

Isaiah 50:4-9a, Ps 116:1-8, James 3:1-12, Mark 8:27-end

Our God is good and gracious and he answers prayer.

There is a nice example in the life of James the brother of Jesus. James lived and grew up in the same family as Jesus but did not believe in him [John 7:5]. How do you live and grow up in the same house with the Son of God and not recognize that he is special? It says something about how normal Jesus was as a child and young man. But after his resurrection The Lord Jesus visited James and James came to faith in Jesus [1 Cor 15:7].

Lets keep on praying *for our family and friends*.

James probably wrote his letter within 10-15 years of the resurrection of Jesus and the coming of the Holy Spirit. James stayed in Jerusalem and became a faithful leader in the Jerusalem Church.

His letter was written to be taken out to be read by Jewish Christians all over the Roman Empire.

James knew from his own experience that though Christians are born to new birth by God's word we still have to battle with our old nature which remains active. The Christian life is a battle but we grow as believers by hearing God's word, by receiving it as truth and living it out in our daily lives [1:13-25].

As we receive God's word and put it into practice we are doing what Jesus calls his disciples to do; [Mark 8:34]

"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me

One of our chief battlegrounds as Christians is to learn to use words well; to control our tongues.

James wrote; [1:26, 3:2].

"If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue he deceives himself and his religion is worthless...

**If anyone is never at fault in what he says,
he is a perfect man,
able to keep his whole body in check."**

This is especially important for those who want to be teachers in the church because teachers and preachers carry a responsibility to pass on the word of God and to build up the church. We are responsible to stick to the true message of the gospel and not wander off into speculations or our own ideas.

But what we heard in our reading today is not just for teachers. It is for all of us [3:1-12].

Our tongues can be used for good or evil.

To encourage and strengthen one another.

To build one another up or to tear down & destroy.

Satan, as a snake came into the garden of Eden and misused the gift of speech to sow doubt in the hearts of Adam and Eve and lead them astray.

Our tongues are very small but can boast great things and have great power.

Just as the little metal bit put in the mouth of a horse can guide the whole horse in the direction the rider wants to go. Our tongue is small but influential.

Just as large ships are steered where the pilot directs them by a small rudder. We can use our words to get us safe to harbour or to crash on the rocks.

A small fire can give us welcome light and heat or it can set a whole forest ablaze with destructive power. We need to be careful in our use of words.

The words we use affect our relationship with God. One of my favourite Psalms [100] encourages us to

**"Shout for joy to the Lord of all the earth.
Worship the Lord with Gladness; come before
him with joyful songs.... Enter his gates with
thanksgiving and his courts with praise."**

We are allowed to Lament all the woes of the world and our own troubles. The psalms have lots of

laments too when people cry out to God. We need to be honest to God about our sadness and remember with joy all the good that we receive from His hands.

I have been asked at times, "Why do we have to praise God?" The implication in the question is; "Does God needs praise like some pop star who crumbles when adulation tails off and any criticism comes." No, God doesn't need our praise. It is us who need to praise Him for our own spiritual health. When we praise the Lord our God we are putting ourselves in touch with the reality of who God is and who we are as His creatures in His world.

The words we use affect our relationship with other people. St Paul wrote to the church in Colossi;

**"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you
teach and admonish one another with all wisdom
and as you sing Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs
with gratitude in your hearts to God" [3:16].**

Our ambition ought to be to use words to encourage one another, to build one another up with kind affirming words, telling the truth, correcting where necessary, articulating a vision or building hope. We won't use flattery to manipulate but we can express our appreciation for others.

We can speak of ourselves with a sober estimate of who we are rather than with any boastfulness or pride [James 3:13-14].

Do our words bring healing and comfort, welcome and restoration or division and dissention?

In daily experience we don't always manage to say the right thing at the right time. We let that snippet of gossip or nastiness slip out though we know we ought not betray a confidence. We neglect to give thanks and praise where it is due.

But James points out how unnatural it is that good & bad, blessing & cursing, comes from the same mouth.

Normally a natural spring of water will either we sweet water or salty but not both at the same time.

A fig tree will bear figs and not olives

A grapevine will produce grapes and not figs.

James asks, how can we use our mouths to Bless God our Father, and sing His praises and soon after be cursing people made in the image of God?

It should not be like that!

There is a good example in our Gospel reading of how even the most eminent Apostle tripped himself up when he opened his mouth.

Jesus asked the 12 Apostles the question, **"Who do you say that I am?"** Peter was the spokesman for the group, **"You are the Christ."** You are God's anointed King and Saviour.

Peter had got it right. Now the Apostles had to learn what kind of Messiah Jesus was going to be. Jesus started to teach them;

"The son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law and that he must be killed and after three days rise again." [Mark 8:31-38].

The Jews anticipated that Messiah would be King but they hadn't understood that Messiah would also be the Suffering Servant.

Poor Peter. Jesus was turning their expectations upside down with this new revelation. Peter took Jesus aside and tried to persuade Him not to follow the path of the Cross but to take another path to Kingly glory. He would be saying,

**"What does Messiah have to do with defeat?
We need you to be our King."**

What a shock it must have been to hear Jesus say;

"Out of my sight, Satan!"

Jesus had been tempted by Satan in the wilderness to abandon God's path of service and sacrifice.

Now his leading disciple was being used to bring pressure to bear on Him to abandon His mission to save His people from their sins. [Mark 10:45].

The beautiful thing about Peter, this giant of the Early Church, was that, though he often made mistakes, he had the humility to learn and the determination to follow Jesus even if it meant going to the cross himself. I remind myself that Mark's Gospel is a record of Peter's preaching. He told these stories of his blunders against himself. This reminds me that there is room for us, who are conscious of our shortcomings in the kingdom of God.

The crowds who had been following Jesus wanted to be associated with a famous and successful leader. Jesus called the crowd to Him and gave them a new and stark challenge [Mark 8:34b].

"If anyone will come after me he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

Many of the crowd, hearing this, turned back and went home. This was not what they had come looking for. But turning back was not the way into God's Kingdom. Jesus continued [Mark 8:35].

"Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it."

I can't develop all that it means to take up our cross today. But how does taking up our cross relate to what James teaches us about the words we use.

James is honest about how difficult it is to get perfect control of our tongues.

We make mistakes, a bad joke, words spoken in anger. The wrong words in the wrong place.

Once you have launched words into the air it is like an email, you can't put it back in the box.

Fortunately for Christians there is forgiveness, the possibility of repentance and reconciliation.

Denying ourselves, taking up our cross means not hanging on to our pride or fear. Losing our life is really a picture of entrusting our lives to Jesus. He will keep for us what we are not able to keep for ourselves.

Taking up our cross means allowing the pride that easily takes offence to die. Allowing the fear that hides behind boasting, or gossip, putting people down or lying to be replaced by love and faith. Holy Spirit of God is at work in us to make us more like Jesus. It is God's work.

As I finish; there is something we can do to help the Holy Spirit to do his work in us. When the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin lets agree with Him. Lets confess our short coming in detail to God.

The general confession in our church services is good. But when we talk over the detail of our day with the Lord in our prayers the Holy Spirit has a better chance to work with us and help us to change and become more like Jesus.

PRAYER

We thank you father for your grace and patience with us. We need Your Holy Spirit's help to learn to control our tongues because our blunders, our faulty speech destroys and divides our relationships. Help us Lord to be instruments of your peace in the world and in the church.