

James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our redeemer.

...

Does silence make you uncomfortable?
Unless you are used to it, for many of us our instinctive reaction is to want to fill the space. We want a flow of sound to carry us along. But why is that?

The Bible has a lot to say about silence, extolling it as a positive thing. Here's one fun quote from Proverbs that might make you think twice about being a chatterbox: "Even fools are thought wise when they keep silent; with their mouths shut, they seem intelligent." Or on a more thoughtful note, Isaiah writes, "For thus said the Lord God: 'By waiting and by calm you shall be saved; in quiet and in trust shall be your strength.'"

I think the fact that many of us are uncomfortable with silence is partly because it acts as a mirror. In silence, you only have your own thoughts to listen to. You are

brought face to face with the contents of your own heart and mind. It echoes back whatever question you bring to it, encouraging an assessment of motive and intent. Silence asks you to look into your own heart.

While it is quite far from our own liturgical tradition, there is something to be said for the Quaker practice of sitting in silence together for extended periods of time.

I wonder if this virtue of silence was on James' mind when he wrote about the dangerous power of the tongue. Have you ever said something in the heat of the moment that you immediately wished you could take back? Maybe you've made a smart retort that is instantly regrettable, or sent a text or fired off an email that, in hindsight, wasn't the best idea. I know I've done it. It's kind of scary - the damage that can be caused in a matter of moments by things that are said. Words are wildly powerful. They can change the course of history, and they can destroy a person.

At our Wednesday Bible study this week someone remarked that the saying 'sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me', is not at all true. We probably all know that personally for ourselves, that words can be more painful and more

damaging than any physical injury. So we find in James' letter the vivid analogy of a tiny spark setting a great forest on fire. Words are capable of causing incredible destruction if we're not careful. What a store of weapons we all carry on the tip of our tongues!

But this doesn't mean we should all take vows of silence and avoid speaking altogether—though the thought of us all having to communicate through interpretive dance is quite funny! Instead, the emphasis is on being mindful of what we say and how we say it. Silence can be golden, but thoughtful speech is where the real treasure lies. Are we framing things kindly? Are we taking a moment to consider the opposite viewpoint? Do we imagine what it might be like to walk a mile in someone else's shoes? The pause, the reflective moment with yourself in the mirror of silence before opening the floodgates of words, is where Wisdom can be found.

In moments of frustration, when the kids are screaming, the dog has chewed your shoes, when someone cuts you up in traffic, take a moment to breathe. Consider the weight of your words before you let them loose. Ask yourself, "Is what I'm about to say helpful or hurtful? Does it reflect the love and wisdom I believe in?"

A spirit of faith endeavours to choose words that heal, not harm. By consciously choosing to align our words with the teachings of Jesus, we're reaffirming our belief that Jesus is the Messiah. 'Who do you say I am?' asks Jesus. If our answer is the same as Peter's, that affects everything. It asks us to continually mould who we are around our conviction. Because what is the point of believing something if it doesn't make any difference?

To continue with James' analogy of a forest fire, we are surrounded with a lot of dry tinder in our day to day life. There are brown crunchy leaves and old pine needles and dead trees. All the things that encourage division and judgement between us, all the 'us and them' scenarios that are presented to us in a whole host of ways, just waiting to go up in flames. The posts on facebook, the yard signs, the bumper stickers, the ball caps and t-shirts.

This is a country where you all LOVE to advertise your opinions, which makes it so much easier to categorise each other, so much easier to maintain tensions. All that is needed is that spark to stoke the embers. And oh how tempting it is to let loose! How tempting to decry the opposite team, to scorn, to pity, to judge. These sparks are lit in a moment.

So we find ourselves presented with the mirror of silence. The wisdom of holding back. The reflection asking you to take another look, and to seek the loving response even as the words start to tumble out.

When I was little, my mum used to threaten me and my older brother with washing our mouths out with soap if we spoke rudely. Now it never actually happened, but the message was clear enough. What we say really matters. And it's more than just trying to be a nice person. Anyone can be nice. Instead we are being counter-cultural because we are called to be people of Wisdom. We're participating in the kingdom work of spreading love and peace.

Now, is this it? Has this sermon put you on the path of enlightenment and you'll never say something hurtful or angry again? I doubt it. Unfortunately nobody has achieved that (apart from perhaps the odd monk who has made a vow of silence), because we're all works in progress. We are definitely, without question, going to mess up, but that's not a reason to be disheartened or to give up trying. What's important is that we keep seeking, and keep listening for that wisdom calling out to us.

So this coming week, perhaps challenge yourself to listen for wisdom calling out. Pause before speaking, especially in moments of annoyance or anger, and don't let the sparks escape into the world. Be intentional. Let your speech be seasoned with grace, and you will find yourself living out your confession of faith, that Jesus is the Messiah, in a way that's authentic and impactful.

May we each continue to be transformed anew as we seek wisdom where she may be found.

Amen.