

Chichester Cathedral

Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, 11.00am Sung Eucharist, 16 September 2018

There is a children's rhyme that goes, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, But words can never hurt me!' I can't recall when I first heard it, but I can remember thinking, even a child, 'that is obviously not true.' Now that I am older I can analyse why this is, noting that the rhyme carries within it its own contradiction. If words really didn't have the power to harm, then such a reassuring rhyme would never have been composed. Everyone knows that words *can* wound, sometimes deeply. Words spoken in anger, that cannot be forgotten even if there was a subsequent apology. Words spoken to us in childhood that hurt and have stayed with us; perhaps even shaped our lives.

I say all this, of course, because of the striking and powerful words heard in our second reading this morning. Human being may be able to tame wild animals, says the letter of James, but 'No one can tame the tongue'. For the tongue is a 'restless evil, full of deadly poison.' Like the rudder of a ship or the bridle of a horse, the tongue is a relatively small part of our body, but it accomplishes far more than seems possible, given its size.

Earlier in his letter, James has anticipated this theme. In chapter one he wrote, 'Be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.' But no one reading this sensible advice about the prioritizing of listening over speech, would expect the explosive language about destructive human words that follows two chapters later.

Most of us, I suspect, would recognize that James is on to something important here. From our personal lives to politics, from the print media to broadcasting to digital and on-line communications, the harmful and distorting effects of language, whether spoken or written, are everywhere to be seen. In the past week, a couple of spectacular examples are to be found in the news: first, two Russian men claiming they went to Salisbury not to kill a former spy, but to see a cathedral; but apparently the Russian winters had not prepared them for the impassable Wiltshire slush; and then second, an American president denying meticulously compiled figures about the death toll from last year's hurricane in Puerto Rico, on the grounds the numbers had been invented to make him look bad.

Both are examples of a relatively new phenomenon: the use of words to shape reality without any concern for evidence or facts. One commentator on the letter of James, Richard Bauckham, describes today's reading as articulating a powerful case for 'speech ethics'. If such ethics were needed in the ancient world, they are surely needed even more than today, but neither Bauckham, nor James himself, tells us what these ethics might be, not gives us much practical advice. I hope and expect some illumination on this area in the Cathedral's forthcoming series of events beginning this Friday, International Peace Day, on the theme of 'Live Better Together'.

James' effective diagnosis of a problem – the destructive power of the tongue – without giving immediate solutions, is effectively explored by Donald Nicholl in the final pages of his short but profound spiritual classic, *Holiness*. Nicholl, a British historian and theologian, spent the final part of his career as Rector of an Ecumenical Institute in Israel. With characteristic honesty he recalls three occasions when unconsidered words of his, threatened the peace of the community there. The only consolation he gained from repenting of these transgressions was to be driven back to the significance of exactly the passage in the letter of James that I've been considering, in particular the text: 'All of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect... How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire.'

Nicholl notes both that the practical implications of what James writes are not spelled out in his letter, and also that they have not received the attention they deserve in Christian theology. In fact he found the help he needed, in a classic *Jewish* work called *Guard Your Tongue*, by Reb Yisroel Meir. It is a rather fearsome book, from the stern portrait of the author on the cover, to the uncompromising nature of the contents, where Reb Yisroel argues that evil speech is worse than idolatry, adultery and murder. If you are in the company of people speaking evil of others, Reb Yisroel writes, you are obliged to rebuke them. And then an even tougher piece of advice that Nicholl found especially significant: you are *forbidden* to refer to a wrong someone has done you, even if there is no doubt that it *was* a wrong.

Nicholl discovered by accident some hurtful personal remarks made by two scholars visiting his Institute. During the following months several occasions arose, especially in intellectual discussions, when he might have quite legitimately made these scholars look incompetent. Each time he was tempted to do just this, however, the stern portrait of Reb Yisroel from *Guard Your Tongue* arose before his eyes, and he kept silent. Soon even the temptation disappeared. And then, towards the end of the academic year, Nicholl tells of a convivial meal, as follows:

'At dinner one night I felt a wonderfully deep sense of peace and affection and joy flowing from one to another of those sharing the same table. Then suddenly I remembered that my table companions constituted the very group that had spoken harshly of me some months earlier. Yet now they were full of affection and warmth. With a shudder I realised that this wonderful fellowship would have been quite impossible if I had said one such word as I was tempted to say.'

Nicholl reflects that what helped him to hold his tongue, and so keep the peace, was not so much an abstract teaching as an image: the image of the stern face of Reb Yisroel arising in his mind's eye. This is the way, he concludes, that the Holy Spirit often works in our lives: through the gift of images that help us to live better lives.

Nicholl's book does not publish a picture of Reb Yisroel, so that is left to the reader's imagination; but Nicholl also offers the wonderful image of a joyful meal in which

past tensions and hurts are not forgotten, but no longer seem important. This is an image that stays in *my* mind, and has helped me when I have been tempted to take an opportunity to speak harshly. For me it is an image reminiscent of Christ's teaching about the kingdom of God as a heavenly banquet, a feast to which all people are invited.

I have said that the letter of James does not offer a solution to the problem he diagnoses. If you read on in the letter, however, he does go on to argue that the origin of true wisdom is found in God, and he encourages friendship with God rather than the world. What he urges in his readers is integrity of life, and in chapter four he relates this back to speech: 'Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters.' So perhaps the solution to the destructiveness of speech is about more than a code of 'speech ethics', for all that our world does need practical advice and guidelines in this area. Ultimately, however, the full remedy is found only in relationship with God, and through the gifts of God.

Today's Gospel explores a pivotal moment in our Lord's relationship with his disciples. And in the words that Peter speaks, we see a good example of James' suggestion that we should be 'quick to listen, slow to speak.' For when Jesus asks his followers, 'But who do you say that I am?', Peter's first response shows how carefully he has attended to all his Master has said and done over the preceding months and years. He has listened, reflected, and correctly concluded that Jesus is the Messiah. But when Jesus then speaks unexpected words about rejection and suffering, Peter speaks too quickly, without much reflection, and offers a rebuke. Jesus then rebukes Peter, for focusing on human things, not the divine.

From the *human* perspective, more than ever today, everybody has the right to say exactly what they want. The divine perspective offers the reticence and silence of Jesus at his trial. The human perspective seeks to use words to assert the way we want the world to be, and our own version of reality. The divine perspective offers the gift of integrity, and openness to the Spirit who leads us into all truth.

'Sticks and stones may break my bones, But words can never hurt me!' Oh yes they can. And words can harm others too, and engender division and hatred. There is no easy solution to this, but this very Sung Eucharist offers us a better way; for here this morning we are invited to a joyful meal in which past tensions and hurts are not forgotten, but no longer seem as important. Here we see, as our reading from James affirms, that human speech can bless as well as curse. Here, at the altar, we share in a foretaste of the heavenly banquet prepared for all humankind.

And here, invited into a deeper relationship with God in Christ, we find the way to the healing of our hurts and our hearts, for whatever may have been said to us in the past, here are words of love and kindness and compassion. Even the most challenging words of Christ are designed to help us to live better lives, and to come to know the joy and peace to be found in him. AMEN