

13th September, 2015

Reading: James 3: 1 - 12

Sermon: Watch what comes out of your mouth

Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check. So writes James at the beginning of Chapter 3.

I can't help feeling that this is said a bit tongue in cheek by James, because I suspect we would all be hard pushed to find anyone who had never criticised anyone. We would be hard pushed to find someone who had never muttered something about what someone else had said or done. We are all guilty of letting our tongues run away with themselves, sadly, all too frequently. None of us is perfect.

On Facebook and Twitter, we are bombarded constantly by people criticising the actions of others and the words of others, people who would claim to be caring and compassionate, although perhaps not perfect. There is nothing more waring than reading all that negativity.

It has become second nature to many people to lay into others and to insult others via electronic media, people whom we do not even know. In 2012, Tom Daly was texted by someone who told him that he had let his father down because he had failed to win an Olympic Medal. What is that about? The comments we make can, at times, be so hurtful and even destructive.

Youngsters have taken their own lives because of words, because of what other people have said about them. Youngsters have taken their own lives because of cyber

bullying, bullying on Facebook and in messaging, all of it done with words which come out of our mouths and our hearts.

Our words can have serious consequences and we all need to realise that. It's as I said two or three weeks ago, we need to take the plank out of our own eyes so that we can see to remove the splinter in someone else's eye. Our words can impact greatly on other people and in ways that we cannot even begin to imagine. They destroy people's self-esteem, such as it may be. They destroy people's image of themselves and yet we are made in God's image and perfect in His eyes. What right have we as human beings to destroy others with our words?

Words destroy lives, cause unrest in the work place, tensions within nations, civil wars. Words cause relationships to break down within families. We only need to look at Jeremy Kyle's programme to see just how fierce the tongue can be and how abusive and how hurtful to family and so called friends. As James says in his letter: **The tongue is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body.**

We may be thinking just now that we're nowhere near that bad. Well, Margaret White, a retired minister from Glasgow, says that James, in writing this letter, is responding to a situation which has arisen within a congregation, just like Paul was, when he wrote his letters to the Church at Corinth.

The words that come out of our mouths, whatever they are, impact on the whole body, on the whole people of God and indeed on how other's view us.

James is hitting home the message that we all stumble, that we all fall short, in many different ways, but he was writing to a very close and intimate community in a Church. Even there, or maybe even particularly there or here in our Church, the danger of unguarded words had and has to be recognised.

Other traditions sometimes have interesting stories which bring home the message from our own faith. Margaret Whyte tells a story from the Muslim tradition. She says:

A man came to Mohammed one day and said to him:

'The people in my village are shunning me because I said a few hurtful but true things. What harm is there in that?'

Mohammed answered: 'Go and place a white feather on the door step of all the people you have hurt'.

The man went and did as Mohammed had said. The man then came back to Mohammed and said: I have done that. What will I do now?'

Mohammed replied: 'Go and collect all the feathers'.

A while later, the man came back to Mohammed and said to him: 'All the feathers have blown away in the wind.'

'So it is with our words', said Mohammed. 'Once uttered, they are blown away on the wind and we cannot take them back again. Guard your tongue in future.'

It's a nice story with an important lesson for us all and it reinforces the message in James' letter.

All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

We worry about venomous snakes and the harm they can do if we tread on them but they only attack when provoked. They only attack us to defend themselves.

We lash out with our tongues, often attacking those we do not know because they hold an opinion which is different from our own. Surely we need to respect the opinion of others even when we don't agree with them. We worry about snakes but there can be more poison come out the mouths of human beings than out of any snake.

The call of James is to look at why the same tongue which praises God can also curse His people, people made in God's image. **My brothers and sisters, he says, this should not be.**

We are the body of Christ. If we are truly part of that body, why is it possible for such extremes to come from within us? I'm going to suggest that it is because we forget to filter through Christ what comes out of our hearts before it comes out of our mouths.

James says a salt spring cannot produce fresh water. That's true but we are like salt springs. However, fresh water can be made out of the water from the salt spring when it passes through a desalination plant. Being the great scientist that I am not, for the sake of argument, let's just

call that process 'filtering'. When salt water passes through the filters which purify it, it is fit for human consumption.

We need to filter what comes out of our hearts before it comes out of our mouths, so that what comes out of our mouths is fit for human consumption. If we use the analogy of food, what we take in nourishes us. If we take in too much of the wrong food stuffs, it damages our health.

Words are like food which is taken in by someone else. If we produce words which are harmful and hurtful, words which are damaging, they will have a damaging and hurtful effect on the lives of others.

There is a well-known saying: Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me. That is not true. Words do hurt and words eat away at us, permeating our whole being like a poison which destroys us.

What about words, though, which are filtered through Christ? What about words which are pure, which are caring and compassionate? Those words have the power to build us up, to encourage us, to sustain us like nourishing food. Those words have the power to comfort us, to teach us and to strengthen us as they permeate our whole being and enter our hearts and minds.

What would we rather feast on? What would we rather feed to others? Surely we need to take stock and consider everything which comes out of our mouths whether we are sitting within our family circle, among our friends, or in meetings and hopefully if that is a Church meeting there is some crossover because each of us is made in the image of

God. Each of us is His child and therefore brothers and sisters in Christ.