

Sermon on Sunday 15 September 2024

by Rev. Alan Stewart

Readings: James 3. 1-12 & Mark 8. 27-38

Taming the Tongue

Foot in Mouth disease. We've all been there; speaking before thinking, accidentally saying something we shouldn't. From Biden introducing Zelensky as President Putin, to Gordon Brown's microphone gaffe berating a 'bigoted woman', none of us are immune. We've all said things we immediately or later regret, and in a cancel culture where historical Twitter posts, for example, can come back and bite, words can be the downfall of some.

Peter, the disciple, was something of an expert when it comes to Foot in Mouth. He's a good guy, full of well-intentioned but sometimes ill-informed bravado. Take this conversation in today's Gospel reading. It starts off so well. Peter is among the first to identify Jesus as the promised Messiah. It's a big moment. He's probably feeling very pleased with himself. Seconds later, however, Jesus tears a strip out of him with that now-famous rebuke, 'Get behind me, Satan'.

After the big reveal that he is indeed 'the One', Jesus unexpectedly goes on to talk about his arrest, his death and finally a resurrection. Now, this doesn't fit with Peter's (or many other's) version of how things should pan out, and he says so. 'Over my dead body,' he says, clearly motivated by wanting to protect his friend; picturing a more glorious and successful Messiah.

Jesus' response feels like a major overreaction. No doubt he's terrified of what's ahead, and the very last thing he needs is a friend trying to steer him away from his true calling. It's important here, by the way, to recognise that, in scripture, Satan simply means 'Accuser' or 'Prosecutor'. So, here, Jesus isn't calling Pete the devil. It's his dramatic way of saying, 'No, I have to do this. Don't get in my way, this is hard enough'.

Words have extraordinary power. And this is picked up in our other reading from James, actual brother of Jesus.

'The tongue is a fire that can set great forests alight,' he writes. It's 'untamable', 'a restless evil, full of deadly poison'. Strong words. I imagine many of us will have witnessed such destruction first hand, either through poisonous political rhetoric or a callous unkind remark. Words have power both to raise up and to destroy. Sticks and stones may break bones but names and words hurt like nothing else.

And, of course, we'll all have experience of how the written word (on paper, text, email etc.) can be misconstrued and lead to upset.

Most of us, I know, are very careful with our words, but there is a culture developing where many people justify cruel words as simply speaking the truth. 'I pull no punches; I tell it like it is'. But there is a time be quiet, to hold back, to bite, bridle and tame our tongue.

You might know the acronym **THINK**. Before we speak, we ask ourselves:

Is it T, **True**? Not third-hand gossip.

Is it H, **Helpful**? Will it help or hinder?

Is it I, **Inspiring**? Will it encourage?

Is it N, **Necessary**? Do we actually need to say this?

Is it K, **Kind**? As someone once famously said, 'Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a battle you know nothing about'.

That's a great checklist, don't you think? It should prevent a great deal of Foot in Mouth. It should squash that very human thing called gossip, which can come veiled in seemingly innocent or thoughtful language; 'Remember so and so in your prayers... have you heard...?'

I want to end by sharing with you a poem (a poem prayer, really) by the American writer John Roedel, which says so much, so much more beautifully than I ever could. It's untitled and it deserves to keep speaking long after this service is over.

'The words we form on our tongues can become bombs or acorns. Every time we speak to each other, we have the choice to ruin or to raise each other.'

When I die, will I be surrounded by a forest of comforting words that I planted, or will my final resting place be an ash pit where I detonated my pride over and over?

Oh Spirit, help me grow a grove of kindness that stretches from valley to valley.

Oh Divine Light, help me become an arborist of hope whose redwoods hold treehouse chapels where the congregants hold hands and count each other's tears.

Oh Mysterious Love, help me cultivate a vast wilderness of empathy and mercy.

Oh Mystical Mover of my Heart, teach me how to let every word I utter be a source of shade, instead of a cause for shame.

This is my purpose, this is why I'm here, and not to sound too preachy – but I think it's why you're here too. We are here to grow the most incredible towering trees of compassion for each other to climb in.

Oh Eternal Artist, help us replace our nooses with tire-swings, so we take turns rocking back and forth under the thickets of our most gentle wishes for each other.'

So, may our prayer be that our words do not ruin but raise, are not bombs but acorns that grow empathy and mercy. Amen to that.



*'Every time we speak to each other,
we have the choice to ruin
or to raise each other.'
- John Roedel*

Mark 8. 27-end

Peter's Declaration about Jesus

²⁷ Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' ²⁸ And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' ²⁹ He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.'^[b] ³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel,^[i] will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words^[j] in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.'

James 3. 1-12

3 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters,^[a] for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. **2** For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. **3** If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. **4** Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. **5** So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! **6** And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature,^[b] and is itself set on fire by hell.^[c] **7** For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, **8** but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. **9** With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. **10** From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters,^[d] this ought not to be so. **11** Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? **12** Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters,^[e] yield olives, or a grapevine yield figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.