

## Speaking Life

Readings: Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-45

As John Wesley rode across Hounslow Heath late one night, singing a favourite hymn, he was startled by a fierce voice shouting, "Halt," while a firm hand seized the horse's bridle. Then the man demanded, "Your money or your life."

Wesley quickly emptied his pockets of the few coins he had and invited the robber to examine his saddlebags which were filled with books. Disappointed, the robber was turning away when Mr. Wesley cried, "Stop! I have something more to give you."

The robber turned back towards him. Then Mr. Wesley, bending down toward him, said in solemn tones, "My friend, you may live to regret this sort of a life in which you are engaged. If you ever do, I beseech you to remember this, "The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin."

The robber hurried silently away, and John Wesley carried on, praying that God would use his words for good.

Years later, after one Sunday evening service, lots of people hung around the doors to see Mr Wesley; by now an old man.

A stranger stepped forward! It was the robber of Hounslow Heath, now a successful tradesman in the city. Even more exciting he was now a child of God!

God had honoured Mr Wesley's words in bringing the man to Christ.

Raising Mr. Wesley's hand to his lips, he affectionately kissed it and said in tones of deep emotion, "To you, dear sir, I owe it all."

"Nay, nay, my friend," replied Mr. Wesley softly, "not to me, but to the precious blood of Christ which cleanseth us from all sin."<sup>1</sup>

Now I haven't been able to tell if this story is true or not. Certainly robbers were a problem on the Heath and both John and Charles Wesley often used the Heath on their journeys.

It could have been true but even if it wasn't it makes a great point. We never know when the Lord will take our words and use them to accomplish his purposes.

I wonder if you can recall a moment when someone spoke life to you? They may have praised you for something you did or a talent you have? Maybe they affirmed your worth as a person? Perhaps they challenged you to step out and do something different. Or to turn around completely – as Mr Wesley may have challenged the robber?

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<sup>1</sup> The story is reported by John Wesley in

What did the person say to you? Do you think they might have been words from God? Perhaps you can recall a time you are certain God spoke, maybe through his Word? Maybe through creation? Maybe through your own thoughts or perhaps directly via his Holy Spirit? Most often we don't hear an audible voice do we?

I often envy those people who were around in the time of Christ. Imagine how it might have been to walk with Jesus to see his very sick friend Lazarus. It was a risky journey. The Judeans had recently tried to stone Jesus. Thomas thought they would all die if they went, but he went anyway.

Imagine hearing Jesus' words to the grieving Martha:

I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die.

You wait with baited breath, among the crowd, to hear her response as Jesus asks her if she believes him.

Imagine if you were among the crowd and witnessed the intensity of Jesus' emotion when he asks Mary where his dead friend is. Some of the crowd are impressed by his love for his friend while others question why he didn't heal his friend. After all he was a proven healer.

Imagine being near the tomb as Jesus approaches; demanding the stone door be rolled away. Is he crazy? Everyone's freaked out expecting .... goodness knows what!

But some do what he says. You know how it goes.

Jesus talks to his Dad. He:

... looked up to heaven and said, "Father, thank you for hearing me. You always hear me, but I said it out loud for the sake of all these people standing here, so that they will believe you sent me."

Then Jesus shouted, "Lazarus, come out!"

There's complete silence as everyone waits. Then a stirring and a muttering – as the man who was dead does indeed come out. Lazarus is alive!

Does the crowd back away in horror or surge forward to get a better view as someone moves to unwrap the grave clothes?

Then and now, Jesus' words have tremendous power.

Scripture is full of God speaking. Often in the first or Old Testament he spoke through prophets. He called men and women to speak on his behalf – sometimes when others needed a good kick up the bum, but also often to bring words of encouragement and restoration. The prophetic words of Ezekiel illustrate this.

Ezekiel is part of my focus for Lent. He came from a priestly family and delivered his messages from God while he and the people were in exile in Babylon. Apparently his ministry lasted about 23 years and began after he'd been in exile for five years. Early on in his ministry he tragically lost his wife.

The tribes of Israel had been so widely scattered among the surrounding nations that they seemed all but lost as a people. The tribes of Judah, Benjamin, and Levi were carried away captive to Babylon.

If you had to be in exile, it wasn't too bad under the Babylonians. The Jews were allowed to keep their national identity and to carry out business. Later not all Jews would return to Israel when they were permitted to do so.

Still the homeland beckoned. And challenges came in their relationship with God. Where was God? Did God remain in Palestine? Was God impotent against the Babylonian gods? <sup>2</sup>

Ezekiel's first 32 chapters are God's words of judgement on Israel and the surrounding nations. They are wonderfully descriptive passages. You can see the judgement images so clearly. From chapter 33 on though, God's words, through Ezekiel, paint much more encouraging pictures of Israel's restoration.

