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James 3. 5. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire. And the tongue is a fire. =

There is a familiar phrase in Scots that goes ‘haud yer tongue.’ It is I think stronger than ‘hou je mond’ in Dutch. If we literally try to hold our tongue then it is impossible to communicate except by noises. We have stopped ordinary speech.

That is a very direct measure. But the letter of James, which was only with difficulty included into the accepted authentic canon of the New Testament, is very direct and very clear. Its a letter sent to Christians under persecution and in diversity attempting to bring direct and practical guidance for fragile communities of faith. In an earlier passage the writer brings a sharp focus on those who claim that if they have faith it really doesn’t matter what they do, and he is critical of a kind of spiritual anarchy which guards their own holiness and doesn’t care for the needs of others or the world outside. In a later chapter he has very hard words for those religious people who pile up wealth and exploit the poor and it is believed that he is the origin of the early church’s custom of following prayers for the sick by the practical and personal ministry of anointing with oil.

All in all it’s a pretty radical letter, radical in the sense that the writer is returning to the roots of the message and ministry of Jesus from which he sees the church as straying. His words about faith without works being dead and his criticism of wealth and power brought a contemptuous response by that giant of the Reformation Martin Luther, who was of course the great advocate of justification by faith and who relied on the powerful and wealthy as his patrons., Luther famously called the letter of James an ‘epistle of straw.’

No doubt some people of the time felt that James had over done it. What harm, they might argue, are a few words. They are not the same as physical violence. An insult against another person, even a false story, is nothing to breaking into their house and robbing them. In the English speaking world in the mid nineteenth century the phrase was first written which has almost become a familiar one in our speech ‘Sticks and

Stones may Break my Bones, but words will never harm me.’ The minister has stolen my thunder here! It comes from the African American Episcopal Church’s publication in America in 1862. Understandably it was an attempt to enable African Americans either slave or free, to find dignity in resisting and overcoming the daily insults heaped on their race which as we are all too aware continues to shamefully poison communities today. But taken elsewhere, as James makes clear, it is simply not true. The tongue, the use of words, can do immense damage as it can do immense good.

‘How great a forest is set alight by a small flame’ wrote the author of the letter of James. He compared it with a small bit in a horses mouth or a large ship that is steered a certain way by a very small rudder.’ So also the tongue is a small member,’ he says,’ yet it boasts of great exploits.’

I was this spring in the United States sharing in the jubilee march from Selma to Montgomery Alabama commemorating the 1965 march led by Dr Martin Luther King to establish equal voting rights for all Americans. It was a momentous journey undertaken with veterans of the struggle who had encountered violence and some of whom had seen their friends murdered. One with whom I walked was the 84 year old Ralph Worrell who had been a friend and companion of Dr King when he made the ‘I have a dream’ speech that has gone down in history. ‘When I heard Martin speak that day’ said Mr Worrell, I decided to give the rest of my life to the cause of equality. The influence of that speech by one of the great orators of history not only changed the life of a Trades Union organiser from Barbados but inspired thousands to commit themselves to what is sadly an ongoing cause of non violent work for justice and peace.

What a contrast to thirty years before that ‘I have a dream speech’ when so much of Europe was mesmerised by the voice of Adolf Hitler, inspiring or enflaming thousands to embark on the deadly poison of racism with the unspeakable results in human suffering. When I see these old newsreels I am reminded of the horror and carnage caused by well directed propaganda in the shape of one mans tongue. The tongue can be, as James points out, like an uncontrollable fire. For good it can spread and inspire the qualities of courage, love, and humanity, the very qualities that were constantly commended by Jesus. On the other side scholars see James’ vision as that

of the imagery employed often by mediaeval painters in later centuries. That of the fires of gehenna or hell, that cannot be put out.

