**16th September 2012**

**James 3.1-12**

 A family had invited another family around for a meal and just before they were about to eat the father turned to his young son and asked him to say grace. The boy was a bit embarrassed and lost for words. So his mother tried to resassure him. She said just remember the words your father spoke at the meal last night. So he started ‘O God, we’re not having those people around for dinner again are we?’

You have to watch what you say. Your words may be repeated. Words are very powerful. There is a saying that sticks and stone may break my bones but words can never hurt me. It’s not true is it?

This week in the news Nick Clegg the deputy prime minister got into trouble for nearly saying that opponents of gay marriage were bigots – but the word was removed from his speech at the last moment.

The Independent Panel into the Hillsborough stadium tragedy 23 years ago, reported how there had been a series of lies and deceit from the police and the ambulance service, covering up their failures in the disasters. Malicious rumours had been planted in the press at the time that Liverpool fans had charged and broken through the turnstiles causing the crushing to death of 96 football fans. Four days after the disaster, the Sun newspaper published a story under the headline The Truth, and claimed that fans had picked the pockets of victims, and attacked and urinated on police and rescue workers. All such allegations have been proved unfounded but the damage has been done.

Words can hurt.

We have been looking at a letter in the New Testament of the Bible – the letter of James – and this letter offers us much wisdom for daily living. Today’s passage in chapter three talks about the power of words and the harm the tongue can do unless it is properly under control. James describes it as a ‘restless evil, full of deadly poison’. Is he overstating the case, or simply warning of how things are? His community, as he makes clear at the start of the next chapter, seems to have some serious conflict going on in it – there is dissension and rivalry and presumably there was gossip and backstabbing happening. You can see why he is concerned at poisonous tongues. How true is it that the words we speak reflect what lies in our hearts.

I don’t like Twitter. So many people have got in trouble because they have responded to situations impulsively. We tend to confuse impulsivity with spontaneity. Actually they are quite opposite. When we speak spontaneously, we speak out of the unity of our person. On the other hand, when we speak impulsively, we are speaking from inner division. It is as though our inner parent—our conscience—is temporarily distracted, and our inner child sees the chance to act quickly before being detected. Immediately after our impulsive speaking we tend to defend ourselves: we rationalize why we said what we said. But later the guilt descends and we wish we had “bitten our tongue” instead. Or not written that tweet.

The tongue already is a symbol of communication, but for James it is a symbol of the *failure* of communication.

I sometimes get asked to mediate when relationships are at breaking point. I often discover that that the partners want to talk to me rather than to each other. My challenge is to direct their communication to one another. It seems amazingly difficult for either husband or wife actually to turn and look at the spouse when there is conflict, let alone to speak directly to the other person.

The failure to use words for communication accounts for much of the misunderstanding that occurs in families, churches, and workplaces.

For example, Laura complained that Fred never showed her any appreciation. Fred was incensed at this charge.

“That’s not true,” he said. “Just yesterday, I came home for lunch!” “Big deal,” she said. “ I ended up having to fix you something for lunch!”

Fred was perplexed. ‘But I came home for lunch because I wanted to be with you Laura. ”

“Well, why didn’t you say so?,” Laura broke in.

 “Why do I have to say so?,” Fred shot back.

Because he didn’t, his own nonverbal communication was misunderstood. It lacked a label.

Bill and Doris had been married 50 years. At their Golden wedding celebrations Doris was asked if she had any regrets? She said Bill had only once said that he loved her and that was on her wedding day. Bill said ‘that’s right dear and if I’d changed my mind I would have told you!’

And then there is gossip. Gossip is always juicy. Did you hear about so and so…?

Let’s face it; most of us enjoy talking about other people. To quote the great theologian Oscar Wilde, "If you can’t say something good about someone, come over here and sit next to me." The right to gossip about the famous and the powerful may be the stiff price our egalitarian society extracts from those who rise to the top of the heap. The right to print topless photos of them when they are having a private holiday I think is well beyond the pale.

