

James 3:1-12

16.09.18

*Words and worlds*

At first sight the lesson of our reading from the Letter of James this morning is pretty simple and straightforward. Beware the tongue! The tongue is such a very small member, hidden away in our mouths, and yet what havoc it can cause. James likens it to bits that are put into the mouths of horses - small devices, but they can steer powerful animals. James likens the tongue to the rudder of a ship – again a relatively small instrument, hidden away and mostly invisible, yet capable of directing a large vessel. And then he uses the image of fire: a small spark can cause a raging inferno, and likewise what destruction a single word can cause – for good or for ill!

The context in which James raises this subject concerns teachers – people in the church community with the task of teaching and who therefore carry great responsibility. Their words can be influential – for good or for ill. And I realise – as I am only too aware - that this includes me as a pastor, one of whose responsibilities is teaching. I have to get up here every week and throw words at the congregation and that is a dangerous business. And there have been instances in my ministry when I have used words carelessly or without sufficient precision and that has caused damage and hurt, and it pains me deeply when that happens. I don't want to dwell on this but can I take this as an opportunity to say that week by week I stand here in fear and trembling as a bearer of words and that I am always open to being challenged – preferably after the service!

Back, however, to the passage. Beware the tongue. James describes it as 'a restless evil, full of deadly poison' and we know what he means. The same tongue can sing hymns and spread gossip. Or, as James puts it, from the same mouth comes blessing and cursing, from the same opening there comes both fresh and brackish water. But that leads me on to here I want to go this morning. It

would be easy to devote the entire sermon to the misuse of the tongue, to its dangers. I want, however, to focus on the positive side, on the amazing gift that words are, on the fact that words are one of the distinguishing marks of human beings. As I will suggest, they constitute part of what it means to be made 'in the image of God' and I would rather celebrate them and encourage their right and creative use. So I would like this sermon to be an encouragement to rejoice in the gift of words!

I want to begin by referring back to some other verses that come earlier in this Letter of James, for this is not the first time that he has addressed the matter of words and the tongue. So in verse 18 of chapter 1 James writes this: 'In fulfilment of his own purpose God gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.' Now that verse tells us two things. The first is that God creates by Word, by speaking. 'God gave us birth by the word', and that applies not just to human beings but to the entire creation. Go back to the beginning of the Bible, to Genesis 1, and we find those great words, 'In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...' and then God speaks and things appear – out of nothing: light, land, animals, humans spring into being. So God's Word is creative. Its interesting that the Hebrew word for 'word' can also mean 'act' or 'action'. So words are not just empty breath that drifts off into space. Words, as with God's Word, are dynamic. Words, like God's word, make things happen. But then we come to the second part of James statement: 'God gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits if his creatures.' And what I want to take from this is that as 'the first fruits of God's creatures' God has given us the gift of words and the ability to use them to create. Just like God's Word our words do not just drift into space but they too are dynamic and active and can make things happen.

Let me give you a little example of this. Staying with that story of creation in Genesis 1, God speaks and the world comes into

existence. But read on a bit in the story and God creates Adam, the first human. And what is the first thing that Adam does? Well, in the story God brings to Adam the animals and invites him to name them. And what is happening here? Well, at one level what is happening is that Adam is using language, using words to create his own world within the world he has been given. By speaking God has created the heavens and the earth, the world and all that is. But now by speaking Adam creates a world within that. The world that God has spoken into being becomes the material out of which Adam speaks his own world into being, naming the animals, establishing connections between living things, creating meaning. God's word creates a world and now Adam's words create a world within the world.

So one of the great philosophical questions concerns whether the world is given to us or whether we construct it. Is reality a given or is it socially constructed – made by us? Well, of course the answer is both. The world is created by God and there are certain givens that shape and structure reality and we go against them at our peril. But within that there is enormous scope for us to name our own worlds and to bring them into existence – and hence the marvellous diversity of cultures and ways of life: different worlds within the one world. And language is crucial for their construction. The great philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said something very profound. He said that 'the limits of my language mean the limits of my world' – think about that. What cannot be grasped by language, what cannot be named, must lie beyond us. And that is why of course God in the Bible God cannot be named and our talk and our speaking about God is always inadequate – mere baby talk – for God is always beyond us. And it's why there must always be a place for silence before God – where words run out.