What has this to do with us in our daily lives? Most of us are unlikely to be anywhere near shaping the course of history by our words. But few of us can be unaware that things we say, rumours we spread, small untruths passed on, or mistimed remarks can have a ripple effect and perhaps the lighted timber is not an exaggeration. The church is not absolved from this – in fact often our Christian communities have been at the forefront of it. Europe in the 16th and 17th century was full of witchcraft and heresy trials, so often fuelled by quiet inuendos and denunciations of others. One million women are estimated to have been killed as supposed ‘witches’ often on the evidence of men who wanted to get rid of them. Spain under the inquisition and Geneva under Calvin brought many innocent people to torture and death on the whispers of righteous religious people. Of course that is all over now, or is it? Substitute for the word ‘heresy’ ‘Islamic’ or ‘terrorist’ and we can very easily open the gates to a modern culture of denunciation. Both politicians and the media in some parts of Europe and certainly in Britain have recently with great irresponsibility used words such as ‘swarms’ and ‘hoards’ to dehumanise our attitudes to our fellow human beings fleeing from Syria and other lands. The tongue as the lighter of a flame is all too close to home.

When I was a student I remember hearing of a young minister in Glasgow who was in the Church of Scotland tradition preaching to a congregation who would vote on whether to accept him as their minister. When he was in the vestry, being very nervous, he asked for a glass of water. As he was drinking it a lady looked in and saw him. She felt it was her Christian duty to warn the elders that their prospective minister had a problem with alcohol since he was obviously taking some gin to boost his courage. Word spread round the whole church as whispering gathered and they voted not to accept him. That word was passed to every congregation to which he applied and there was not a word of truth in it. No congregation would call him and in the end he had to go overseas to escape the rumours and to minister. James’ forest fire had done its work.

But one of the issues raised by attempts to control the power of words that has engaged many in recent times is that of the limits to free speech and journalistic

licence. The Charlie Hebdo shooting in January has raised discussion all over the world. At what point should speech not be allowed? What are the limits to criticism or to advocate views and attitudes that are to most people shocking and offensive. And when do words become a threat to others? That fine international organisation Amnesty was founded to defend those who spoke out and proclaimed their views non-violently and were imprisoned or worse for doing so.

Are there any circumstances in which that kind of speech has to be made illegal? Voltaire is credited with the principle 'I hate what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it' That seems to be a robust defence of proper liberty in a free society. But is it? The issue surely is much more complex than that. Sixty years ago, reflecting on post-war Europe a small pamphlet was written by Richard Ullman, a Quaker, a native of Frankfurt and a survivor of a concentration camp. Its entitled *Tolerance and the Intolerable* and it explores the complex area where the limits of tolerance of publicised views come to an end faced with the intolerable consequence to which they lead. Where must we say no to dangerous and offensive propaganda and ban it?

These are huge questions and ones that have been debated over the centuries. In our own time in various countries Holocaust Denial is made a crime reflecting the feeling that raising any questions about it is a further violation of the memory of those who perished and an invitation to diminish the scale of such unspeakable deeds. Anyone who was not part of that can perhaps only be silent. The problem is of course that this cannot be used as a licence to silence any criticism of the policies of a political state such as Israel on the spurious grounds of anti-semitism.

In Britain after much debate, there are laws making language calculated to stir up racism. I am a keen football fan and in the past I have been appalled by some of the taunts and phrases used sometimes by supporters of my team towards the race of players on the other team. Fortunately the clubs have recently taken a robust attitude, signed up to 'Give racism the red card' and excluded any who use racist, homophobic, or sectarian language. Many would still argue that to make racist words a criminal offence violates free speech even though we have in Britain had laws against obscene language in public for many years on the grounds of public order.

If we acknowledge the validity of James' warning about the destructive power of the tongue and all the evidence we have today of its power, is it right, as a current article in the Church of Scotland's magazine *Life and Work* suggests, to see the proper Christian position as one of caution in speaking out? This is a tempting response and even a reasonable one to avoid inflaming a situation. But it this was not the way of Jesus. My grandson asked me around Easter about a story he heard from the school Chaplain that Jesus thre tables around and became very angry. And I told him that Jesus showed anger, even fury, when he learned that people were exploiting others in the cause of religion. Jesus' words sometimes arrest and shock us – because he was deeply rooted in the Jewish prophets whose traditions he knew so well, he spoke the truth boldly to religious and political powers. If he had not done so, he would never have been seen as a threat and certainly never been cruxified.

