

'The perils of the tongue and the power of the Word'

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

Send out your light and your truth to be my guide; let them lead me to your holy hill, to your dwelling place. – Ps.43,3

Collect:

Grant, O merciful God, that your Church, being gathered by your Holy Spirit into one, may show forth your power among all peoples, to the glory of your name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen

Reading: **James 3, 1-12**

Sermon:

Dear friends

James finds in the church a readiness to teach which produces an environment for faith and in the church which is detrimental to their flourishing. Too many folk are eager and encouraged to teach in a way that affects things negatively. Whatever the motivation and desire to teach in the church of these teachers may be, they divert faith from its path, the church's teaching. There are too many words, with the result that the *Word of the church* suffers; there are too many teachers, with the result that the *teaching of the church* suffers.

James considers this a problem serious enough to lay down this warning and seek to put on the brakes on this proliferation of teachers. It indicates a problem that affects not those who teach, but believers more generally, as becomes clear when he speaks about the tongue and the need to tame it.

But he does first address this problem of the increase of teachers. Let us ask: Why is it a problem? (Perhaps James is just fearful of his own position as teacher?) Things develop, don't they, in teaching? Who is to say that new revelations and insights cannot be given, which new teachers pick up? Are not the new teachings from the Spirit too? And so on.

The crux of the matter here lies with *the church's teaching*. You see, it is the church's teaching

whereby faith and church came to be; it is also that whereby faith and church *come* to be and whereby the church grows and prevails against all opposition.

It is this circumstance precisely, this causal connection between the church's teaching and the church's being, that led the church to define the scriptures of the New Testament over against the increasing number of writings and teachings which were not of that whereby church and faith came to be (!), and which were lacking the authority and authenticity belonging to the Apostles who were witnesses of the Saviour's resurrection. The need for defining the NT (and say 'no' to other teaching) arose from the recognition that the teaching of Jesus and about him – his life, his words and works, his death, his resurrection and the proclamation of it by the Apostles –, which had led people to faith and gathered them together as the church, *retains* its place and function in the life and the work of the church. This teaching of the church is not like a founding document which has an honoured place in the church's history and memory, but which for direct influence needs amending all the time. It is that whereby God makes known the mystery of salvation, it is the message of which it is said, '*Faith comes by hearing the message*' (Rom.10,17).

So what we see in James is an awareness already that the inflationary increase of teachers and their words masks a weakening influence of the church's teaching and its word through a weakening regard for it and dependence upon it.

The seriousness of this is underlined by the reminder of judgment: "*we who teach will be judged more strictly.*" That is: To distort the teaching whereby God makes known the way of salvation, to speak words that pretend but fail to make known and to serve the truth of God, renders a teacher more culpable: Not only does he cause damage, he then also prevents healing; not only does he deprive man who needs healing, he deprives God who wants to heal man and has given the Word and the Spirit to achieve it!

The church's teaching ought therefore to be of primary concern to the church and to faith, both of which live by this that its message is proclaimed in words of truth and faithfulness. To guard the church's teaching - from those who would distort it, from those who would subject it to their innovations, from those who would instrumentalise it for their purposes, from those who would hold it captive to their cultural outlook and to the spirit of the age - is not optional nor is it ever unnecessary (or a done job): it is a matter of survival and a spiritual necessity.

This area of our faith, of Christianity, is one where the pivotal place of the word and the use of words is most apparent. It matters greatly what is said and what is not said and whether what is said is true and whether the truth is heard.

And when we see this, we also see that it is not the only area. In fact, in all areas that we are called to live out our faith, the way we use words – what we say and what we don't say – has huge impact. Indeed, James reckons that if we managed to speak truthfully at all times, if we used words with true knowledge and would never stumble when we speak, we would not in our heart be subject to those desires and fears which come to be expressed in words that hurt, destroy, betray and hide and suppress the truth. James: "*Anyone who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.*"

Here we have an important clue why James speaks of the power of the spoken word and the need, consequently, to tame one's tongue. It is because genuine faith is about cohesion, about fellowship; it is because faith brings together what stands apart, controls and overcomes that which divides, separates, corrupts and subjects us to death. Faith is nothing if not a most powerful cohesive, to bind us together: and at the heart of it is communication.

