

James chapter 3, 9.30 am

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our of strength and our redeemer
Amen

This morning I'm preaching on the third chapter of James' letter to Jewish Christians. This chapter starts, "Not many of you should become teachers."

Before we delve into the reasons why St. James makes that statement let me say that the majority of people cannot avoid being teachers.

Jill and I brought up three children now living independent of me, in Cheltenham, Leicester and Dubai, and many of you have also brought up children.

We also teach many other people by our example, and the way we live out our lives, people who we will never know, and I remember my parents saying to me when I got something wrong; "That I was not showing a good example to other people.

My children's formative years were spent with Jill and I, we taught them the difference between right and wrong, we taught them how to cope in this world of ours and we introduced them to Jesus and the Christian faith.

Fortunately there are schools, colleges and universities who gave them a broader education and taught them specialist skills.

The reason St James warns us against teaching is because, as James wrote, teachers will be judged with greater strictness.

Indeed teaching the gospel of Christ this morning, which was of course what St. James had in mind when he wrote the letter, certainly has it's responsibilities, which is why I pray for guidance when writing sermons.

I'm also mindful that God is speaking to all of us through this sermon, and that includes me.

The reason teachers will be judged more strictly is because teachers have the future lives and well being of children and other people in their hands, which, as I've said, is a huge, if not awesome responsibility, which we have to take seriously.

And when it comes to teaching, teaching is of course, as I've said, done by example and by what we say and how we say it.

But chapter 3 of St James' letter deals mainly with the tongue and what we say, and I'm reminded of the very well known saying.

"The tongue is mightier than the sword." And of course we've all had our own experiences of how the tongue can be at least as hurtful as the sword, not only to others, but also to ourself.

In verse 2a James writes, "Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect." And we all know that there has only ever been one perfect human being who will never be equalled, and that was Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, so we must be on our guard at all times when speaking.

When speaking of mistakes that we must be on guard against; I'm referring to those thoughtless remarks which hurt other people in some way or other; those that hurt ourselves we have to learn to live with and try not to repeat, and of course there's no excuse for deliberate hurtful words.

The book of Proverbs in the Bible is full of sayings regarding the tongue and how we speak, for example, and I've chosen just four.

The first proverb is from chapter 10 verse 20, "The tongue of the wise is real silver, but the heart of the wicked is of little value."

The others are, Proverbs, 12:18, "Rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise bring healing." and 15:1, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.", and 16:24, "Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones."

It might be argued that St James is making a lot of fuss about such a small thing as the tongue, but James uses two pictures to combat that view.

He uses the image of a horse's very small bit and bridle that controls the might of a horse, and the significantly small ship's rudder which these days controls super tankers of 350,000 tons driven by the equivalent of 100,000 horses.

The tongue writes St James is like a small flame that can set ablaze a whole forest.

And we've seen the dreadful effects of that over the last few months, particularly in Greece where so many people lost their lives, following our extraordinary dry hot weather.

Isaiah wrote in chapter 9, "Wickedness burns like a fire consuming everything in its path." The tongue, like Isaiah's fire, can be also be very destructive.

Then in verse 6a James writes, "The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body."

Those are very strong frightening words, it infers that the devil within us manifests himself in what we say and how we say it.

That the devil's implement of war is our tongues; so don't let anyone tell you that what we say isn't important, or doesn't have wide or lasting consequences for ourselves and for those we speak to, because it certainly does.

Jesus said as recorded in Matthew 15 verses 18 to 20, " But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them."

"For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person."

This also infers that when the devil uses us in his devilish plans he fully commits us and uses us, so we have no excuses when we allow him to use us in the things we say on his behalf.

St. James points out that we have tamed large numbers of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures and other human beings, but we can't tame the tongue.

St James then goes on to write that no one other than Jesus has been able, or will be able, to control or tame the tongue, because not only do we bless the Lord and Father with our tongues, we also curse those who are made in the image of God.

It is too easy to have double standards; speaking for myself, I can easily say one thing and in reality do the opposite, and it is at those times that I realise I need God's forgiveness and mercy.

However from those four extracts from the book of Proverbs, we can see that the tongue can not only cause problems for ourselves and other people, but more hopefully can also bring healing and reconciliation as well, so thank the Lord that not all is doom and gloom.

But we do need to stay alert because clearly what we say to other people can have lasting consequences for both good and evil.

I have a slight issue with verse 11 of our reading where St James compares us with a fig tree that can not bare olives or a grapevine figs, because this suggests that a person who speaks good things will always do so and that a person who speaks bad things will also do so, but that is not my experience.

My experience is that we are all capable of saying good things and things we later regret, and it is important to be able to realise that we've said something which was wrong or hurtful, and try to put it right.

Also, as Christians, we have to show wisdom in the people we speak to and have an association with, because we can so easily start speaking of worldly things rather than things of God.

St. James writes as much in the following chapter where he writes in verse 4, "Do you know that friendship with the world becomes enmity with God."

From verse 13, St. James writes about earthly wisdom and God's wisdom, so dealing with earthly wisdom first.

Earthly wisdom is not from God, and in verse 14, James warns us against earthly wisdom, that is, wisdom that results in bitterness, envy and other characteristics of the devil, and asks us not to boast of such things.

Spreading discourse of any kind is the work of the devil and should be avoided especially between Christians.

And this is particularly relevant today where it is possible to spread discourse, even hatred to a vast number of people so easily through the internet, mobile phones and other gismos of mass media.

Because we can do much more damage to people through mass media than we ever could through speaking to people direct, and now we don't even have to know them or meet them.

In Verse 13, St James writes about **God's** wisdom, "Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of true wisdom." and in verse 17 James tells us that true wisdom which produces the good life comes from above.

Unlike earthly wisdom it is not something we attain for ourselves, but is a gift from God, and true wisdom will not enter a deceitful soul, or dwell in a body enslaved to sin.

True wisdom is the breath and power of God, it is pure and peaceable, considerate, willing to yield, full of mercy and from true wisdom comes the good fruit of the spirit.

It is these people who have true wisdom from God who we need to emulate, speak to and associate with; because it is people who exercise gentleness born of true wisdom, who will guide those of us who are struggling in our desire to imitate Christ in our earthly journey.

And lastly St James writes, “The harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.”

James is writing, that the peaceable fruits of righteousness are sown by those who practice peace, and the person who strives to live peaceably will have peace for his reward.

As we sit let us pray,

Lord God, protect us from the deceit of flattering tongues and lying lips. Give us words of life which speak your truth and bless your name. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour.

Amen