

“Taming the tongue”

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Psalm 19, James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-38

Last week my sermon referred to the importance of the gift of hearing, based on the gospel reading of Jesus miraculously healing a deaf and mute Gentile man. This week I want to focus on the gift of speech, based on the strong teaching of James chapter 3.

Using our tongues clearly, accurately and fairly is always an issue. Every time I attend a meeting of the World Council of Churches, the use of language inevitably causes a problem or two. Our meetings function in 4 languages, with the use of headphones and simultaneous interpreting. Ten days ago at my meeting in Crete it was the French-speaking Africans who at one point jumped to their feet to protest at something an English speaker had said. We were discussing the troubles in the Democratic Republic of Congo and they were horrified that something so nasty, so critical of the church in central Africa, could be said. They were offended, and heatedly called for a point of order and retraction – and the rest of us were bemused for we couldn't understand the reason for offence. It took a few moments to sort out, with the poor interpreter having to apologise for mistranslating what the English speaker had said. The use of language... very important for relationships, for our own well-being, for reaching mutually agreed solutions, for the quality of our lives.

The author of the letter of James has obviously experienced considerable controversies and troubles caused by people's thoughtless speech. In just a few verses he refers to the tongue as a fire, a world of iniquity, a stain to the whole body, a restless evil, full of deadly poison, untameable. When we discussed this passage at one of our home fellowship groups this week, we concluded that James was thinking of at least three things in writing that way:

- First, about bad language, about swearing, about crudity, about over-the-top abuse of others;
- Second, about dishonest untruthful speech, dangerous gossip, deliberate misrepresentation, half-truths parading as the whole story, and
- Third, about what our speech says about ourselves, how the manner and content of our speaking reflects who we really are deep down.

We can certainly acknowledge truth in what James is saying, while perhaps being surprised at the strength of his vitriol against the tongue. We agreed in that home fellowship group that James is correct when he writes “anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect” and acknowledges that “all of us make many mistakes”. I've not yet met anyone who would claim they've never said anything in their life they wished later they hadn't said!

In light of James' warnings about the use of our tongues, it's then rather intriguing to turn to today's gospel reading. Peter and Jesus use strong language against each other. After Peter has declared that he recognises Jesus to be the long-awaited Messiah, Jesus speaks of how he will undergo rejection, arrest and execution, and resurrection. Peter will have none of it. Peter's understanding of the Messiah is not that of Jesus! Peter must still be imagining the Messiah to be the miraculous deliverer for the people of Israel from Roman rule, a political, even military, leader, who will turn the tables on the Roman empire. Whereas Jesus knows his Messiahship is that of bringing in God's kingdom, not a political kingdom. Jesus knows that God's way of self-giving love and service will bring opposition, suffering, death – far from the sort of glory Peter and the rest of the Jewish people had in mind.

So Peter, we are told, took Jesus aside and rebuked him. We are not told what he said, but he is clearly doing more than mere questioning of the teaching of Jesus, he's rebuking Jesus, telling Jesus he's wrong! In turn, Jesus rebukes Peter, with strong language accusing Peter of being more in tune with Satan than with God - “Get behind me Satan”. A fiery

exchange between Jesus and the disciple who was to become Jesus' most important lieutenant in the months that followed, as gradually Peter came to understand the true nature of the mission of Jesus, the true nature of God, and the true nature of what it means to be a real follower of Jesus the Messiah.

These two readings for today lead me then to ponder a few rules or guidelines for the use of our tongues. Some are obvious, like "think before you speak", "count to ten before you speak in anger", "check your facts before you run off at the mouth", "if you can't say something positive about another, then say nothing". But let me add two things to those old clichés:

- One is never to use our tongues to put people down, rather to use our tongues to build people up. Tell family members regularly that you love them. Affirmation rather than denigration. This does not mean we cannot be critical of another's actions or attitudes, but it does mean that any criticism should be couched in ways that show we still clearly have personal respect for the other. Straight talking is fine, as long as it's in the context of respect, listening, seeking to understand the other. Speaking with disrespect or contempt, disparaging or belittling another, is always wrong.
- And another is to not let your tongue become a cross you have to bear. Gaining the reputation of being foul-mouthed or insolent or habitually offensive does you no good. It cuts you off from healthy positive relationships, it isolates you, can blight your whole life.

Let me return to one of the concerns behind James' vitriolic attack on the use of our tongues. How we speak reflects who we are. Jesus was always concerned about our inner selves, what we are really like deep inside. Transforming our selfishness, our godlessness and our lack of well-being through receiving the love and forgiveness of God, was always uppermost in Jesus' teachings, actions and relationships. How we employ our tongues is a major factor in whether or not we receive God's gift of transformation of our lives.

And then one last thought. Our Psalm for the day concludes with one of the most well-known verses in the Hebrew Scriptures: "let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer". There it is again – our speech is the outward expression of our inner true self, mouth expressing heart. That's as good a guideline as we'll ever find for the use of our tongues – is what we say and how we say it acceptable to God, our rock and our redeemer?

To the glory of God, Amen.