*Gossip has its salacious side, to be sure. Yet while slander is destructive, maybe not all gossip is slanderous. I read how one editor of a Gossip magazine contends that talking about the personal lives of others is a means whereby we attempt to figure out who we are and how we ought to live. In other words, my talk about others is not always an attempt to build them up or tear them down but rather, to make sense out of myself. I’m not entirely convinced by the argument.*

The word "gossip" derives from the older word *godsip --* acontraction of the words *"God"* and *"sibling."* Gossip must have been that privileged conversation among the family, the siblings, probably about someone in the family who was absent. We all talk about other members of the family when they are not present don’t we. But usually that conversation is out of love and support. The abuse of that privilege was undoubtedly the beginnings of the negative connotations of gossip.

But any community can’t emerge without intimacy. A good church, which I hope we have here, will want to love and care for each other and support each other and that will mean talking about each other. But sometimes there are grey areas. Suppose you’ve heard that good friends of yours are having financial difficulties. Do you pretend you don’t know, or do you offer support, ‘forgive me but I’ve heard you might be struggling – can I help?’

William Willamon a Methodist minister has written about the times as a pastor he has taken the initiative with people. He writes ‘I have knocked on front doors saying. "Joe, Joan, I hear you’re having some marital problems." Sometimes they would say "Oh, we see that the church rumour mill has been hard at work" -- congregational gossip making its nasty intrusion into their personal lives. "Call it gossip if you will," I would counter, "but I heard this as the genuine concern of some fellow Christians who care about you and are not sure how to show their care." More often than not, the information was accurate and the couple was grateful that we had made their troubles our own. That does not mean that I will divulge something a parishioner has said to me in confidence. It does mean that I help the troubled individual to see that the main resource for pastoral care in the church is the whole church.

He goes on: ‘A woman admits to me that her adult son is an alcoholic. She tells me not to tell anyone in the church because "I know how they would look down on me." I have two problems with her request. First, two-thirds of the congregation already know her son is an alcoholic. A congregation that doesn’t know intimate information about one another isn’t much of a church. Second, the dozen or so members of the church who are parents of alcoholic children could be her primary path to care. I tried to help her see that her deep, unmentionable secret is in the eyes of faith a church problem, an invitation to renew her baptism and possibly that of her son as well by allowing her brothers and sisters in Christ to minister to their need. As Christians in the church we are journeying together rather than detached strangers or consumers of individual therapy.

Is William Willamon right? He is American – we British are far more reserved and private. Some of course are hurt by confidences they feel are betrayed even if the motives were right. Information can be used for good but it can be used maliciously.

People long not to be alone – but be connected in community. Church at its best does that – and many of you know the wonderful strength you can get from being part of a caring church. But we are not perfect and we do stumble. James admits this in verse 2 – for we all stumble in various ways. The word of forgiveness is so important: asking for it, offering it and receiving it - renews trust and intimacy.

James offers a structure for the use of the tongue which could serve as its bridle and aid good communication. Can our words be constructive not destructive, can our words bless not curse?

In chapter one he has said “Let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger” (1:19).

It may take courage to listen—to use our tongues in a way that encourages rather than hinders the other’s speaking. Being slow to speak should ensure that our speaking does not get in the way of our listening. Rather, we use speech to draw others out—to assist them in expressing themselves.

Listening is particularly difficult when we are threatened by what we hear. Usually we do not like to listen to people with political, moral, or religious views different from our own.

Sometimes there is conflict between parents and their young adult children. It is hard to let our children go if they are not going in the direction we had in mind for them.

Here is where “slow to anger” completes the bridle. But slow does not mean *never.* Anger is not destructive in itself; however, the way in which we express it may be destructive. If we are aware of people being oppressed and abused, we should be angry. We probably do not have enough of this anger, considering the amount of injustice in human society.

But we all get angry from time to time .

When we deny our anger or otherwise repress it, it may come out indirectly in digs and jabs. It also makes us ill.

Anger is a precarious passion. It needs a healthy means for expression.

Some people take it out on things. Many a football manager has kicked chairs and thrown tables around in their anger so they can exhaust themselves physically and then be able to talk with their players with respect and restraint.

