

The Living Word

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The Bible readings for Sunday, Sept 16, 2018, with commentary notes

rudder wherever the pilot wants to go.

Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.

"Bits...rudder... spark" – three images of small things that cause big effects, common in literature of the time. The tongue's power to influence is huge considering its small size anatomically.

6 The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

"A world of evil" – like a little microcosm of the fallen world within us. "Set on fire by hell" – the cause of so many sins when taken over by the devil's destructive influence. The tongue reveals the worldliness lurking in our hearts, Matt. 15:18.

7-8 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

IN PRACTICE The school playground chant "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me" is good to help children refute name-calling but a poor representation of truth. Words that curse can have an enduringly hurtful effect. Who has carried the words of a parent or authority figure for whom we were never good enough? Prayer ministry later in life often reveals such barriers, words spoken over us that have had the effect of a curse, the word meaning the opposite of a blessing. On the other hand the encouragement of the person who believed in us at a not-very-successful time is not forgotten.

Words spoken have power, and there can be spiritual power behind the emotional or suggestive power as well. What comes from a resentful heart can do harm to us as much as the target. What comes from a pure heart submitted to Jesus can bring much benefit – perhaps, with faith, even a mountain-moving miracle.

QUESTION *What words have stayed with me as an enduring encouragement? And what words do I need to lift off my heart, to be free of their restriction?*

PRAYER From Psalm 139:23-24: "Search me, God, and know my heart... see if there is any offensive way in me..." And help me to speak with the tone and truth and compassion of Jesus, whatever is going on around me, and to be quick to forgive those who, like Peter in the Gospel reading, have spoken from the selfish nature and momentarily become a voice for the enemy of our souls. Amen.

"All kinds of animals" – as in Genesis 1:26. "No human being" – emphatic: the tongue often has a life of its own and can be like a deadly snake, Psalm 58:3-6, Psalm 14:3. The tongue cannot be tamed except by God's power working in us.

9-12 With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

"We praise...and... we curse" – words have power, to bless (with life and encouragement) or to curse (bringing harm, life-sapping). "God's likeness" – all hearers have worth as created in God's image.

"Can both... flow from the same..." – for a Christian, reborn with a transformed heart, to utter demeaning words is like a tree producing the wrong fruit or a spring that runs brackish. Only the heart continually renewed by the Holy Spirit can produce pure and life-giving speech.

Revised Common Lectionary readings for **Sunday, Sept 16** in Bible order

Prepare for Sunday by reading the Bible passages beforehand – read again to reflect on Sunday's teaching

Theme: **Listening to the Lord and speaking for Him**

Proverbs 1:20-33 » Listening and speaking – our opinions or wisdom's voice?

C of E alternative reading Isaiah 50:4-9a

Mark 8:27-38 » Listening to the Lord and speaking as His disciples

James 3:1-12 » Listening to God first – does He have our tongue?

Also set for this Sunday: Psalm 19

Proverbs 1:20-33 » Listening and speaking – opinions or wisdom's voice?

The voice of wisdom gives sound guidance for living for all who will hear

20-21 Out in the open wisdom calls aloud, she raises her voice in the public square; on top of the wall she cries out, at the city gate she makes her speech:

"Wisdom calls aloud" – personified as a woman (the Hebrew word is feminine) who cries out, for all to hear in the marketplace and place of debate.

22 "How long will you who are simple love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge?"

"Simple... mockers... fools" – Proverbs addresses three sets of people who need God's wisdom. Those who are simple or inexperienced, pethim, are the most open, Prov. 1:4. Fools, kesilim, have heard God's wisdom but are resisting it. Mockers, latsonim, oppose by ridicule and are condemned in Proverbs as too arrogant and contentious to learn.

For further study on kesiy, kesilim see Prov. 17:10, 12, 16, 21, 24-25 and (related word) Prov. 17:7.

23 Repent at my rebuke! Then I will pour out my thoughts to you, I will make known to you my teachings.

"Repent... then..." – the consequence of heeding the warning is a blessing, where wisdom is like a

fountain of constant refreshment and insight.

24-25 But since you refuse to listen when I call and no one pays attention when I stretch out My hand, since you disregard all my advice and do not accept my rebuke,

"Stretch out My hand" – in appeal, like Isa. 65:2, God holding out His hands to "an obstinate people."

26-27 I in turn will laugh when disaster strikes you; I will mock when calamity overtakes you – when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind, when distress and trouble overwhelm you.

"Laugh" – at the predictability of those who spurn wisdom's guidance – and get into difficulties.

28-29 "Then they will call to me but I will not answer; they will look for me but will not find me, since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord.

"Call to me" – sounds like 1 Samuel 8:18, but this is probably not about prayer; wisdom is a personification, not God. The sense is of mockers and scoffers frantically seeking wisdom when they get into trouble, but 'too little, too late'.

30-31 Since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they

will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes.

"Eat the fruit... be filled with the fruit" – like the NT phrase "A man reaps what he sows", Gal. 6:7. Evil people suffer by living out the consequences of their own actions, in the destruction meted out to others.

