The gospel we just heard contains a number of sayings and proverbs which Jesus probably pronounced on different occasions but which Luke has brought together in his account of the teaching of Jesus.

The sayings are reminiscent of similar sayings in what is known as the wisdom tradition of Israel. There are literally hundreds of proverbs in the biblical book of Proverbs as well as in the book of Sirach from which today’s first reading is taken.

Proverbs flourished in most traditional cultures. They were a way of summarizing and handing on to the next generation the insights and understandings people had arrived at through their experience. There is a homely, everyday quality about them. Their format makes it easy to remember them and to relate them to one’s own experience. Those of us of a certain age heard many such parables as we were growing up –“a stitch in time saves nine;” “a friend in need is a friend indeed;” “better safe than sorry;” “haste makes waste.”

Biblical proverbs reflect almost all aspects of life from familial and community values and responsibilities to moral teaching and the use pf political and other forms of power. Although we would call some of them religious and others secular, for the Bible nothing is ultimately secular.

The first of the sayings in today’s reading has to do with blindness. “Can a blind person guide a blind person?” Jesus asks. “Will not both fall into a pit?” Jesus is thinking here primarily of moral or spiritual blindness, especially the blindness that can undermine the best efforts of a teacher or parent or friend to reach the young people for whom they have responsibility.

The public discussion of the COVID pandemic suggests that some of the loudest defenders of certain bizarre ideas in regard to it are not only blind themselves but insist on trying to convince others that what they “see” is indeed the truth.

We can all be more or less blind in countless ways depending on whether we are dealing with business or investments, politics or climate change. There has, for example, been a great deal of blindness in the church over the last several decades in regard to the abuse of children, young people and others.

The third saying is related to the first. It too has to do with seeing and not seeing. Why, Jesus asks, are we so quick to see the speck, a small failing, in our neighbour’s eye and not to see the log, a serious failing, in our own eye? The issue here is our tendency to judge one another and in doing so to focus on what is negative in others while disregarding the sometimes greater failures in our own lives.

We all have to make judgments of others if only about the maturity of a baby sitter or the kind of people our teenage children are spending time with. The legal system requires judges who are able to cut through contradictory arguments in order to discern where, for example, the responsibility for an action resides.

The failing to which this saying points is our tendency to judge others harshly, sometimes unfairly, while refusing to examine our own actions. In fact, we are sometimes guilty of the very thing of which we accuse others. It is for that reason that Jesus calls such people hypocrites. They puff themselves up while putting others down.

With this saying Jesus here is challenging to be honest about ourselves. We should take some of the time we spend thinking and gossiping about the failings of others and use it to examine ourselves and our inadequacies.

A variation of the fourth saying in the reading comes back a number of times in the Gospels. It points to something that is central to the teaching of Jesus. “No good tree bears bad fruit,” he says, “nor does a bad tree bear good fruit; each tree is known by its fruit.”

Here as so often, Jesus is emphasizing the importance of the heart, the inner, spiritual source of our identity. Does what we do come from the heart and does it reflect the deep thoughts and feelings that define our moral and spiritual identity or is there a dislocation or contradiction between the inner and the outer person, between who we are and how we act.

The last saying of the reading comes back to the same issues. “Out of the good treasure of the heart, the good person produces good,” Jesus says, “and out of evil treasure, the evil person produces evil.” Jesus concludes the saying by applying it to speech. What we say and talk about and how we go about it reveals a great deal about who we ultimately are.

All the sayings in their different ways underline our capacity for good and evil, for truth and lies, for humility and self righteousness. With these and other sayings like them Jesus encourages us to embrace the good and to reject evil in all their different forms.