

Blessing and Cursing

Proverbs 1:20-33; James 3:1-12

Bernard Meltzer, an American entertainer, is quoted as saying: "Before you speak ask yourself if what you are going to say is true, is kind, is necessary, is helpful. If the answer is no, maybe what you are about to say should be left unsaid."

Like the Letter of James, Meltzer has made one of those unerringly uncomfortable observations. We are told, in another proverb, that, 'Speech is silver, but silence is golden.' What a world it would be if, amidst the cacophony of noise with which surround ourselves in reality, and online, was suddenly and thoughtfully stilled. What a thought and practice to wrestle with: is what we are going to say true, kind, necessary, helpful?

Or perhaps we should pay heed to what our grandmothers told us, I know mine did, "You have two ears and one mouth, so that you can listen twice as much as you speak." It's actually a quote from the Greek philosopher Epicetus.

What a quiet world it would be if Westminster and Holyrood followed such a philosophy. What a quiet world it would be if business people and lawyers, broadcasters and journalists, media influencers and teachers reduced the number of words they spoke.

And Ministers. My goodness, my sermon would have finished five minutes ago! Behave!

All those words, that all of us use, issuing from us day after day, hour after hour, minute after minute. Weaving around us like a coil of letters. It reminds me of the ghost of Jacob Marley in *A Christmas Carol*, swathed in chains that represent his sins in life and his guilt in failing to help his fellow human being. If we were to be fettered by the endless words we have spoken, the cruel and unkind and thoughtless and spiteful, my God, who amongst us would be able to walk?

The writer of the Letter of James says there are three marks of true religion. One is to care for widows and orphans in their distress. The second is not to become ensnared in the ways of the world. And the third is right speech. Those who do not substantiate their speech with action are not only practitioners of a worthless religion, they also disembodify the Word of God. The act of speech is part of our Christian practice. It is part of bringing together our thinking, our speaking,

and our action. All of these have to be in harmony; all of these demonstrate what is on the inside of our lives, what we believe.

It therefore matters what we say, and how we say it, and why we say it.

It is not that we should say nothing at all. It is that we should be careful with what we do say. For words, like actions, have consequences. Setting aside the party politics of last week's pronouncements on the provision of social care and the increasing of National Insurance, or on the commitment to prioritise an Independence referendum and not an unswerving focus on economic recovery after the pandemic, it was the words, first, that most focussed on. Could the words be trusted? Is the breaking of explicit or implicit manifesto promises a thing that can be swept aside because a global pandemic was in nobody's manifesto? What should they, those people saying those words, and we, those people hearing those words and then adding our own, be saying, and then doing? So that all of us fundamentally practise what we preach.

Whilst it is important to assess, even judge, the words, and actions of others, let us also be honest in our assessment and judgement of what we say, and what we do. Can what we say be taken as truth, as honest, as up-building? "Before you speak ask yourself if what you are going to say is true, is kind, is necessary, is helpful. If the answer is no, maybe what you are about to say should be left unsaid."

It is the great irony of faith that the mouth can both bless and curse. The mouths that say, "I love you", that encourage children, that speak comfort to some broken-hearted soul, that speak out with courage when someone needs to say something, can also be the mouths that character-assassinate a colleague, that pass on unfounded gossip, that tear strips off someone's soul without justification, and that speak utter mince about things they know very little about, but with great confidence.

When the writer of the letter of James writes, "Let not many of you become teachers...for you know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness", I for one know that I am speaking to myself, but you might consider eavesdropping and applying that same lesson to yourself, and what you say, and how you say it, and why you say it. Yes, those with platforms or

pulpits have responsibility for what they say and how it might influence others, positively and negatively, but we who listen need not follow their example if it is negative.

Which is what makes the Letter of James so prickly to read, because we know, whether we like it or not, that it unveils a truth. Language remains powerful. The smallest words of encouragement can make the greatest things possible. The smallest words of denigration can cause untold damage to the life of the hearer who is the victim of the unkindness. Blessing and curse, from the one mouth; we know it is so, and we know it should not be so.

This week has seen the twentieth anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy in New York. A few days ago, I watched a documentary made up of the words of the people who were there at the time. The emergency crews who raced towards the tragedy when everyone else was fleeing from it. The firefighters talking to their colleagues still fighting the fire in the Twin Towers before they collapsed. The terrified woman in a smoke-filled room struggling for air and calling for help for others. The families watching the smoke rising from the towers from the disjointed relative safety of their homes a few blocks away. The woman repeating again and again to the people who pulled her off the street as she ran in front of the smoke clouds, saying, 'You saved my life, thank God for you, you saved my life.' The stranger saying to another dust-caked stranger, "Here, drink this water."

I was reminded of the romantic comedy film with several subtle and hard-hitting messages, often shown around Christmas, Love Actually. At the opening and close of the film we hear the narrator saying:

Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrival gate at Heathrow. Love is everywhere, it's not always dignified, it's not always newsworthy, but it's there. When those two planes hit the Twin Towers in New York, when people reached for their mobile phones, the messages were not of hate, or revenge. They were all about love, actually."

Messages not of hate, or revenge, but love, actually. Messages, words, of blessing and not cursing. "If we dedicate our tongues to the language of God, our actions will follow. Our tongues, which bless and curse, can also ask for forgiveness."¹

We know we won't get it right always; we know the wrong things will be said at times; we know it's sometimes hard to stop ourselves. But today, hear the Bible speak to you. Use your speech for blessing, not cursing. Open and close each day with blessing, and maybe, just maybe, all that passes in between will be the language and action of blessing too. Think it. Speak it. Live it.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Kathy L Dawson, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 4 p66