

***Power of Words* – sermon by Rev Phil Wootton on James 3: 1-12 & Mark 8: 27-38  
Sunday 12 September 2021**

‘Sticks and stones may hurt my bones, but words can never hurt.’ They say ... but they lie, and lie perniciously. Words are powerful, and powerfully hurtful. They wound more deeply than the sharpest knife, cutting to the very heart of who we are. In his letter, St James identifies this problem, which must go back near the beginnings of human language – that our extraordinary capacity for speech, that largely sets us apart from other animals, is so often so utterly abused so destructively. If that were true then, it is so much more true now, when words can be streamed around the world, instantly creating fire-storms on other continents. Guard your tongue, says James. Guard your fingers too, in all your emailing, texting and twittering.

‘I speak my mind,’ you say, ‘and it’s never done me any harm.’ But you haven’t looked behind you to see the havoc left in your wake, or the teams of people needed to clean up the debris. ‘Careless words cost lives’ was a wartime slogan: today, we wage war on careless words. The speed of modern communication makes us worse: the email dashed off at midnight has no thought how it will be received; the quick text cannot convey a tone of voice, and the accompanying emoji leaves the recipient baffled. If we are face to face, the facemask masks the smile, and an intended joke is received as a personal criticism. ‘Casual’ is a big problem. Modern society quite rightly considers the so-called ‘casual’ sexism and racism of yesteryear totally unacceptable, but replaces it with ‘casual’ obscenities and blasphemies that are deeply unattractive. In Psalm 141 verse 3, the Psalmist prays, ‘Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth; keep watch over the door of my lips.’ St James would say, ‘amen to that’. We must rein in our words.

‘Reining in’ is an image James likes. Traditionally, royalty are painted or sculpted on horseback holding the reins as a symbol of being in charge. We have our own in Wolverhampton: the so-called ‘man on the ‘oss’ in Queen Square. Prince Albert probably never saw it like this, but the idea is the king takes the reins of a mighty stallion, just as he has the controls, directs and reigns in his kingdom. St James suggests the tongue is like the horse’s bit: one of the smallest organs of the body, but controlling your direction of travel. Don’t get addicted to your own voice, to being the centre of attention, to boasting and showing off, to the thrill of having people laugh at your jokes. Control your tongue, or it will get away from you.

The other image James uses is of a boat’s rudder, again so very small in comparison with the whole, but controlling the direction of a mighty ship. I’ve never been allowed to steer a ship (any more than I’ve ridden a horse) but watching people steer narrowboats on the canal, it occurs to me you must have to keep a step ahead of where you are. If you’ve got 60 or 70 feet of boat in front of you, it’s no good waiting until you yourself reach the bend before you have to turn. Words go ahead of you – I don’t mean by shouting. But it’s a matter of thinking ahead of the effects your words may have before you actually utter them. And that can be tricky. But it’s very necessary.

With all this complexity, all these things that can go wrong, you sometimes wonder if it's worth speaking at all. Better to keep silent! Well, there is a strong tradition of silence within Christian history, especially in monasticism. If you've ever shared in a silent meal at a monastery, you've probably found it quite embarrassing or even comical to begin with – trying to use sign language to get a glass of water. But slowly you realise it's about true attentiveness to your neighbour – passing them the salt before they've even thought to ask. To be with someone, in silence, can be a very powerful thing. There's a lovely story from the Egyptian desert tradition of Abba Pambo, one of the desert fathers, who was visited by the Archbishop of Alexandria, and apparently refused to speak to him. Asked why this was (if he was offended in some way) he explained, 'If he is not edified by my silence, he will not be edified by my speech.' Answer that!

Silence may be golden, but silence is not always the answer. Words have their place, when well used. St Peter spoke the most important words of all. Replying to Jesus' question, 'Who do you say I am?' Peter answered, 'You are the Christ.' The most important use of our tongues is to make that same proclamation: Jesus is Christ – Messiah, anointed one, Son of God, Lord of heaven and earth, Lord of my life and yours. And yet even these words can disguise misunderstanding, confusion and self-delusion. Peter thought he knew what he meant by saying 'You are the Christ' but he didn't. He had pictures in mind of glory and power, of military victory and slaying of enemies. He thought it meant Jesus was untouchable – above human pain and anguish and death.

Jesus did not stint at using hard words to rebuke Peter: 'Get behind me, Satan'. You might have good, religious-sounding words, but what you've got in mind is very far from what God wants. Guarding the tongue very clearly does not mean hard and challenging words should never be spoken. Jesus did so frequently. We all need challenging at times. But it does mean such words have to be spoken in love, with as much understanding and empathy as we can muster, being ruthless in asking ourselves whether this is really about making ourselves feel important or powerful; and simply must be done with kindness. And it probably means being willing to bear some of the pain that the situation has created. James called for consistency – people who only bless, not those who both bless and curse. And Jesus asks for authenticity in his disciples, ones who will match words with deeds, who will bear the pain of others, who will encourage by coming alongside and take up every challenge. In short, perhaps his most important words are these: 'Take up your cross and follow me.'

*Lord, protect us from the deceit of flattering tongues and lying lips; give us words of life which speak your truth and bless your name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*