

READINGS: JAMES 3:1–12; MARK 8:27–38

What's the problem?

Think back over the past week starting with the after church coffees last Sunday. The sermon was about our love for others being unconditional and about there being no room for favouritism, no room for discrimination of any kind and on any basis, so did we just chat to our favourite friends, deliberately excluding others? Or did we show unconditional love and talk to any and everyone, even those we have up to now avoided? And how did we get on when it came to living out our faith in our daily lives, say in our speech – did the words we said bring honour to Jesus?

Which brings us to this week's sermon about our need to watch what we say. How easily a wagging tongue can damage a reputation or bring about a conflict situation. So will our chat over coffee build others up or tear them down? Will our chat promote peace or will it pit people against each other? And during the week will our words match up to our claim to be followers of Christ. Controlling what we say, taming our tongues, can be a problem, as the reading from James made clear.

James writes: 'By putting a small bit into the horse's mouth we can turn the horse in different directions; it takes strong winds to move a large sailing ship, but the captain uses only a small rudder to make it go in any direction'; the point he's making is this: although our tongues are small, they can head us off in different directions, producing words of joy, peace and hope, words of pardon, faith and light, words of love, support and encouragement – words that are powerful for good, powerful to resolve conflict, powerful to build up people and trust – just read your daily newspapers; or producing words of hate, words which injure, words of doubt and despair – dark words that are powerful for evil, powerful to tear down, powerful to foment prejudice and tension, powerful to create violence and conflict – just read your daily newspapers.

James continues: 'It takes only a spark to start a forest fire! The tongue is like a spark. It is an evil power that dirties the rest of the body and sets a person's entire life on fire with flames that come from hell itself.' In other words, just as a forest fire begins with a small spark, so casual gossip can spread and cause great damage

'What *was* Tanya wearing?! It was *so* distracting.';

'His parents are coming...you know what **they**'re like!';

'Did you talk to that new girl who came today? She seems nice, in fact *very* nice.';

'Did you see the way that nerd Ted was sucking up to her?'

'Jason thinks he's so cool. He really annoys me. He's a complete idiot.'

See how the forest fire of gossip starts and spreads and damages.

James continues: ‘My dear friends, with our tongues we speak both praises and curses. We praise our Lord and Father, and we curse people who were created to be like God, and this isn’t right. Can clean water and dirty water both flow from the same spring?’

Let’s be honest, we know what we’re like and know that we often say things that aren’t right, yet we claim to be God’s children. So, what can we do?

How can we watch our words?

Self-control

James makes the point that the way to get our words right is self-control. Getting our talk right leads to right actions and right living. James writes: ‘All of us do many wrong things. But if you can control your tongue, you are mature and able to control your whole body.’ Let’s ask the Holy Spirit to produce in our lives ‘self-control’.

Getting our hearts right

‘My dear friends, with our tongues we speak both praises and curses. We praise our Lord and Father, and we curse people who were created to be like God and this isn’t right. Can clean water and dirty water both flow from the same spring? Can a fig tree produce olives or a grapevine produce figs? Does fresh water come from a well full of salt water?’

The point James is making is the same one we saw Jesus make two weeks ago – change from the outside in never works – simply trying harder to ‘be good’ cleans up the outside but leaves the inside messed-up and dirty; we need first of all to be cleaned up and changed inside which leads on to a radical and practical change in the way we live our lives – it’s change from the inside out, a change only Jesus can bring about. When the state of our hearts is right, the way we think, the way we speak and the way we act will be changed

Focusing on Jesus

Let me highlight the following points from our Gospel reading:

- Let’s recognise who Jesus is and believe in him – he is the Messiah, God’s holy and anointed King – this is the starting point, the key in controlling what we say
- Let’s deliberately live our lives for Jesus: in action – living for him and the Gospel; and in words – boldly speaking out for him.
- Let’s follow Jesus’ example – let’s forget about looking after your own interests and let’s give our lives away for Jesus’ sake.

In short, we are God’s people, so let our words demonstrate that fact.