Let us approach this again from the following angle: The scientists tell us that there are 4 fundamental forces of nature which govern and regulate the behaviour of matter (to hold things together!) - they are the strong and the weak nuclear force, electro-magnetism and gravity. Their values have to be "just so" in order for things to be held together such as to enable life – and astonishingly, against almost infinite odds, they are. There are millions of ways that their values could have been different, with the result that we wouldn't be here, yet they are what they absolutely and without margin for "error" had to be. One may well ask if there is not another force required which is unlike these but defined them? But of more import it the observation that none of these forces bind humanity together or govern the behaviour of creatures that are not just bodies but are souls / spirits. Here we can begin to see something of the character of this other force that is required – that it is spiritual and that it communicates.

This force works through the Word – *In the beginning was the Word* (Jn.1,1). And this reasonably explains why the ability of the (human) tongue to form and speak words (to communicate!) carries such power. And therefore, why it is that:

by the power of his tongue man can destroy – think in this age of the internet in particular of the damaging effect of words on reputations, careers, prospects etc.;

by the power of the tongue man crushes and shames, divides and alienates, corrupts and sets things in motion that are simply evil;

by the power of the tongue man can withdraw love, silence the truth and cover wrong, can make the bad sound good and the good sound bad, can hinder every kind of flourishing.

Consider this power which the tongue yields that you possess and with which you communicate.

And consider carefully! These deeds of the tongue, says James, because of the nature of the ultimate force that is God's Word, originate in hell itself: *"Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell."*

And such is its activity that it would be foolish to think ourselves to be in control of it or able to tame it. Compelled by desires and fears living deep within us, the tongue will do their bidding. *"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."*

Let us not underestimate, or play down even, the power of the tongue to be quite deadly, by saying that surely James is exaggerating somewhat. How far back do we have to go when last our mouths ran away with us and we said things we thought we'd never say, said things we wish we hadn't, things that cannot be unsaid, that leave scars? And how much, do we think, of what we have said and of what we have left unsaid, is the same as what we should have said or even meant to say?

But it should not be like that. Because by the tongue also are spoken those words that have the power to heal, comfort, strengthen, counsel and bring together, words speaking forgiveness and mercy, speaking love in truth and the truth in love. It is therefore a real anomaly and self-contradictory, for a Christian to feel free to use words of praise and faith in his relationship with God, but in his relationship with other people, esp brothers and sisters, use words that are neither true nor kind and should simply not be said, not to use words that help and build up etc.

Dear friends, the tongue, for the power it yields, is a part of the body most in need of redemption. And it is not irredeemable, there is a force that can tame it and it is the effect of the sanctifying work of the Spirit of God in our life. *"A good man", says Jesus, "brings good things out of the good stored*

*up in his heart, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.” (Lk.6,45) The grace of God by the death of Christ for our sins draws the poison out of the heart that humbly seeks it, and the grace of God through the resurrection of Christ by the Spirit fills the heart with new life, so that filled with the word that is Christ the heart may learn to speak *this* word.*

Here is the source which as we drink from it in repentance and faith brings cleansing to our tongues.

AMEN

Lord God, you spoke through Jesus Christ once and for all for our salvation, and he now intercedes for us before you. Grant that we hear what you are saying in the power of your Spirit, so that our tongue may become an instrument for good and for blessing. Amen

- time of prayer / intercession – [what concerns we have on our heart we pour out before God and seek in thanksgiving the gifts of His blessings;
we ask to discern His judgments and for a spirit of understanding and repentance, for mercy and an end to the spiritual ignorance whereby we fail to reject and abhor sin and wickedness;
we plead for the lost, the broken, the lonely, the abandoned, the persecuted, the suffering...;
we think of the victims and the ongoing trouble of the pandemic in our country and around the world and pray for those who care for the ill and for those tasked with keeping the people safe and for faith and courage...;
we pray for the authorities and those in leadership, for our communities;
we thank God for His guiding and keeping, for all the ways in which we discern his helping hand;
we pray:]

‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen

Now may the peace of God which passes all our understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you. AMEN
