, or indeed say, much in order to “be in danger of hell fire”.

“And whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council. And whosoever shall say, Thou Fool, shall be in danger of hell fire” (Mt 5:22) – Without becoming overly paranoid about what we say, we have to remind ourselves that we will be judged one day regarding everything we have done in life: “in thought, word and deed (*cogitatione, verbo et opere*)”, to use those words from the *Confiteor*. We have to take to heart that advice from Psalm 33, quoted in today’s Epistle, from St Peter’s First Epistle: “let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile” (1 P 3:10).

Not calling someone “Fool”, “Moron”, does not however mean that we cannot use it in a general sense. The Gospel of St Matthew is, if you pardon the expression, the Gospel of the “Moron”: since he mentions the word a total of six times, whereas it occurs nowhere in the other Gospels. The next time ‘moron’ appears in St Matthew’s Gospel is towards the very end of the Sermon of the Mount, which today’s Gospel forms a part of: “every one that heareth these my words, and doth them not, shall be like a foolish man that built his house upon the sand” (Mt 7:26). This “foolish man” is joined much later in St Matthew by the famous ‘foolish virgins’: “Then shall the kingdom of heaven be like to ten virgins, who taking their lamps went out to meet the bridegroom and the bride. And five of them were foolish, and five wise. But the five foolish, having taken their lamps, did not take oil with them” (Mt 25:1-3).

The ‘fool’, the ‘moron’, obviously builds houses upon sand and forgets to take oil with his or her lamp, but that does not necessarily give us the licence then to go around saying “Thou Fool”, “You Moron” (Mt 5:22), to anyone we see caught in the act! There is one last mention of ‘moron’, or rather ‘morons’, in St Matthew’s Gospel, which I have deliberately left until last because it is somewhat difficult to explain. The Lord says to the scribes and Pharisees: “Woe to you blind guides, that say, Whosoever shall swear by the temple, it is nothing; but he that shall swear by the gold of the temple, is a debtor. Ye foolish and blind; for

whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold?" (Mt 23:16-17) – "Ye foolish (μωροὶ)", "You morons", in others words – How could he possibly say such a thing, when he has previously told his disciples that they would "be in danger of hell fire" (Mt 5:22) if they said precisely the same thing?



MOROI
"YOU FOOLS"

Yes, this seems like a contradiction, but you have got to understand it within the global context of the Gospel. It is the Lord alone who knows who it is who is 'foolish', as we have just seen in the parables of the "foolish man" (Mt 7:26) and the "foolish" virgins (Mt 25:2), and only he therefore who can then pronounce judgement. When, later on in the Sermon on the Mount, he declares: "Judge not, that you may not be judged" (Mt 7:1), he is not of course applying it to himself, the Judge. No, Our Lord is certainly not "in danger of hell fire" (Mt 5:22) for judging anyone, but we will be however if we judge.

I leave you with the, hopefully consoling, words of St Paul, from his First Epistle to the Corinthians: "judge not before the time; until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts; and then shall every man have praise from God" (1 Co 4:5).