

James 3:1-12 When we open our mouths: Revd.Dallas Ayling

In the letter of James, we have practical down to earth challenges on the way that we live and he is not afraid to hit the truth head on. Today it is about taming the tongue. It is about how we speak not just to each other in the fellowship but to anyone.

Communication is really important, isn't it? It is what makes the world go round and we are all part of that. And part of communicating stands or falls on the words that we use. We can use words to build up or pull down. We can use language of love, grace and mercy, or we can use the language of judgement, fear and attack. I, like many of my age was brought up with the saying: "Sticks and stones will break my bones but words will never hurt me." This "proverb" came from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century but it just isn't true. I learned that words were powerful, and they were difficult to ignore. They can be like arrows that stick in our minds or even at a deeper level and of course used in a detrimental way can hurt us and even change the course of our lives. We know that if young children are brought up in an environment where they hear mostly condemning words or are sworn at they will believe that they are useless and will grow up with low self-esteem and self-worth and that can determine the course of their lives. This is why messaging apps particularly used on phones can be so detrimental not only for young people but also for adults too and although there are some good things about them, it is also an evil of our day.

James uses what were two common objects. The first is the bit in the horse's mouth. The bit is a small piece of metal, but it controls a large animal, and secondly he uses a large ship, the direction of which is controlled by a small rudder. Similarly, our words might

seem to be a small thing, but if not chosen well they can steer others on a course of life that can be destructive and have lifelong implications.

James knows that we all fail in how we use our tongue, and we all have to be honest about that. But what he is saying is that this in itself is no excuse. We need to be wise with our words. The tongue corrupts the whole body and just a word like a small spark can set alight a whole forest or moorland. And we know how devastating fires can be. A small spark can turn into a major fire and homes and lives can be lost as well as the birds, animals, and trees. As it can change the landscape so it can do that to lives. The power of the tongue can have the same effect on us. I like the way that the Message puts it: "By our speech we can ruin the world, turn harmony into chaos, throw mud on a reputation, send the whole world up in smoke and go up in smoke with it, smoke right from the pit of hell". It's kind of scary isn't it and as James says we have learned to tame all sorts of animals, yet we have not learned to tame the tongue. We know that to be true, don't we? Before we know it we have said something which can damage our relationships, which can cause hurt and pain. Sometimes that is unintentional and sometimes our words are misunderstood and if we are given the chance, we realise we have to explain what we meant. It is not uncommon that the words from the Bible such as from Ephesians 4.15 about "speaking the truth in love" are used purposely as a weapon to support what is being said when actually we don't know what that really means in that situation. God may use us in that way, but we need to be pretty sure that it is God that is speaking into a situation and not because we think we are right. There are times and moments when we can see that words need to be said but such times need careful handling. Often, we will find

ourselves with words having gone straight through our heads without stopping and they come tumbling out of our mouths. We are all quite capable of doing that particularly when we are cross or angry or perhaps, we are feeling threatened or even insecure ourselves. What comes out of our mouths more often than not, in those situations, says more about us than the situation we have been presented with.

It isn't that we shouldn't speak what we believe is the truth, but it is how we do that, isn't it?

The community to which James writes has a bad word problem. It will have been full of people who don't really think that words matter. But James makes the point that your words are the things that guide your whole life. How we speak to people, what we say, has not only an impact on other people but it also has an impact on the speaker. Speaking in love and truth is about building people up not trying to dismantle them.

So much of our media today uses negative language and everyone is fair game. There are those who think that clergy are in that same category. We are people too, and we do not expect everyone will agree with us or what we do but generally we are trying to do the best we can, multi-tasking, spinning numerous plates and with less and less resources. It seems that we have been invited into a game where we put people on pedestals and then we hurl insults at them because they are not actually the people, we want them to be. James is right: The tongue can be a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

Are we allowing ourselves to be conformed to this world or are we asking God that we will be conformed to his Kingdom – to Jesus? In other words, are we allowing God to shape our language, what we say, to be the language which honours Jesus or not?

We need to ask ourselves this question because the truth is that it is the same tongue we have which we use to bless God. It is the same tongue we use to praise God and then curse the very men and women he made in his image. Both blessings and curse come out of the same mouth and that should not be the case like you cannot have two different fruits on the same tree. Or James also uses the illustration of a stream – it either gives good water or bad. It cannot do both.

As ambassadors for Christ – then what we say, or what we are known for saying – will impact on our mission.

I hope that in our lives we have regretted some of the things that we have said to people because when we realise the impact we can have, or see it, then we can learn that there are better ways to handle situations. As we all know we have two ears and only one mouth and just may be God designed us that way so that we would spend more time listening to what is being said and less time speaking before we know what a response might or should be. Yes, we get angry and frustrated, we can see things differently, we debate and argue but is it not possible to communicate those things without the personal attack which can come with it? Let's try to speak with blessing and love to build up and not to demolish. To think about words which honour God. And when we get it wrong to apologise, to forgive, to be more generous, to convey words of healing, and comfort, and to seek better ways of speaking truth, and if they are challenging words, to do that with real honest love with compassion and understanding recognising our own failures in life too.