The power of words, however, is reflected also in our ability to use them to construct fantasy worlds: the glory of writers and authors and poets. Think of the phenomenon of Harry Potter – the world that has been created by J.K. Rowling, the world of Hogwarts

and Dumbledore and Voldemort. As in all good fiction there is a coherence and a connectedness about this fantasy world that make it plausible, with a power to draw us into it. And we rejoice too in the gift of poetry, for poetry has the power to disclose to us something of the richness of the world, its depth. So we look at a flower and we catch something of its splendour and beauty. And then along comes the poet and breathes words upon it and something deeper about the flower is disclosed, possibly something deeper about flowers generally, possibly something deeper about reality as a whole. Words evoke reality, words disclose reality. And that is where Jesus was such a master of language and why his words have resonated down through the centuries. Jesus, God's Word made flesh, came armed only with words. 'The kingdom of God is upon you', he proclaimed and by his words and by his other actions he was bringing a new world into being, a world where God rules and all is made new. And in order to evoke and to disclose that new world Jesus told stories and devised parables. Parables are such strange stories because they seem to be talking about something else. They seem to divert our attention elsewhere. In his parables Jesus is talking about God and about God's new world that is breaking in, but he does so by talking about seeds and sowers, and mustard bushes and widows and coins and lost sheep. But precisely in their indirectness the power of these stories to evoke and to disclose is heightened. It is as if parables mug us: they divert our attention and then they hit us over the head with a new reality that surprises us and that we are not yet ready for.

All this, of course, explains is why lying is such a sin. To lie is to use words to mask reality, to distort reality, to create an untrue and deceptive world. And it is so depressing the way that spin and deception have become so much a part of politics and political discourse, where language is used to manipulate and to mislead. How language is abused by spin! How political discourse is debased by being reduced to the 140 characters of the Tweet!

St Francis of Assisi once famously said, ‘Go into the world and preach the Gospel. Use words if you have to.’ Well, this is one place where I part company with Francis and I wish he had not said that and I wish it was not frequently quoted with approval. I know what Francis was getting at. Too often our words are belied by our actions. Too often words distort the truth. Too often our faith is reduced to ‘mere words’. And today especially we live in a blizzard of words that often blind us and that obscure rather than reveal. And there is that wonderful passage in the Book of Ecclesiastes which tells us of a time for doing this and a time for doing that and it includes the admonition that ‘there is a time to keep silence, and a time to speak’; and there is great wisdom in knowing the difference. And we should take good note of the fact that God has given us two ears but only one mouth and use them proportionally. But nevertheless words are such a precious gift. Used well they can enrich and dignify the world and human life. They are a reflection in us of our Creator by whose word all things came to be and whose Word became flesh in Jesus Christ. Sometimes words are all that we have. Sometimes when someone is in a state of great joy or sorrow we have nothing to offer but a word.

So without further ado – thank God for words. Enjoy them. Savour them where they sparkle and shine. Ally them to your imagination and use them to create worlds. Ally them to kindness and love and use them to build up and to encourage. Ally them to actions and use them to evoke and to disclose the Kingdom of God. Rejoice that we are speech creatures. And to correct St Francis, ‘Go into the world and preach the gospel – and use words well!’ Amen.

O holy and gracious God,  
we gather here to worship you,  
to give you the glory that is your due.  
And we praise you, the living God who has spoken:  
in the beginning you spoke and by your word  
you brought all things into being;  
and we praise you that your creation is  
proclaiming your glory;  
the things that you have made tell of you  
and of your power and your wonder;  
all creation bears silent testimony  
to you and to the mystery of who you are.  
And we praise you that in the fullness of time  
you have spoken to us in your Son, Jesus Christ,  
your Word become flesh.  
And, God, you have given us ears to hear  
and you have given us tongues to speak.  
Forgive us, we pray, for when we do not listen,  
when we turn a deaf ear to you.  
And forgive us, we pray,  
for when we use words wrongly,  
for when we use them to conceal the truth,  
for when we use them hurtfully and destructively.  
Speak we pray to us words of forgiveness;  
speak to us words of reassurance and renewal,  
and give us grace to hear and to respond.  
We pray in the name of Jesus Christ,  
your living Word, and we pray together in  
the words he taught us...

Living God,  
We rejoice this morning in the gift of words;  
For the joys of communication,  
For the delights of language and dialects and literature.

We pray today for poets and playwrights,  
for authors who create imaginary worlds  
and invite us to inhabit them;  
we pray for those with the gift of imagination  
and the ability to use words well –  
to create and to move and to inspire.

We pray for journalists that they may be truthful;  
we pray for politicians, that they may use words  
faithfully and not to mislead or manipulate;  
we pray for preachers, that they may use their tongues  
to tell of you and convey your truth to hearts and minds.

And we give thanks for your world  
that is alive with words,  
uniting us to one another,  
linking us in a great global web of communication.  
So it is that we know of a deadly typhoon  
that has hit the Philippines;  
and we know of a fierce storm that has wrought havoc  
in North Carolina;  
and we know of more displaced people  
fleeing from war;  
and we know the names of Syria, and Yemen,  
and South Sudan...

O God may the gift of communication unite our world  
And draw us together as one –

Not just in word but in justice and in understanding  
And in co-operation with one another.

And we pray today for your church  
which lives by your word:  
give us grace to discern it;  
give us courage to proclaim it;  
give us the joy of seeing it bear fruit.

And we pray for those in special need of hearing  
your word this morning:  
for those who mourn,  
for those who are afraid,  
for those who are not at peace,  
for those who experience only your silence.  
Living God speak –  
and bring comfort, strength and new life.

And we pray all these things in the name of Jesus,  
our Lord and Saviour.  
Amen.