

Pentecost +15
17/9/2006

Mark the Evangelist

Proverbs 1:20-33
James 3:1-12
Mark 8:27-38

The Terror of the Tongue

Sermon by Bruce Barber

The texts before us today are a reminder, as indeed the texts are every Sunday, that for our protection we really need to be wearing crash helmets when we come to Church. The fact is that Sunday by Sunday, texts like these hold up to us a variety of mirrors, with the invitation to see ourselves reflected in them.

As we know, the majority amongst whom we live increasingly decline this invitation, preferring, like Narcissus, to construct their own mirrors in order to secure less confronting images. This fact is now largely beyond our control.

But I take it that we still want to look to these venerable texts in the hope that we might learn something that we cannot, or perhaps even more to the point, dare not, tell ourselves. So - crash helmets on.

Now if you think that only you are about to be exposed, not by the preacher, but by the texts themselves, imagine what it is like for those of us who stand in pulpits or behind lecterns in theological colleges. Imagine what it is like to be greeted by the opening words from the letter of James: *'Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness'*.

Nevertheless, we press on. Well, someone has to do it!

If the sermon today were to have a title it would be something like: 'The Terror of the Tongue', or, more directly, 'On getting it wrong while being right'. The latter title would doubtless immediately confirm for despisers of our enterprise their confident conclusions as to the futility of what we are about. Nothing, they are certain, is to be gained by such gobbledegook. Propositions, they claim, can only either be right *or* wrong.

But, if the words from James this morning can be trusted, such a claim is just one illustration of the truth that the tongue is deceitful above all things. No-one, James tells us, can tame the viciousness, nor the twists and turns, nor the oversimplifications of the tongue - it being *'a restless evil full of poison'*. Who does not have to fall to their knees in the face of this indisputable fact! And you may have thought my admonition about the need to don crash helmets was exaggerated!

But we have already been warned about such an inevitability. The book of Proverbs, that distillation of centuries of immersion in the vagaries of the human condition, already knows the score. *'Wisdom calls aloud in the streets; she raises her voice in the public square: You ignorant people, how much longer will you cling to your ignorance? How much longer will fools hold knowledge contemptible? Pay attention to my warning'*.

Well that loud and clear warning takes on a fearful dimension in the gospel today: the so-called confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi. Why so-called? Because here is the most dramatic expression imaginable of the ignorant tongue in dialogue with the Truth: Peter in front of Jesus.

Now Peter is most certainly right in his discernment concerning Jesus. Various understandable answers had already been proposed to his question 'Who do people say that I am?' To the same question, but now asked of the disciples, Peter - representative as always - answers: *'You are the Christ'*, the anticipated messianic figure. Full marks! But the point of the text is that just here, from Jesus' point of view, such an answer is premature, since much has to unfold before this claim can properly be upheld. Hence the command to silence.

We can be confident in this. Peter is right without any qualification. But when the significance of this title is unfolded, namely, that contrary to all expectation, suffering and rejection on the part of the expected Messiah will prove to be unavoidable, only then is the correct answer shown to be demonic. Hence the claim. Peter is wrong in getting it right.

What's more we note how inclusive is the text. *'Turning'* we are told *'and seeing his disciples'*, Jesus rebukes Peter. The point is that they are all indicted. Peter may have spoken the words, but they are all compromised. As James puts it: *'All of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect. The tongue is a small member, but it boasts of great exploits'* or, in this case, of great evasions.

What a mistake indeed Peter and the eleven are making, being ignorant of the character of messiahship soon to be unfolded.

Those first disciples' desire for a deathless messiah has been to the fore ever since, perhaps most insistently today. Think of all those people who revere Jesus as a teacher of noble truths, like the Buddha, but who are either scandalised or uncomprehending of the drama of Holy Week as the inevitable outcome of his teaching.

But we are far from exhausting the import of these texts. See what happens when, in the inspiration of today's lectionary, we are reading two texts together, so that the one informs the other. In the relentless exposure of the deceit of the tongue, James can conclude: *'With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God'*. That, of course, is its plain meaning. And we need no reminder that we are living in a world of its frightful demonstration, whereby the

confession of the One God - albeit in different names - issues in the most horrific cursings of those made in the same likeness, as suicide bombers carry out their deeds of darkness.

But James' indictment has equal immediate application. It serves today to highlight the pathos of Peter's confession. Peter is indisputably right. With his tongue, he blesses the Lord, but equally with his tongue, in seeking to deflect that same Lord from his path, truth is turned to heresy. The praise of recognition becomes the curse of avoidance, of such seriousness that it is called satanic.

This judgement gives an added spin surely to the robust conclusion: *'Everything has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue from the same mouth come blessing and cursing'*.

It is, of course, inevitable and sad that those whose ego is bound up with an undeviating estimation of their own propriety with regard to the tongue - those who, as the gospel today has it, seek to save their own life, these will be bound to hear such a wholesale reproach as a description of someone else.

You will doubtless be feeling profoundly depressed. All this would be bleak indeed were it not for the fact that we have not been permanently left in this debilitating ambiguity of a tongue both rejoicing as well as cursing. But the remedy is initially as terrifying as the disease. It is far too early to take our crash helmets off.

Let me propose the solution of one who saw truth in all its glittering precision, the great C19 Danish philosopher and theologian, Søren Kierkegaard. He surely teaches us everything we need to know about the terror of the tongue, when he said: 'The blessedness of knowing that before God I am always in the wrong'. They are words which some might consider to border on the pathological, which is perhaps why they have sustained me for decades!

But note this, it is the blessedness, he says, not the sadness - *that* would indeed be pathological - but the blessedness, the blessedness of knowing that *before God* - and that is the all important phrase - I am always in the wrong'.

This blessedness is, of course, simply the flip side of what Christians know as justification by grace through faith, and which is nothing other than the working out of the words of Jesus, that *'those who want to save their life - and here we might add, who want to shy away from the terror of the tongue, they will lose life, but 'those who lose their life for my sake, and the sake of the gospel - who offer up their constant linguistic treachery - the same will save it'*.

This blessedness is the fundamental freedom of the Christian to face the truth of human existence; that, given the treachery of the tongue, we can never claim a righteousness of our own. On the contrary, our righteousness is an extrinsic righteousness, a righteousness outside of ourselves. It is a righteousness grounded in the confession of faith: *'I know*

whom I have believed'. That is what Kierkegaard is saying, in the face of which there can only be blessedness in discovering that, without this knowledge, I will always be in the wrong.

Only someone on the way to faith could possibly rejoice in this. But that is who all who have been baptised really are. Moralists of all persuasions must inevitably find such a sentence both infuriating and insulting. But to learn of our affliction, and of its costly remedy, is why we have come to church, or else we have come for the wrong reason.

And all this means that the good news is that, living in this truth, the need for crash helmets disappears. But we don't take them off - they are taken off for us. In their place, great blessedness, that true benediction for which we have been waiting all our lives, our ultimate safety device we might say, descends redemptively upon our heads to our salvation.

But nevertheless - precisely nevertheless - today and every day while we rejoice in the gift of this blessing, we need to hear both Jesus' word to the embryonic church, and James' caustic word to us all:

Watch your tongue!