

James 3:1-12

Words and silence

Silence is golden

The young mum loves her child dearly but just sometimes she longs for the wee one to stop bawling. The elderly couple have known the kids next door since they were born and get on fine with them – but oh, if only they'd cut down on the volume of their guitar and drums! It's good to be neighbourly and it's fine to hear what Mr or Mrs So and So has to say – but not every day and not for hours on end. Silence – peace, quiet. [pause here for a few seconds]. It's so rare for most of us that we begin to imagine that something is wrong if there ISN'T talk or noise.

Of course, we can be blatant in our attempts to defend our peace – Shut up! Be quiet! Turn it down! But that doesn't always have the desired effect and can rub people up the wrong way. Throughout the last year I've had a problem with my throat – it gets raspy easily. I had it checked out and it was a comfort to learn that there were no nasties. Apparently, I've just been using it in a different way and a lot of recordings and online meetings. Elaine joked that the doctor's prescription was for me to shut up! That's not what he said but I do have to watch that I don't speak too long at one go – and a series of longer online sessions, recordings, services or phone calls causes difficulties. But it is a job trying to get ministers to be quiet.

Watch your mouth

You'll have heard that expression as someone is chided for their bad language. James goes further. Yes, he criticises the ease with which bad language can come out of mouths that have been used to sing praises to God, but actually his warnings about speech go far deeper. He warns of the damage that can be done by that little member of the body – our tongue. Ranging from a careless comment, hurtful remark, vicious spiteful accusations, to inflammatory tirades that stir up hatred and violence even war. And though James wouldn't have had a clue about the internet – just think how valid his words are in our day - with social media, trolls, political spin and damaging words reaching hundreds of thousands in an instant; where baseless accusations and wild theories wreck lives and undermine health without any recourse. “It was on the news”, “I saw a post about...” It doesn't need to be proved, no justification is required – something is said and for some, that is enough to make them wonder; there is sufficient doubt cast on even well proven positions. And once it is out, you can't get it back in.

What is said or posted can't be taken back. I remember getting children to squeeze toothpaste out of a tube – it was all a bit messy – and then I asked them to put the toothpaste back in the tube. The look on their faces was a picture – shock, concern – YOU CAN'T they exclaimed – and they were right – and they got the message – neither can you put hurtful words back in your mouth. You can apologise, but what is said, is said. Lesson – watch what you say. Watch your mouth.

Use of words

James begins with an added warning for teachers. In the context that almost certainly meant preachers – so we ministers need to take this to heart. But it is applicable to

school teachers too – clearly the way they speak (and treat) their pupils is very influential. In the modern context I believe you could reasonably extend the special warning to all who have a real influence over others through what they say (or write) – politicians spring to mind as a classic, other people in the public eye – celebrities, sports stars – journalists too and no doubt other groups. Fake news, spin, trolling, manipulation – all these are so much easier to spread, to inflict hurt and damage given the internet. But the humble face to face (or behind your back) gossip using no more than their tongue can wreak lasting damage in a community (or even church) that can be just as devastating for those affected. And that is the point – James is saying that no one is immune – and it doesn't take much to inflict damage that can't be undone. He illustrates it referring to how a spark can lead to wildfires – and even over the last few weeks we've seen images on TV of just how devastating that can be. For me, the navigational illustration is telling – a wee rudder hidden under the waterline, possibly a fair size but tiny in proportion to the overall size of the vessel is enough to let the pilot (and yes, the Captain used to call me Pilot) steer a ship that was many many times the rudder's bulk. Do we really think about how much we allow our tongues to dictate our lives? Or allow our words to influence, control even manipulate others?

The tongue – a weapon?

Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me. There was probably some merit in such phrases being used to get us to refrain from resorting to violence when we were called names but actually the truth is that words can impose serious and lasting damage. I'm not talking about my Dad, who was asked by his Primary 1 teacher to stop singing because he was putting the other children off. He joked that that comment had inflicted untold psychological damage on him; it hadn't and he readily acknowledged that he was no singer – and instead he began a lifelong enjoyment of LISTENING to others' music making. But there is all too much destructive use of words – using the tongue to do people down, to make them feel useless and inferior, to silence them (not for peace and quiet but) so that the speaker's own will might be imposed on others. The tongue can be weaponised, words used as power – and that isn't on. Yes, we ministers need to watch that we aren't too quick to silence those whose views run counter to what we see as right belief – we need to give people space to explore their understanding, we need to be gentle and loving in HOW we point to Jesus' love.

Perhaps our status, as with doctors these days, is much diminished such that we are less of a problem. Few hang on our every word! But maybe we need to be better at holding others to account for what they say. I wouldn't want politicians to be afraid of being cut to pieces for every word that came out of their mouths, but I do think those who have great influence will, in James' words, be judged with greater strictness. Truth matters and phrases like “political promises” ie ones that don't need to be kept after an election or being “economic with the truth” just don't cut any ice with me. Throwaway lines intended for sound bites to catch the 6 o' clock news – to attract attention but with little thought about delivering outcomes should be challenged.

And before we let ourselves off the hook altogether and pass on blame to politicians, celebrities and those in the public eye remember we've all got a tongue – and we are

responsible for the way we speak. Not only are we to refrain from hurtful and damaging comments we are to allow the love of God in our hearts to work through our whole beings so that his grace is apparent in our lives – including the way that we speak.

Silence isn't always golden

There is of course something else that we need to bear in mind. Keeping quiet isn't always right. Failing to speak up for the truth, for justice, for what is right and true and good is equally as culpable as damaging words. I'm keeping my mouth shut. I don't want to get involved. These are common responses – sometimes understandable in face of intimidation – but not helpful. For the fact is that we have tongues in our heads and each and every one of us has the opportunity to speak up for the truth, to offer words of comfort and consolation, encouragement – to engage in peace-making and healing, to defend the oppressed – in our local community and yes, on the world scene. Silence has its place and probably we should give it much more place – listening to others needs, to ideas and proposals that come from other quarters – instead of always insisting on our own way and listening only to the sound of our own voices. (I'm still learning that lesson that requires us to concentrate on what someone is saying rather than working out how I am going to reply to them). But for all that – the Bible is clear that sometimes keeping stum isn't an option. We've to speak up for the downtrodden, the oppressed, the unloved, the vulnerable. And we've to do it, not from a position of power and with aggression but graciously, lovingly and with a view to healing broken relationships, not imposing our will.

So, yes there is a balance of words and silence. Yes, we've to watch our mouth and not abuse our freedom to speak; listening, being quiet will have a place but there will be times as well when we need to speak up. God give us the grace to be responsible in and for our speaking – and for our listening.

May the Lord bless you! Amen.