32-33 For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of

fools will destroy them; but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm."

"Waywardness" – the Hebrew word for 'turning' can mean "repent" or "turn wayward". Not heeding wisdom by repentant turning causes destruction.

"Whoever listens to me" – those who listen to wisdom's voice experience security.

IN PRACTICE The voice of wisdom is not the the voice of God, but closely aligned. It is more the sense of how we live out what we hear as the voice and truth of God.

Wisdom is evident, or lacking, in all our attitudes of heart – and our heart determines what we say. Here we meet those who are uninstructed, or a stage worse, stubbornly foolish and wrong-intentioned. But worst of all is the arrogant mocker, the opinionated "I know best" person who is proud that they have no need to listen and learn. This is the root of dissent, and derogatory slander, that is the devil's strategy to impede the kingdom of God. To the extent that we allow it.

QUESTION *How proactive are you in seeking God's wisdom to live by, day by day?*

Mark 8:27-38 » Listening to the Lord and speaking as His disciples

Speaking as disciples of Jesus - who do we say He is?

27 Jesus and His disciples went on to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way He asked them, "Who do people say I am?"

"Caesarea Philippi" – a new town named after Herod the Great's son Philip the Tetrarch on the slopes of Mount Hermon, 25 miles north of Galilee.

"He asked them" – for the first time, Jesus raises the question of His identity. He must clarify their understanding of the Messiah as God's servant who will suffer and be shamed for His people, a difficult concept (Peter's response v.32 below) against the popular idea of Messiah as a deliverer like King David.

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets."

29 "But what about you?" He asked. "Who do you say I am?"

"But what about you?" – more emphatic in Greek.

Peter answered, "You are the Messiah." *"The Messiah" – or Christ. Both mean 'anointed one'. Peter speaks out for all the disciples.*

30 Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about Him.

"Warned... not to tell" – the mission of Jesus as Messiah could not be understood apart from the ordeal of the Cross, which the disciples were not yet prepared for. To announce Jesus as Messiah would only reinforce the wrong conception of a military-style leader with the danger that people would try to make Jesus king by force, John 6:15, John 12:12-19.

31-32 He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that He must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him.

"Peter... began to rebuke Him" – to Peter, what Jesus was teaching was just plain wrong. In this section, Mark 8:31-10:52 Jesus prepares the disciples for His divinely-ordained death.

"Suffer... be rejected... be killed and...rise again". The Messiah had to suffer, as predicted, Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and see Luke 24:44, and be rejected, Psalm 118:22, and die before being raised to life

again, promised in Hosea 6:2. The Jews had not understood God's ways being higher, Isa. 55:8-9.

33 But when Jesus turned and looked at His disciples, He rebuked Peter. "Get behind Me, Satan!" He said. "You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."

"He rebuked Peter" – seemingly harsh, but Jesus recognised Peter coming under the same attempt to deceive that He had experienced in the desert confrontation with Satan, Matthew 4:8-10.

"Take up their cross" – not a medieval-style self-abasement which misses the point made in the sentences around this phrase. The disciple call is to die to the right to one's own life path and success.

35-36 For whoever wants to save their life

IN PRACTICE Everyone wants to be known as a fan of a popular hero. Even if we have no local affiliation, we support a particular Premier football club 'because it is the best'. People are intrigued by, and sometimes drawn to, 'populist politicians'. Some 'do a Huw', the highly individual pose of the revered Welsh newsreader.

Jesus is more of a problem. In our church, He would be an outsider, a disrupter, a change-bringer. In our community, He looks like a servant, not a figurehead. In a post-modern, inclusive world, some want every spiritual insight to be 'a path to the truth'. The question for us (like Peter), is who do WE say Jesus is? And that draws out from us where we really stand in relation to His Lordship of us.

QUESTION *How ready are we to stand up, be counted and speak for Jesus and His values in our sceptical world?*

James 3:1-12 » Listening to God first - does He have our tongue?

The tongue is a huge source of trouble if our words come from the wrong spirit

1 Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

"Become teachers" – the rabbi was honoured in Jewish society and the teacher in Christian circles, Acts 2:42, Rom. 12:7, 1 Cor 12:28, at a time when Christians generally were regarded as social outsiders, James 2:6-7. James points out that few should aspire to the teacher's responsibility to influence for good, not harm, and with it a more severe accountability, Matt. 5:19, Acts 20:26-27.

2 We all stumble in many ways. Anyone

will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?

"Save their life" – self-preservation and holding onto what we know is a strong human instinct. Losing the selfish life is to gain the spiritual life.

37-38 Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when He comes in His Father's glory with the holy angels."

Standing up for Jesus, His values and His words, requires courage – but it's a non-negotiable position in choosing to walk the Way of Jesus.

who is never at fault in what they say is perfect, able to keep their whole body in check.

"Fault in what they say" – the argument moves from the specific role of those called to teach, to the general responsibility we have for the imperfect words we utter, to bless and encourage or to harm. The main issue in the church, then as today, is the twin problem of dissent and slander, James 4:1, 3:9, 4:11.

3-5 When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal.

Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small