

Reflective Worship 4th July

Wisdom in our attitude to what we say

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James 3:1-12 and 4:11-12

I read a news article earlier this year which reported on a scientific investigation into one of the great mysteries of human existence. Why do some people stick out their tongue when they are concentrating?

And it seems that it's more than just being so interested in what they are doing that they forget to keep their mouth closed so their tongue lolls out.

The tongue apparently contains a huge, enormous, gigantic number of nerves – to control its position so we can chew, and don't accidentally cover up our windpipe and choke; to carry the impulses from our taste buds to the brain, even to assist in our thought processes – it seems that when we think, our tongue is already preparing itself for action.... to 'voice our thoughts' if you like.

Not to mention the imperative of checking out that small hole in the broken tooth, which is impossible to ignore....

And all this takes up a huge amount of our brain's computational power. So sticking out one's tongue is a way of "turning it down" for a while, reducing the 'routine' input to the brain, in order to free up thinking capacity.

(Aren't you glad you came this evening?)

Well, I'm sure James had no idea about all this – but of one thing he was clearly very certain – the tongue is very powerful, and we need great wisdom if we are to use it wisely and well.

And to do this he uses three fabulous metaphors

- The bit in the horse's mouth
- The spark igniting the forest fire – if you joined in with the Climate Sunday service last week, you will have heard about how an abandoned disposable bbq lead to a fire in the Mountains of Mourne which took 4 days to extinguish

- And the tiny rudder, which nonetheless steers the mighty ship

So in response, let's ask three questions as we look at how we might bring James' wisdom to bear in our own lives.

- When to speak?
- What to say?
- How to express ourselves?

I guess for me, the image of the horse and bridle is very much one of stopping. (Maybe because I have never ridden a horse and I can only imagine wanting the animal to stop so I can get off!) And elsewhere in the NT, there is quite an emphasis on when we should not speak. The beginning of Paul's letter to the Romans and the end of his second letter to the Corinthians both have strong things to say about those who gossip. Pick over and criticise other people's lives and actions, for personal entertainment – or worse. Gossip is invariably negative and destructive – clearly destructive to the person whose life is under scrutiny and attack – but also destructive to the gossiper, who is putting themselves in the place of passing judgement on another, of assuming a power which is not theirs to assume.

Similarly, quarrels and dissensions are called out as 'works of the flesh' ie not of the Spirit, in the letter to the Galatians, as are the factions which result from them as people "take sides." History is littered with the fall out from such quarrels, from the Wars of the Roses through to Brexit. "Them" and "us" has no place in the Kingdom of God.

And yet – there are times when the rider wants – or even needs – the horse to move forward. Times when as followers of Jesus we do need to speak out. For the oppressed. Against injustice. To effect positive change. To do that terrifying thing of "speaking truth to power". "The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing." As Edmund Burke didn't say. (Apparently the sentiment was first expressed by John Stuart Mill)

Maybe the OT book of Ecclesiastes puts it best
For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...
... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.
(Ecc 3 1;7b)

... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak.

So if the horse and bridle help us to think about when to speak, what of the fire metaphor? For the out of control forest fire is undoubtedly destructive; yet when used carefully, fire brings light, and warmth, comfort and - some would say - civilisation.

Like the forest fire, our speech can be destructive, can pull down, but like the burning logs in the hearth it can also bring light and warmth and comfort - building up, encouraging and enabling others to grow and flourish.

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul wrote, "Let no evil talk come out of your mouths, but only what is useful for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear." (Eph 4:29)

Are we people who actively encourage? Who specifically look out for things we can say that will build others up? Who are always on the lookout for other people's gifts, inviting them and making opportunities for them to grow and develop?

"So that your words may give grace to those who hear."

Grace. Unearned favour. Unconditional love. In what we say.

And so to the third metaphor. The mighty ship, steered by the tiny rudder.

The rudder steers the ship. But the rudder itself is under the control of the person in charge. The person who is responsible for the course that the vessel takes, for how it gets to its destination.

And how we say what we say can make all the difference between building up and tearing down. When we know that something has to be said, offering it in a humble and constructive fashion, rather than thoughtlessly and carelessly. Steering the course which encompasses both compassion and clarity.

"...Speaking the truth in love", wrote St Paul to the Ephesian Christians, "we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ."

(Eph 4:15)

"...Speaking the truth in love",

So, bringing this all together, when we speak, what we say, and how we say it, will emerge from who we are. From our own character, shaped as it is by the influences on our lives.

Jesus said to the religious leaders “You brood of vipers! How can you speak of good things, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks. The good person brings good things out of a good treasure, and the evil person brings evil things out of an evil treasure.”

“From our own character, shaped as it is by the influences on our lives.”

What are the greatest influences on our lives? Whose is, or are, the voice or voices to which we listen most often? Our family? Our friends? The TV and newspapers? Advertisers?

God’s voice?

This series of reflections is about wisdom – wisdom in our every day lives. Maybe there are few areas where we require more wisdom than in this topic of using our tongues. To speak or not to speak?

- When to speak?
- What to say?
- How to express ourselves?

There are no hard and fast tick box rules for these things. What is appropriate one day might be wildly inappropriate on another occasion. A good approach for one person might be completely wrong for another.

How to make wise choices?

At its core, wisdom is about understanding and discerning. Understanding – seeing from God’s perspective (insofar as frail human beings can) and discerning – hearing God’s voice.

And maybe that’s what it all comes down to. Listening to God’s voice. Becoming so familiar with it that, just as we hear our own name spoken by someone we love in a room full of noise, so we hear God’s voice in the business and turmoil of every day. His voice of love and encouragement, grace and mercy. To us, and through us, to be made real in the world.

And the more time we spend in his company, the easier it will be to hear.

Maybe the reality is, that wise speech begins with wiser listening.

Response

Let's allow ourselves some time to listen to God.

Maybe to reflect on some of the thoughts you have just heard

Maybe to listen to God for his wisdom for something we know we should be saying to someone. How to say it?

Maybe to bring to him a time when you said something you regret.

Or didn't say something that should have been said.

How might you have done things differently?

Bring them to God in repentance, hear his forgiveness, and receive his wisdom for the future.