There is a story told that when the late President of Tanzania, Dr Julius Nyerere was newly elected he made a significant speech to the new University of Dar es Salaam. 'Your job,' he said to the University, is to criticise the Government. We will not like it. We will probably try to stop you. But you must keep doing it.' Dr Nyerere saw the importance of the prophetic role of speaking out regardless of the consequences and he had enough wisdom to recognise that in all ages the powers that be try to muzzle prophets. He also realised the danger that individuals and institutions faced by remaining silent for the sake of their own safety, or preservation, or position. It was the great Irish politician and philosopher Edmund Burke who famously said 'all that is necessary for the triumph of evil than that good men do nothing.'

Because most of us at some time or other remain silent and hold our tongues, not because we feel that we should be careful not to inflame a situation. Its rather that we don't want to get involved, we fear perhaps that others will humiliate us, we want to avoid risking relationships or position. In Matthew and Mark's gospels Jesus makes the overcoming of that hiding behind a safety barrier rhe very test of discipleship. 'What does it profit someone,' he said 'to gain the whole world and lose his own life.' In the King James version of our Bibles it is even sharper ' what should a man give in exchange for his soul?' For Jesus integrity and truth was at the very being of every

authentic human person and beside that security, possessions, power and prestige was as nothing.

One of the great influences in my life was the late Archbishop Trevor Huddleston who devoted his life to the struggle against racism and particularly to overcome Apartheid from the time he was a young priest in South Africa. When he was recalled to England before being expelled by the government his African friends named him 'the dauntless one.' The South African police once asked him – 'Is it the role of a priest to speak out on political issues?' The old chestnut about religion and politics mixing. Trevor instead of answering asked the police another question in reply 'Is it the role of a priest to remain silent in the face of injustice?' He never got a reply.

He was a man of prayer and deep contemplation, a man who chose his words and whose encouragement from his tongue changed many lives, including that of a young boy in Sophiatown called Desmond Tutu. But he was moved to fierce anger in which he did not spare his tongue, especially with the way in which God's people were humiliated and counted for nothing. He once said 'even if apartheid could be shown to be just and fair to all races (a virtual impossibility) as a Christian I would still oppose it with every breath I have. Because it carries with it the lie that we cannot cherish, honour, respect each other in the deepest of relationships because of the blasphemous barrier of race?'

The letter of James an 'epistle of straw' Martin Luther was surely never more wrong. These few verses on the power of the tongue for good or evil are only one aspect of that epistle but the dilemma for Christians and indeed all who seek a true humanity is sharply articulated. The writer of this letter may not have had the deep theological imagery as St John's gospel, the sharp focus of Mark's Gospel, or the analysis of St Paul. But here again as throughout the whole letter he focusses on the essentials of Jesus life and ministry, and like the master he challenges us to work out our own responses in our own situation to a tantalisingly complex ethical dilemma.

AMEN

Prayer of Intercession

God of mystery and marvel, reflected for us in the light of Jesus and continuing to be close to us in spirit, we bring these prayers for ourselves and others.

We pray for ourselves in this coming week that we may meet whatever it brings with joy and with commitment, and where these are necessary with courage and faith.

We pray for those near to us and those around us – those we find it easy to like and to love and those we find difficult and unlovely. We pray especially for those with pressing needs – overwhelmed by problems, in pain in body or mind, full of anger or hurt, bereaved or lonely, that they may find the healing power of knowing that they are accepted and valued.

We pray for the church as a witness to God's love and Christ's message of saving power. For this congregation at this time of change and uncertainty, for Alastair ministering at present, for its leaders and members, We pray for our Church of Scotland as it struggles to be faithful to Jesus' care for all, and to any in our land from different faiths who seek peace and justice. And we pray for the Church throughout the world, remembering especially this week all those who have lost friends and loved ones in the murderous attack in Charleston.