But there may be better ways. Biblical people like the psalmists and Job let out their anger to God. They were assured by their faith that God can take it and take them when people may not be able to do either. Some of these angry prayers are so violent in their language that we hesitate to read them in public worship. Yet they are healthy expressions of anger and probably reduce the possibilities for a destructive expression with people. Only God has no fragile ego;

only God’s acceptance is perfectly unconditional. Before we speak on impulse, perhaps we need to retire to the lavatory or some such safe place, and let our feelings out to God. Then we may be better

able to express these feelings in a constructive way—that is, without sinning—in our conversation with people.

I heard about a teacher a woman who was open with the children and expressed her feelings in a constructive way. When she came to school in a bad mood she would say so, rather than try to hide it behind a smiling facade.

“Children,” she would say, “I am in a bad mood. It has nothing to do with you. But I don’t want to jump on you today. So please be careful, because I am in a bad mood.” Then if a child should step out of line and “get” it, he would be likely to say, “She’s right; she *is* in a bad mood!” But if she had said nothing or even had tried to hide her feelings, and an unsuspecting child got the “load of anger,”

that child would more likely say, “She doesn’t like me. I must be bad.” The difference between these two responses on the child’s development is significant.

I know someone who when he is angry with his wife tries to let her know: He’ll say ‘I’m angry with you and I don’t want to be. When can we talk about it?’ An “I message” reveals to the other where we are—what is going on within us. It is a way of being an open person.

Rather than using the accusatory and provocative ‘You made me angry.

Words are important. The right use of words make a difference to communication. That’s what I believe James is trying to get at. He trying to encourage us to steer clear of destructive harmful ways of speaking to each other and use communication that fulfils its God given purpose – to facilitate us knowing one another and building up a strong caring community.

But for that we also need a good heart so that the words we speak come from good intentions.

Let me end by telling you a story where the words were right but the heart needed to change – so that the words in ord

<http://www.makeadifferencemovie.com/>

It’s about a teacher called Miss Thompson. At the start of every school year, she would stand before the boys and girls and say "I love you all the same", which wasn't really true. Teachers do have favourites, you know. But she wanted to say nice words to them. Teddy Stallard happened to be a little boy that Miss Thompson did not like. He didn’t seem interested in school. He was unfocussed, unkempt, not attractive or likeable in anyway.

She marked Teddy's wrong answers with "Xes" with a perverse pleasure, put "Fs" on the top of the paper with a flair. She should have known better because she had his records, and they read:

\* Year one - Teddy shows promise with his work and his attitude, but poor home situation.
\* Year two - Teddy could do better. Mother seriously ill. Receives little help from home.
\* Year three - Teddy is a good boy, but too serious, a slow learner. Mother died this year.

Christmas came and all the kids brought their presents and gathered around Miss Thompson's desk to watch her open all the gifts. Among the presents was one from Teddy. She was surprised.

Teddy's gift was wrapped with brown paper and scotch tape and on the paper was written, "For Miss Thompson from Teddy Stallard." When she opened it, out fell this gaudy rhinestone bracelet with half the stones missing and a bottle of cheap perfume.

The other boys and girls began to giggle and smirk. Miss Thompson at least had enough sense to silence them by immediately putting on the bracelet and putting on the perfume. Holding her wrist up for them to smell, she said, "Doesn't it smell lovely?" The children, taking their cue, agreed with "OOOHS" and "AHS". Thankyou Teddy, she said

At the end of the day all the children left except Teddy. He waited behind. He slowly came over to Miss Thompson's desk and said, "Miss Thompson, Miss Thompson. Thankyou for your kind words about my present. You smell just like my mother, and her Bracelet looks so nice on you".

When Teddy left, Miss Thompson got down on her knees and asked God to forgive her. The next day when the children came to school they were welcomed by a new teacher. Her name was still Miss Thompson. But Miss Thompson was no longer was just a teacher, but had became an agent for God.
She now was committed to loving her children in words and deeds and doing things for them that would last long after she was gone. She helped the students, especially the slow ones, and especially Teddy.

By the end of the year, Teddy showed dramatic improvement..., caught up with most of the students and even passed a few.