The dry bones, in chapter 37, is likely the best known of them all. It responds to the exile's lament for home. God promises 'a divine miracle of renewal and restoration for them and their land.'<sup>3</sup>

Ezekiel was carried off in the Spirit and taken to an obscure valley, probably below the Jordan Valley, near the Dead Sea, to a place about 400 metres feet below sea level - very low and very hot. It's where Sodom and Gomorrah used to be.<sup>4</sup>

Here God tells Ezekiel:

"Speak a prophetic message to the winds, son of man. Speak a prophetic message and say, 'This is what the Sovereign Lord says:

Come, O breath, from the four winds! Breathe into these dead bodies so they may live again.'" ...the Sovereign Lord says: Come, O breath, from the four winds! Breathe into these dead bodies so they may live again.'" v9

At God's word, through Ezekiel, all the bones are covered in flesh. The Spirit breathes life into them and they live again.

Ezekiel, as always, obeys God and tells the people what God has said:

"O my people, I will open your graves of exile and cause you to rise again. Then I will bring you back to the land of Israel.

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<sup>2</sup> Old Testament Survey, Lasor, Hubbard and Bush, 358

<sup>3</sup> Ibid 367

<sup>4</sup> [www.amazingfacts.org/news-and-features/inside-report/magazine/id/10732/t/reviving-dry-bones](http://www.amazingfacts.org/news-and-features/inside-report/magazine/id/10732/t/reviving-dry-bones)

When this happens, O my people, you will know that I am the Lord.”

All the way through the book of Ezekiel, the prophet speaks God’s words so that the people will know the Lord is God.

What about us today? When and how do we speak? What is our motivation for the things we say?

Scripture has a lot to say about this:

- Instead we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. Eph 4:15
- Prophecy and speaking in unknown languages and special knowledge will become useless. But love will last forever! 1 Cor 13:8
- For if we could control our tongues, we would be perfect and could also control ourselves in every other way. James 3:2
- Then keep your tongue from speaking evil and your lips from telling lies! Psalm 34:18
- The tongue can bring death or life; those who love to talk will reap the consequences. Proverbs 18:21 Or the Message version of the same verse:
- Words kill, words give life; they’re either poison or fruit—you choose.

Powerful words!

I’m sure you’ve also heard: Speak only what is kind, true and necessary.

The ‘kind’ and ‘true’ bits are obvious but how many of us speak too much?

Albert Einstein was once asked to speak as guest of honour at a dinner party. Never one for convention, he stood up and said “Ladies and gentlemen, I am very sorry but I have nothing to say.”<sup>5</sup>

Tony Campolo’s wife offered some feedback after one of his sermons. She told him the theme was great but he spoke far too long, after he had finished.

Some of us are not comfortable with silence or with mystery. We rush in to fill the gaps and make sure we have given every detail we could possibly think of. Doing this, and I do sometimes, can actually take away from the work of the Holy Spirit.

So to those three recommendations: kind, true and necessary, I try to ask if my words point to Jesus. And they don’t always!

That doesn’t mean I will only talk about the person of Jesus. But it does mean that I try and reflect him, his character, his words, his way of being, and the things he cares about, in my words.

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<sup>5</sup> Apparently he telegraphed the organiser back in six months’ time because he now did have something to say. Another dinner was held where Einstein made a speech.

As an aside we also need to be careful how we speak to ourselves. Self-talk too can be poison or fruit, soul-destroying or life-giving. If we are constantly telling ourselves we're stupid and we can't do this, those interior words become self-fulfilling prophecies.

And if we constantly say "If only..." like Mary and Martha did to Jesus, we become regretful instead of living in the present and looking forward to a positive future. So let's speak as kindly and honestly to ourselves as we do to others.

The words we say internally and aloud really do matter. They have power to shape reality; our reality and reality for those around us.

Whenever Jesus spoke, his words were life-giving. They may have been challenging words that people didn't want to hear. But they were words that brought about change and passion and hope. They gave life!

In our Lenten studies, Chris Donaldson has encouraged us to listen to God when we pray for others. He's urged us to pause and ask God what to pray.

I want to suggest his advice applies in conversation too. Let's ask the Lord what to say. Let's ask God to make us people who speak words of the Spirit; words that will have the same results as the words of Jesus, using the authority he has given to us. Let's speak life-giving words and then honour God for the results.

**Reflection questions:**

How often do you find yourself thinking "If only....?"

What difference does it make to you knowing that Jesus grieved for his friend?

How do you experience the 'Spirit in you'? Ezekiel 37:14

What words can you use to bring life to others?