

The power of speech

Bible readings: Proverbs 17:27-18:9, James 3:1-12 and Matthew 12:33-37.

I think you will all agree that we had three very challenging, arresting Bible readings, so challenging that one hesitates to preach; particularly in the light of James' words on teachers being "judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1). Am I therefore being somewhat foolhardy in proceeding to preach this morning?

I have quoted C.S. Lewis' "Reflections on the Psalms" before, where he begins by saying "I am comparing notes, not presuming to instruct". So in like manner I bring my notes and let you judge whether they are true to God's word. Indeed I hope that that is always the case, you all have Bibles, so it is important, that like the Bereans, you examine the Scriptures to see if what you hear from the pulpit is indeed according to the Scriptures. Nevertheless, I am encouraged by James, as in the next verse following his warning to teachers, he says "we all stumble in many ways" (James 3:2).

So this morning on our theme of the power of speech, I want to consider firstly that God is a God who speaks, secondly that we are created in God's image and we also are able to speak, and thirdly that our words can bring life or death, our words are powerful and I want to give you some examples of powerful words.

Firstly then, we believe that our God speaks. In Genesis 1, God spoke the world into being. God said and there was, His words have creating power. "God said 'Let there be light' and there was light" - the power of the creative word of God. But the Scriptures are also full of God speaking to His people. In Genesis 3:9 "God called to the man and said 'Where are you?'" God continues to speak throughout the Biblical Old Testament record, to Abram, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David and the prophets and on into the New Testament. The book of Hebrews begins with these words "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son." (Heb. 1:1). The apostle John in his first letter says "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1 John 1:1). He goes onto say "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all." (1 John 1:5). God is a God who speaks and He has spoken to us pre-eminently in His Son.

God continues to speak through His word, which is why Bible reading is so important. The words are not dead words from long ago but the "word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12). So we need to continue to read and inwardly digest the word of God.

God also speaks to us directly by His Holy Spirit, bringing specific Bible passages alive to us and also in giving us a word of guidance, encouragement or prophesy. We need to learn to listen to the promptings of God's Holy Spirit and to discern His voice from all the cacophony in our own heads. Kay has a recent testimony of this.

So God is a God who speaks and we need to learn to listen to His voice and to be obedient to the heavenly vision.

Secondly, we were created in God's image and also have the capacity for speech. We are all "made in the likeness of God" as James says (James 3:9). Now at first sight you might say, yes, but we don't speak things into being out of nothing like God. True, but I would like to suggest that our words can also create, which takes me onto my third point.

Our words can create untold harm and suffering, with words that are untrue, words of condemnation, and words of gossip. Or we can create life by bringing a word of encouragement and comfort to a situation of doubt and discouragement. Words are powerful; they can bring life or death. Proverbs 18:21 says "Death and life are in the power of the tongue". On a purely human level, compare the effects of the speeches of Adolf Hitler with Winston Churchill.

Words have a source and words have an effect. Jesus, James and the writer of Proverbs are all keen to point out both of these truths. If our words come from the right source they will bring life, but if they come from the wrong source, they will bring all kinds of damage and death. Once our words leave our mouths we cannot take them back, however much we might want to. The spark has already been released to set the forest on fire, as James describes it. An ill-advised word, a false rumor can spread like wildfire these days, particularly with the advent of the worldwide web. It's one of the things that our preachers will have to be careful of, as our sermons are recorded and put on the internet.

We are probably all aware, perhaps we carry the scars with us, of the way in which the tongue can bring carnage and destruction. As children we used to say "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me!" Great bravado but it's not true. And all too many of us have said things we wished we hadn't. But I want to give examples of words that can bring life.

One of the most powerful things we can do is to speak a blessing in the name of Jesus. In the Old Testament the priests were to bless the people in the words of the Aaronic blessing "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." (Num. 6:24-26). This is far more than "bless you" when someone sneezes. This is invoking the very character of God himself into their lives, that they may be enriched with His favour. How much more when we bless people in the name of Jesus, the Saviour of all?