Miss Thompson didn't hear from Teddy for a long time. Then one day she received a note:

"Dear Miss Thompson, as of today, I am Theodore Stallard, PHD. How about that! I wanted you to be the first to know that I'm getting married next month. I want you to come and sit where my mother would have sat if she were still alive. You are the only family I have now -- Dad died last year. Love, Teddy".

Miss Thompson went to that wedding. She sat where Teddy's mother would have sat -- she wore his mother’s rhinestone bracelet.

Her words and deeds had done something for Teddy that he would never forget -- and neither would she.

May God help us to use words that bless rather than curse.

**James 3:1-12**

|  |
| --- |
| http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-87ncpas8rcs/UDbCxxwXygI/AAAAAAAABII/XgdR3g6iyvA/s320/Tongues+-+Vandy.jpg |
| Haring, Keith, 1958-1990. Ten Commandments, unnumbered, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=55144> [retrieved August 23, 2012]. |

**** Display this art depicting our dangerous tongues. Name each of the snakey tongues with ***ways we use our tongues to do harm*** – name caller, angry mean yeller, teller of lies about me (to make me look good), teller lies about others (to make them look bad), teller of secrets I promised to keep, stick out (no words just stick out the tongue), explainer trying to prove I’m really OK when I really am not. In an informal setting children can help you name the tongues and maybe come up with some others.

**** Use these tongues to create ***a responsive prayer of confession***. The prayer below could be printed for all to read. Or, the congregational response could be printed and the congregation instructed to respond when the leader pauses.

****

**A Confession About Using Our Tongues**

*Leader:* God, angry words explode out of us. We do not think about what we say or how it will hurt people. We only think of our own anger and putting it all into words so everyone will know how angry and hurt we feel.

*People: Forgive us for the way we hurt others with our tongues.*

*Leader:* We say things that are not quite true to make ourselves look good to others. We add to the truth, change the story just a little bit, even lie for our own good.

*People: Forgive us for the way we hurt others with our tongues.*

*Leader:* We also say things that are not quite true about others to make them look bad. We change the story just a little bit and even lie so we look better and they look worse.

*People: Forgive us for the way we hurt others with our tongues.*

*Leader:* We know lots of names that are meant to hurt and should never be said. We don’t really intend to say them, but we do. We spit them out hoping they will embarrass and humiliate.

*People: Forgive us for the way we hurt others with our tongues.*

*Leader:* We promise we will never tell a secret. Then we do. It is just too good to keep to ourselves, so we break our promise and we tell.

*People: Forgive us for the way we hurt others with our tongues.*

*Leader:* We use our tongues to convince ourselves that all the wrong we have done and all the hurt we have caused are not really so bad. But we know in our hearts that they are. We have broken your Law. We have not loved you or others with our tongues or our lives.

*People: Forgive us for the way we hurt others with our tongues.*

*Leader:* Lord hear our prayers. Forgive us and guide us. May the words of our mouths then be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

****

**** Children can understand that the biggest problem with our tongues is that ***we can’t unsay anything.*** Once we say it, it is out there. Apologies help, but the hurt is still there.

**** This is also a chance to explore the old adage ***“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me.”*** The fact is that names DO hurt. When people are called nasty, dirty names they know what the name caller thinks of them – and that hurts. Those people can be strong, not believe the name caller, and work to prove they are better than the name caller claims. But, it still hurts.

There is actually a No Name Calling Week in many schools in January. Go to [No Name Calling Week](http://www.nonamecallingweek.org/cgi-bin/iowa/home.html) to learn more about it and download some great resources. There would still be time to sponsor one in your community this January.

**** I’d go straight to the misuse of the tongue ***by-passing the references to bits in horses mouths and rudders on ships***. Before they understand either of these metaphors children need to learn about the horse’s bit or the ship’s rudder. Then those need to be connected to tongues. Neither adds much to what they get from James' direct message.

**** In our day of electronic communication James’ message about tongues applies to ***texts, tweets, twitters,*** etc. as well as oral communication. It is really the words that come off our tongues or through our fingers that are the problem. Once those words are out there, they and the pain they cause can’t be called back. For some reason many older children with their first devices seem willing to say things on line that they would never say with their tongues. They needed repeated challenges from a variety of sources to save them from “learning the hard way” how much damage can be done on-line.