

Sermon for King's College Chapel

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The Taming of the Tongue

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In the excerpt read from Acts this morning, we hear the story of the defence Paul puts to those plotting against him. Paul is on trial because of his confession of belief in the resurrection of the dead, but it is Paul's tactful pronouncement of the legitimacy of his Roman citizenship which ensures that no violent action can be taken against him. Paul cleverly utilises the theology for which he is on trial to divide his accusers – pitching Sadducees against Pharisees – Paul succeeds in both creating sympathy for his cause, whilst holding fast to and promoting the central doctrine of his faith.

How are we as Christians judged today? How ought we to respond when we, and our Christianity, is put on trial? Like Paul, we are often called upon to justify our faith, and even occasionally, its very existence – to pronounce its legitimacy if you will. But unlike Paul, we are rarely called upon to do so through the explicit profession of our theological doctrines and creedal beliefs. In our contemporary context, professing Christian faith, indeed, any faith is generally seen as counter-cultural, and viewed with suspicion. Typically, it is the behaviour we show towards our neighbour and the actions we perform for others that reveal our Christianity in the world. In our everyday lives we are judged on what we say and how we treat people.

The power of the word as a vehicle of spiritual expression was marked by the church two weeks ago on Whitsunday. The fiery tongues of Pentecost remind us of the power of the word inspired by the Spirit of our faith. In thinking about the fiery tongues of Pentecost and Paul's clever trips of the tongue I found myself looking beyond the words of our lesson today to those which James writes in his epistle. The message embedded in James speaks to the importance of practicing mindful speech – in his epistle he provides a practical theology; a way to live out the message of the gospel in our day-to-day lives. The Epistle of James provides its audience with a code which acknowledges that most of our speech is directed, not towards the defence and proclamation of theology illustrated by Paul, but in basic human interactions conversing in non-Christian terms with our neighbour. The majority of our words are spent in the more mundane moments of human interaction; for James it is

through these ordinary conversations that we are called to humbly live out the great commandments of our faith.

A concern for the “sins of speech” was prominent in the Wisdom literature of the time; the faithful are admonished to hold fast to the ethical principle that human persons, made in the likeness of God, should be treated with appropriate reverence. Nothing so reveals the destructive power of speech than the cursing of another human being. Nothing so vividly reveals double-mindedness than to have that curse proceed from the same mouth that blesses God. In James 1.19, all are counselled to be slow to speak and quick to listen. In James three analogies are utilised to enhance our understanding of the potentially devastating effects our words can have. In these James draws analogies between the way that a powerful horse can be controlled by the small bit in its mouth, and the way that a ship of great size can be manoeuvred by a small rudder – in the same way the tongue, whilst a seemingly small part of the body, can contaminate and effect the whole person. The point of these analogies is to show the disproportionate effect the tongue can have. Just as a single spark or a lighted match, can cause an enormous blaze, “A hasty contention kindleth a fire...if thou blow the spark, it shall burn: if thou spit upon it, it shall be quenched: and both these come out of thy mouth” (Eccl 28.11).

I imagine all of us can remember a moment when something was said by a classmate, friend, parent, teacher, or sibling that had a significant negative impact. I remember being at grammar school and a teacher telling me that my hand writing was so atrocious that I would never be a doctor. That moment is still vivid and those words remain clear – the profound impact such moments can have is something we often don’t consider – I am sure that my teacher had no sense that their words affected me so greatly. I now know that not all doctors have legible handwriting and that my cursive handwriting has great style, but criticism of this kind has the potential to become so fused within us that it consumes the whole person.

Our words are often the first, and sadly the last, impression many will have of us. Reckless words can pierce like a sword, whereas words born out of wisdom bring healing. We are judged as Christians by the consistency of our theology and how we enact our beliefs. James addresses forms of speech like boastfulness, condescension, destructive criticism, and gossip all of which influence how we are perceived. Gossip might be the most common and tempting of these. Gossip in the Episcopal Church, the tradition I am most familiar with, was often referred to facetiously as “witnessing”. Sadly, one only becomes conscious of the great hurt that gossip can cause when one is victimized by it. If we spent more of our time

witnessing the good news of Christ to love indiscriminately, then perhaps our Christian communities wouldn't be in such a state of decline.

Kind and loving words, words free of vitriol, are not enough for James; they must be accompanied by action. James is calling-out and warning against "the terrible bluff of unrighteousness that wears a religious mask". A religious language without a religious life is meaningless. It is about living out the Gospel, loving your neighbour as yourself and loving God with all your heart. As James points out, "if any think they are religious and do not bridle their tongues but deceive their hearts, their religion is worthless. A religion that is pure and undefiled is one that takes care of those in distress" (James 1.26-27).

While living in Los Angeles I had the opportunity to volunteer in my parish's food ministry to the growing community of homeless. We served lunch, prepared earlier in the day, to between 150-250 individuals who had made their way to my parish in Beverly Hills. Everyone was asked to wear a nametag, including the volunteers. We were encouraged when serving our guests to use their names and greet them. I had never before been confronted with the power that the mere mentioning of a person's name could have. It was as if for the first time they felt like acknowledged agents in a world that largely ignored them and rarely looked them in the face. Guests would return greeting me and using my name to say thank you, I was humbled. Volunteering taught me that both action and words are essential. James' message is to engage others, no matter how uncomfortable it might make us feel.

The bluntness of one word can destroy the impact of countless words of beauty. It is our charge, as followers of Christ, to resist the temptation of thoughtless words. Our inability to control our harmful speech functions as a reliable indicator of our inability to hear God's will and wisdom to us. We do not have the ability ourselves to subdue all the "sins of speech" but must seek God's help in this.

The words we speak reflect the language in our hearts. Our words are creative acts that can both build and destroy. The wisdom that James imparts in his Epistle is to be both mindful of, and responsible for, the language we speak as Christians. This admonishment from James is not just for Sundays or when in community with other Christians—it is a lived experience Monday to Saturday in addition to Sunday. The greatest proclamation and testament to our faith in Christ is through the daily exchanges we have with each other and our neighbours. Real faith according to James must be constantly active, even in the most trivial of moments. He also reminds us of the Christian call to not show partiality in our interactions; all not some should receive kind words.

Let us remember today the enabling gifts of the Spirit celebrated at Pentecost. Let us recall the power and conviction of Paul's words proclaiming the Gospel message. But, today, let us meditate upon the admonitions in the Epistle of James: to be constantly aware of the power and impact of our words, the effect they can have on others, and the manner in which they reflect our Christian beliefs and practices. Let us take away the wisdom of being slow to speak and quick to listen, a wisdom that ultimately brings us closer to God and grounds us in the Gospel message.