

## Views from the Pews – Vernacular exaggeration

In ordinary common speech, people often use exaggeration to convey the intensity of a feeling, or the importance of a point. So when someone who has missed breakfast staggers through to dinner time, they may claim to be ‘hungry enough to eat a horse’. Or an especially heavy downpour might be described as ‘raining cats and dogs’. No-one really believes either statement could be taken literally, but the force of the contrast between apparent intentions and impossible actions is sufficient to make the point. It is an example of acceptable hyperbole – as a well-understood figure of speech to convey a point.

Exaggerations are simply figures of speech like those common in ordinary conversations, and they help to make the text come alive. The more important the point being made, the more likely the speaker is to exaggerate. So Mark (1:4-5) says that: “John came baptizing in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. Then **all the land** of Judea, and those from Jerusalem...”. This does not mean that John baptized every single person in all of Judea and Jerusalem, only that John’s baptism was extremely popular.

Jesus was a master of perceptive figures of speech that connected with his listeners directly. He knew exactly how to express deep truths in nonliteral symbols, because he came from a Jewish tradition that was steeped in this technique of writing and speaking. The Sermon on the Mount has many such examples. How we think and how we act in our daily lives has an impact, not only on our own wellbeing and on other individuals, but also on our society and on our environment. If we really want to challenge the world, we must start with challenging ourselves.

Today’s Gospel used exaggeration to emphasise the difference between our perceptions of the log-sized faults of others versus the excuses we make for the speck-sized faults in ourselves:

“Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, ‘Brother, let me take out the speck that is in your eye,’ when you yourself do not see the log that is in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take out the speck that is in your brother’s eye.”

Kim King