

Sunday September 16<sup>th</sup> **James 3:1-12 Mark 8:27-38**

“Through the written word and the spoken word, may we hear the Living Word, our Saviour Jesus Christ”.

Words – we can't live without them. They express our feelings; with them we encourage one another or discourage and humiliate one another; we rejoice, we praise but often we interrupt, rebuke and correct one another; we curse and swear. With them we can build each other up or destroy someone and their reputation. Words can change our lives – that unexpected phone call with tragic news or a devastating prognosis. We hold on to a child's first words and long to be present for our parent's last words.

Today we live in a world of multi-communication – much of it no longer face to face so we can't see the reaction to what we say. There is information overload and often a dominance of miss-information - fake news. What once would have been said or thought only in the White House is now headlines across the world in seconds. Twitter .... Facebook. As I was writing this a news alert came on my phone – could facebook have contributed to the level of hate in Myanmar?

We've reached the political party conference season – there will be an abundance of words! Isn't it strange that the media have focused on one word which the Archbishop of Canterbury said at the TUC conference and ignored the phrase which he must have repeated 3 times from Amos – let justice roll down like waters and righteous like an ever-flowing stream?

I wonder as you look back over the past week – are there words that you wished you hadn't have said? I know that's true for me .. there was something I wasn't going to say to someone .. but somehow, before I knew it, the words had come tumbling out...

Isn't it so much easier to dwell and remember on the hurtful things that someone has said to us rather than the positive things?

The letter from the apostle James has often been described as the wisdom book of the New Testament. He is seeking to encourage the followers of Jesus to live the faith – not just talk about it. He has already argued for the need of impartiality, for caring for those with less – but it's not actions alone - our words count too – they are vitally important and powerful. He wrote earlier (in the first chapter) - those who consider themselves religious and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues deceive themselves, and their religion is worthless. Now in the verses we've read today he expounds just how powerful speech is.

First he warns those who become teachers. Well that lets me off the hook as I never was a teacher ... or does it? I'm sure he's particularly referring to those who preach in church or teach or influence others in any form. In the past everyone accepted what a teacher said without questioning. We've all heard it “teacher says...” They have the potential to influence so many. But don't we all influence others by what we say? Parents to children, peers among peers ..

I have to let what I say influence me first. If I'm not challenged and moved by the sermon I'm preparing then I can't speak with passion. I need to respond to what God is speaking to me and change me first – and as you can imagine today's was a particularly difficult one to put together ... May be I should have let one of the ex-teachers do it!

No wonder James says - we all stumble in many ways! If we can truly get it right then we are wise. He goes on to illustrate just how powerful the words that we say are – they're like a tiny rudder controlling a ship – able to direct and dictate to something far bigger than ourselves –

possibly for good - or a small spark which sets forests ablaze – and we've seen examples of this, this summer with the fires across the peak district – capable of immense damage.

While we may attempt to tame the natural world – how often do we overlook that ferocious animal within us?

Then James highlights an inconsistency that I'm sure we're all aware of and been guilty of. With our tongues this morning we've come to praise God – we sung together (does singing count? well - I hope we mean what we sing) Guide me O thou great redeemer .. I am weak but thou art mighty ... but what are we going to be saying when someone cuts us up on the way home? Will we swear at them, mutter under our breath at them, curse them – or bless them and recognise God's image in them?

James' continual plea is for consistency, integrity. It always reminds me of the old seaside rock which when you cut it up has the resort name going through it all totally. When we're cut up – do we display an image of God? We long to be fruitful for God – but are we checking what fruit those around us are seeing – and in particular what words they are hearing?

I'm challenged by these words of James – but I wish he'd given us some advice on how we can change. May be there's a hint of it in our gospel reading.

Jesus – the Word of God – wanted to know what people were saying about his identity – so he asks his disciples - Who do people say I am? But then he went a step further – who do you – my disciples who have seen my life as well as hearing my words – say that I am?

It seems that almost without hesitation Peter replies – you are the Messiah. Great words Peter! But then we read an unexpected response from Jesus – he warned them not to tell anyone!

I wonder why? Could it be that Peter had said some great words without appreciating the real significance of them? Was the disciples' idea of the Messiah so far removed from God's Jesus didn't want them to shout about it until they knew what he had really come to do and deliver us from? They expected and wanted a conqueror – one with power and influence – particularly over Rome.

But immediately Jesus began to teach them plainly, although they don't seem ready to hear it, that the Son of Man must suffer many things, be rejected and even killed but after three days he would rise again. Jesus came not to conquer Rome but to destroy evil in whatever and every form it takes and so to reconcile us to God.

But the idea of a cross was too much for Peter! Although he had just acclaimed Jesus as the Messiah, Peter thought he had the right to rebuke Jesus and tell him what to do instead! I'm sure his words grieved Jesus. And may be Jesus' response seems too harsh for us – looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter. 'Get behind me, Satan!' he said. 'You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.'

These humiliating words must have shocked Peter – being called by such a derogatory name – the epitome of evil. How could Peter who had got it so right in recognising and acknowledging Jesus then have got it so wrong? No doubt we can recognise this in ourselves too – keen on Sunday failed on Monday! But be encouraged - God doesn't write us off – remember it was Peter who stood up after Jesus' ascension and gave that first powerful sermon – words declaring the risen Jesus to be the way of salvation for all.

Jesus then called the crowd to him and challenged them that whoever wanted to be his disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow him. There are times when we make the gospel too attractive – follow Jesus and know his presence and peace beside you every day – when actually he is calling us to die to ourselves and to live the way of the cross. That is the path he took. But resurrection always follows the cross.

Do you recall that verse from Philippians? – I want to know Christ and the power of the resurrection. If we died to ourselves we would begin to know that living power of the resurrection – and it could be that our words might begin to be more Christ like? Rather than centring on ourselves, our desires – they might start reflecting more of what God desires and his love for those around?

I wonder what words you've heard me saying this morning? I pray that rather than my words you may have heard God's words – and that by the power of his resurrection and in-dwelling Spirit – you and I may be more aware of the words we speak and be able to encourage and build each other up in our faith and share his love with those we meet. Amen

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