

SERMON – 24/5/26**'Speaking from Within'**

James 3:1-12

'Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.' (James 3:10)

As we continue our studies in the Letter of James this morning we come to a very practical exploration of another matter of which all of us have plenty experience – the way that our words sometimes get us into trouble. Which of us has not regretted at some point saying something which has gone down like a lead balloon? On occasion we can say something which is misunderstood, or taken in a way we had not intended and other people have been upset by it; sometimes we speak in the heat of the moment and wish that we had thought a bit more about what we had said and the way that we had said it, but by then it is too late and the damage has been done; but sometimes it has to be said that we have carefully rehearsed what we are going to say so that it has maximum effect and sometimes our words have been used as weapons because we have very consciously decided that that is what we want to use them for.

The last couple of weeks we have seen how there is a connection between listening to God's Word and doing what it says – not just remembering the great commandment to love God and love our neighbour but actually loving God and loving our neighbour – and there is a connection between what we believe and what we do – faith and action, or as we summarised it last week: faith works! In this morning's reading it is a slightly different connection that is made – the one between what is in our heart and what comes out of our mouth.

Perhaps you remember how Jesus criticised the Pharisees for making such a big thing about spiritual uncleanness. They made a great song and dance about what they (and their listeners) were putting *in* to their mouths when the big problem was actually what came *out* of their hearts. Jesus said: 'Listen and understand. What goes into someone's mouth does not defile them, but what comes out of their mouth, that is what defiles

them.’ (Matthew 15:11) And James is making a very similar point here.

In fact it's with teachers that he begins. Those of us who use our tongues along with the pen or the computer to share words need to be very careful about how we use those words. James points out that folk like me will be judged more strictly than others on account of what we say because people are dependent on our words and trusting of what we have to say. That point came home very forcefully to me just a few weeks after I was inducted to my first charge. Someone suggested that I should go and see a lady who had been a regular church attender but who had suddenly stopped coming to church. I went to visit her and got a very frosty reception until we got talking. It turned out that she had been very upset by the way I had spoken at Christmas about the people walking in darkness seeing a great light, because she had taken something I had said as a personal insult against her. It turned out that although I had simply been expounding the Christmas story, I had been careless in the way I had spoken and she had taken me up wrongly and been deeply hurt. That incident made me very conscious of the responsibility I bear as a preacher to recognise just what an impact the spoken word can have for good *and* for ill and to be aware that I am under God's judgement for what passes from my lips. I'm very glad to say that lady responded well to my visit and the chat we had. She knitted me a pair of lovely socks and she became one of my greatest supporters over the years. But how easily it could have ended in disaster.

But from advice directed specially at teachers the apostle goes on to point out that *everyone* slips up at some point through what we say and that as Christians, although we may discipline ourselves in an attempt to keep our whole body in check, we can easily fall into the trap of speaking thoughtlessly or injudiciously. And when you stop to think about it, most of us can resist the big temptations in life and yet quite regularly allow what comes out of our mouth to let us down. We bend the truth, we raise our voice, we make a barbed comment, we betray a confidence, we pass on a piece of tittle tattle. As James says here: "Anyone

who is never at fault in what they say is perfect " and which of us can put our hand on our heart and claim that?

James uses a whole host of images to illustrate his point. For those of you who ride horses, it will be clear that a bit in a horse's mouth can be used to to great effect to turn the horse in the direction you want to go. Similarly, if you have to do with boats, you know what a difference turning a rudder makes – although it is remarkably small in comparison with a large ship, it causes the whole vessel to turn. In the same way, although the tongue is a relatively small part of the human anatomy it can have a similarly dramatic effect on the course the whole person takes.

Or again, James uses the image of a tiny spark causing a huge forest fire, and we will all be able to think of examples of a single word or sentence setting in train a set of unstoppable consequences. Perhaps some of you remember a good number of years ago now the business man Gerald Ratner making a throwaway comment about the quality of jewellery sold in his chain of shops – among other things he spoke about a pair of earrings costing less than a prawn sandwich from Marks and Spencers and probably lasting about as long - and the company went into freefall, wiping £500 million off the value of the business.

James concludes that although we can tame all kinds of animals, "no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison." (v.8)

Everything he has said so far could be said of any human being in any context but we come to the heart of the matter when he addresses us as Christians and challenges us to consider specifically how we use our tongues in Christ's service and how the language we use here in worship together in the sanctuary or in the quiet place of prayer before God as individuals is reflected in the way we speak throughout the rest of the day and the rest of the week. There is a really ancient communion hymn which runs as follows: "Strengthen for service, Lord, the hands that holy things have taken; let ears that now have heard your songs to clamour never waken. Lord, may the tongues which 'Holy' sang keep free from all deceiving; the eyes which saw your love

be bright your blessed hope perceiving.” We rejoice to use holy words in prayer and in praise and yet, says James here, “Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.” (v.10)

The apostle offers us another series of images to drive home his point: Can a fig tree bear olives? He asks. Can a grapevine bear figs? Or, as we were thinking last week, although a banana tree and a plantain look alike they cannot bear the fruit of the other. “Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?” asks James. No of course they can't – a salt spring cannot produce fresh water. So how, then, can the same tongue which we have used to make words to offer in praise to God also be used to make words to curse those who have been made in God's image.

It is providential that we come to read this passage on Pentecost Sunday when we celebrate God's gift of the Holy Spirit, the very indwelling of Christ within the believer, for if we have truly received the Spirit of Christ how can we not bear the fruit of the Spirit? Yet if our language is unclean, if our speech is questionable, if the things we say are dubious or untrustworthy, then what does that say about the state of our heart, my friends? As James says, a salt water spring cannot produce fresh water. It just can't.

I knew someone once who felt convicted about the inappropriate language he sometimes used. He recognised that there was a grave inconsistency between the words he used in church on a Sunday morning and the kind of humour he used over a few drinks on a Saturday night, and he made a conscious decision to leave one aspect of his lifestyle behind in order to follow his heart. I would love to tell you that he gave up telling inappropriate jokes in the pub and devoted his life to lifting up the name of Jesus, but that man chose to turn his back on the things of God. That haunts me still, probably 30 years later.

This Day of Pentecost, the Lord Jesus stands at the door of our hearts knocking. Will you ask Him in by His Spirit to take up residence in your life, to become the source from which the water of life wells up within you and overflows to the glory of God in the

faith you profess, through the words you speak, through the actions you take and the fruit of the Spirit that you bear?

As we have seen this morning, the way of the world is that 'Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing.' But this should not be. For when the Holy Spirit filled the first disciples at Pentecost they began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them and peoples of every tribe and nation heard them declaring the wonders of God in their own languages. God is at work in just the same way today, if we will only allow it. So let the fresh water of the Spirit bring forth fruit from our lives in these days, let all those around us hear the wonders of God proclaimed in a way that they cannot fail to understand and let our tongues sing God's praises but never say anything except what will bring honour to the name of Jesus and blessing to all those who hear us.