

Proverbs 1: 20-33

Psalm 19

James 3: 1-12

St. Mark 8: 27-38

Pentecost 17 2024.

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“And the tongue is a fire.”

James 3: 6a

I can't imagine that there is anyone in this room over the age of 2, who has not (at one time or another) expressed him- or herself the wrong way – or maybe we shouldn't have said something at all!...

The Letter of James is sometimes thought to have originally been a homily – a pastoral sermon... James wants his readers and listeners – or course, that includes you and me – to be mindful about what we do (our behaviour), as we live out Christ's life in ours.

In chapter 3, today's reading, James focuses especially on what we *say*. James focuses on what we say...

It seems to be kind of a surprise to James that both bad and good words can come out of the same mouth. It seems contrary to nature!... For example, James observes, if a *fig* tree is growing, it doesn't produce olives; it only produces figs... To take another example, a spring of water can produce clean water; or the spring can produce brackish water which is bad to drink. The same spring doesn't produce 2 different kinds of water at about the same time... How odd it is, then, James reflects, that our mouths, our tongues, our breath, can produce good words and bad words at about the same time!...

James is also aware that a few bad words can cause deep harm – or great healing... To take another example, a great ship can cross the Mediterranean Sea, but that large ship is guided by what is in comparison a very small rudder, wherever the pilot directs the ship. An adjustment to the small rudder changes the ship's whole navigational course... In the same way, a few careless words can cause great hurt... In contrast, a few kind words can be enormously comforting...

James uses another example: People can tame all kinds of wild animals. (For those of us who read the Apocryphal section in some Bibles, we notice that elephants were trained for war during the Maccabean wars, about 2 centuries before James writes. Elephants were trained for war... In a circus, a lion can be trained to sit on a stool. A dog or even a dolphin can be domesticated to do tricks...) We can tame wild animals, writes James... Why can't we tame our tongues, our speech?...

So, James uses several illustrations to illustrate the dangers of ill-chosen speech. Now, a mute man or woman never has the temptation to say the wrong thing (although, no doubt, they face different temptations)... Could it be that the author of James was particularly prone to saying the wrong things, and regretting it?...

There is some debate among Bible teachers whether James was written by the apostle himself, or by someone close to James who gives him credit (a common practice in the ancient world)... The Greek language used to pen the Letter of James is of a particularly high standard, so if the author was once a fisherman, he was evidently a well-educated one...

Yet, let's think about what the gospel-records say about James... James had something of a reputation for blurting out comments he would regret!... On one occasion, James and his brother John ask for special status in the kingdom of heaven, at Jesus' right hand (Mark 10: 37)). (Jesus firmly discourages that way of thinking...) The other apostles resented that James and his brother John had asked this; James and John might well have regretted making that request...

In another example, a Samaritan village rejects the ministry of Jesus. Frustrated, James blurts out an unfortunate comment, suggesting that they should pray for those villages to be destroyed with heavenly fire! The Lord Jesus rebukes James here – for Jesus came to save, not to destroy... There is another thing James blurted out, that he probably regretted...

We note too that Jesus himself affectionately called the brothers James and John “sons of thunder...” Could it be that the thunder in them that Christ saw was the common tendency to speak out first, and afterwards, to think about what they just said?...

So, to my mind, there are good reasons to think that James was written by the fisherman, because the cautions about speech in the Letter of James reflect the relative weakness of the apostle himself...

Now, some of us are particularly prone to verbal gaffs – or to speak without thinking. It can be deeply embarrassing, can't it, when we say the wrong thing?... What can we do about that?...

Well, after we put our “foot in our mouths,” we might think, “I just won't say a single word! *Then* I won't say the wrong thing...” But that's not realistic, is it? God has given us the gift of speech to be able to praise him. It's appropriate that we use the gift we have been given...

However, if we have a particular tendency to blurt out something and then regret it, perhaps we can practice pausing for a moment: “Is what I am about to say going to build someone up, or cut them down?...” Or, when replying to a question, we might need to resist the pressure in our current culture to demand an answer right away... Sometimes, a good answer takes a second or 2 to be shaped in our minds. Not only in our speech, but in so many ways, it can be a good spiritual discipline to slow down... The Holy Spirit often speaks into our minds when we are slow enough to pay attention...

Of course, if we do say something wrong and know it, it's appropriate to apologize. Likewise, if someone comes to us to apologize, we need to take the equally brave step of accepting the apology, and letting go of the hurt. This is a positive use for words...

James cautions against the misuse of words, especially by teachers. James doesn't say "stop speaking." Rather, he cautions us to be wise in what we say. James 3: 1: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness." (Incidentally, when I was feeling called to serve the Lord in the ordained ministry of the Church, this verse made me hesitate. Part of the work of those of us who are in holy orders is to teach, and James warns us that we will be held to a higher standard of accountability.) But James doesn't say, "Don't teach." Instead, he exhorts us to be wise and careful in what we say...

Let's remember that we don't *always* say the wrong thing!... We can use words to cherish our lovers; to encourage the despondent; to guide; to reveal God's word; and in so many other ways...

Part of the story of the Bible is that God communicates with humanity... One of the ways God communicates is through language – speech... Do we remember the Prologue to the Gospel according to St. John? Reflecting on the eternal nature of Christ, John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Since before the beginning of time (imagine that!), God's nature includes communication, which ultimately we experience through the gift of Jesus Christ. We can also say that God himself uses speech – the written word – to reveal Jesus Christ, the living Word...

Our words may sometimes challenge. Yet, may our words bless, encourage, and communicate well. May we honour Almighty God on our lips as well as in our hearts. May we bless one another by what we say; now and ever.

Amen.