We pray for a broken world and especially for those who suffer from oppression, war, and terror. For the children of Syria and the minorities in Burma, for our sisters and brothers in Nepal and in Nigeria, in Palestine and in China, from many lands who cross the Mediterranean sea, suffering the loss of loved ones through disasters or callous treatment, giving thanks for those who stretch the hands of compassion and for those who with courage raise their voices and challenge the inhumanity.

These prayers we offer in the name of Jesus Christ, friend of outcasts and of the powerful and Prince of Peace

AMEN

EMERGENCY

This is the day that God has made ..let us rejoice and be glad in it'
Let us pray:

God of light and love and laughter, God of power and people and compassion, God of creativity and challenge and inclusion we worship you. We meet here together with others to sing and to pray to listen and to share and we all want to give thanks to you and to lay before you our joys and our sorrows, our faith and our fears, to look back at the past week with you and to look forward to what lies ahead with you accompanying us.

God who is present in all of life we cannot hide our lives from you however much we may hide things from others and from ourselves. In this moment of prayer we bring to the surface all the things that we regret, all the things that we ought to regret and those things which lie unresolved in our past. We bring them in the confidence that your mercy is infinite and that you offer us forgiveness and healing freely and fully. Help us then to know that and to be released from our burdens, freed to make a fresh start, and strengthened by your love to live creatively, caringly and well in the time ahead. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ AMEN

CHILDREN'S ADDRESS

I hope that you have all got clean hands. I want you to open your mouth and take your tongue with one hand. Then I want you without taking your hand away tell your neighbour what you had for breakfast.

You cant do it! We need our tongues to move to be able to say thing and be understood by others. Sometimes we say good things to people, helpful things. If someone is feeling sad or we can help by showing them by a few kind words that we understand. If someone is nervous or afraid we can help them by speaking

encouraging things. That's the good side. And in our Bible reading today we learn from a Christian writer many many hundreds of years ago that the tongue which we use to speak can be the tool for us to do many good things, to follow the way of Jesus who spoke words of comfort and encouragement.

But James, the writer of the letter to the churches all these years ago also says that what we say with our tongue can sometimes cause great harm. We can spread nasty stories, we can lie about someone, we can call them names or shout at them for no reason. And James says sometimes what we say can be so destructive that it is like putting a fire in a forest of trees that burns up the whole forest.

Of course there are times when we must speak out against wrong things or if people are being treated cruelly or unfairly. Jesus did not stop his tongue when he came across these things. He spoke out even when people didn't want him to do. And so must we. But we need to remember that the tongue, which we use for speaking, can be a dangerous thing and we need to stop and think always before we speak.

Our prayers are for ourselves and others.

God of faithfulness we pray that we may live faithfully this week this month, whatever it may bring, meeting any difficulties or challenges with confidence in your care, being open to the needs of others and to deepening old relationships and developing new friendships, seeking healing where that is needed and meeting others where we can.

God of compassion we pray for those known to us, our family and friends and neighbours and those in this city who are in special need, any who struggle with illness or loneliness, those in pain and those who live with anxiety or broken relationships. We pray in the name of Jesus who brought healing and wholeness

God of inclusion we pray for our congregation here and neighbouring congregations in this city and land in seeking to be places of inclusion and outreach, of hospitality and witness to all in the name of Jesus who gave his life for all humankind.

God of peace and justice we pray for all who at this time are fleeing oppression and violence from and to many lands. We pray for generosity of spirit from all of us to whom they turn for shelter, for the decision makers that they may put humanity before narrow economic or political gain, and for all agencies on land and sea who offer the hand of assistance and rescue, in the name of Jesus, whose family knew the pain and the fear of a refugee in Egypt.

All these our prayers we offer as we seek to come closer to the spirit of Jesus, master and brother, example and friend, servant of the needy and price of peace

Amen.