The book "The Grace Outpouring", describes how Roy and Daphne Godwin were introduced to the power of blessing people in the name of Jesus. They were called to be wardens of a small Christian retreat centre, Ffald-y-Brenin, in rural Wales. Once they had realised the power of blessing those that came to the centre, Roy says "We turned our sights outwards and began a pattern of speaking blessings into the local community. Every Friday morning in our chapel meeting we would speak blessings over the neighbourhood. We bless every household, we bless every marriage, we bless the relationship between family members of

different generations and we bless their health and we bless their wealth. We bless the works of their hands. We bless every wholesome enterprise they're involved with, that they may prosper. ... We bless supportive networks of friendship that run through the community, because they are a sign of the kingdom. We bless the pupils of our rural school and ask God to aid their learning. We bless the teachers and pray that school may be a safe and wholesome place, where simple childlike trust and belief in God and in Jesus can be comfortably maintained. We pray for both places of worship in the valley, that the word of God and the Spirit of God may flow out from both. Then we speak to the hearts of the people who are in the community. We bless them to be safe and to be softened, so they may become more and more responsive to the voice of God. We bless them with the overspill of the kingdom of heaven being made manifest here at Ffald-y-Brenin." And they have seen dramatic changes in their community as a consequence. Blessing in the name of Jesus has power to transform.

The three words "Please forgive me" or "I forgive them" can also have great power.

The Waldensian Church was founded in the 1170s as a spiritual renewal movement and later became part of the Protestant Reformation. Several popes attempted to exterminate the movement, whose followers were treated appallingly by Catholic forces. Their treatment at the hands of the Duke of Savoy in 1655, when his forces conducted a campaign of torture, rape and murder against them, prompted John Milton's famous poem *On the Late Massacre in Piedmont*. You can read Foxe's Book of Martyrs to get the details.

Recently Pope Francis visited the Waldensian's Turin community and asked pardon on behalf of all Catholics, who he said "cannot but grieve" in view of the violence committed in the name of the faith. The Pope went on to say "On the part of the Catholic Church, I ask your forgiveness for the non-Christian, even non-human, attitudes and behaviours that, in history, we have had against you. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, forgive us!" (Christian Today 22 June 2015)

<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/pope.francis.asks.evangelical.denominations.forgiveness.for.centuries.of.persecution/56853.htm>

Words of forgiveness can be very powerful, not only to communities but also to individuals.

I was interested to read recently of the link between forgiveness and physical health. Doctors have recently found out that forgiveness may also help relieve the body from physical difficulties and treat diseases. Dr. Michael Barry, also a pastor, conducted research on cancer patients and found out that about 61% of them had trouble forgiving. He explained that carrying bad feeling toward another person can negatively affect the human body.

Harbouring this anger and hatred, creates a state of chronic anxiety, which in turn, produces excess adrenaline and cortisol, which deplete the production of natural killer cells.

To help alleviate the bad effects of certain diseases, doctors such as Barry are now trying "forgiveness therapy", which involves praying and reaching out to enemies.

Jayne Valseca, who has Stage 4 breast cancer, tried forgiveness therapy and found relief not just physically but also spiritually. She said "It was as if this huge ton of bricks, this weight of the world, was instantly lifted from my shoulders,"

Barry, for his part, said he always shares with his patients the first step in forgiveness: realising how much we have been forgiven by God. "When a person forgives from the heart we find that they are able to find a sense of peacefulness. Quite often our patients refer to that as a feeling of lightness," the doctor said. (Christian Today 24 June 2015)
<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/forgiveness.can.bring.not.just.spiritual.but.also.physical.healing.doctors.say/56982.htm>

Words of forgiveness can be very powerful. Archbishop Desmond Tutu said that "To forgive is not just to be altruistic, it is the best form of self-interest." I was also recently reading an article on the experiences of a number of parents whose sons had been murdered. All of the parents said that they recognised that they needed to forgive their sons' killers **for their own benefit**. Their overwhelming message was that forgiveness "set you free." "When we hold on to hate and anger, it destroys us. It's like a poison," they said.

I wonder if you have ever said "I'll never forgive that person for that" or even "I'll never forgive myself for that". Those words are far more powerful than you realise. They can act like chains within our lives. It is the common practice within our church to say the Lord's Prayer, which includes those words "Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us". Perhaps we need to pause and review our hearts to see if there is any unforgiveness within our hearts. Sometimes the effects of unforgiveness are a blight on our lives and we don't realise it. Robin Kingston from Greymouth recently ran a course here on inner healing and a number of from this church were trained by Robin. Sometimes we need help from other Christians to pray through these issues and bring the healing and release of forgiveness.

So we have looked briefly at the power of speech. We have seen that God is a God who speaks, secondly that we are created in God's image and we also are able to speak, and thirdly that our words can create life or death, in our own lives and in the lives of others.

May we all become more like Jesus, our Lord and Saviour, who always spoke with grace and truth.

So may we, according to the riches of His glory be strengthened with power through His Spirit in our inner being, so that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith—that we, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that we may be filled with all the fullness of God. Amen.