

Sermon for Sunday 15 September 2024

16th Sunday after Trinity

**Proverbs 1: 20 – 33; James 3: 1 – 12; Mark 8: 27
– end.**

Words and their Uses

Words matter, and they are powerful. They can be used well or badly.

We've recently been watching the three-part documentary about president Zelensky. It's been on the BBC – about how he rose to power and how he has succeeded so far in resisting the Russian invasion. As a former actor, Zelensky understands how to use words, and from the beginning he has used them to effect. There was that short video posted on the day of the invasion. We see him surrounded by his government, in Kyiv. He says simply, "We are all here." And he encourages his people not to flee, but to stand firm and to resist. That one video probably changed the whole course of the war. A few weeks later he cleverly references Churchill in an address to the UK Parliament, and receives

a standing ovation. And pledges of support. He understands that words are important, and he knows how to use them to positive effect.

Contrast that with the use of words on social media and on websites. Still powerful, but used to abuse and bully and even drive some to suicide; used to persuade others to believe in wild conspiracy theories that are completely without foundation. Used to make every argument black or white, right or wrong and to deny the possibility of nuanced debate or any kind of understanding between parties who disagree. What on earth would James, who wrote our second reading, have made of that? This is no longer just about taming tongues, but about fingers too – when we're tempted to make a thoughtless or unkind reply and press 'send'. But far deeper than that, hearts and attitudes that 'other' the other person, that deny their humanity, also need to change.

Yesterday, I'm pleased to say, I enjoyed some walking and some very good discussion as I joined in the hike part of Bike 'N Hike. I find it's

often easier to talk when you are walking. We can perhaps imagine the disciples having a relaxed conversation with Jesus as they travelled to Caesarea Philippi. Jesus had asked 'Who do people say that I am?' They may have been enjoying regaling him with the stories of peoples' reactions to his teaching and his miracles. Then it gets more personal; Jesus says, 'Who do you say that I am?' One can imagine a sharp intake of breath, and a short silence before Peter speaks, 'You are the Messiah'.

With those words, Peter gets it both right and wrong. And on those words 'You are the Messiah' the Gospel pivots. The disciples have understood who Jesus is. Now he sets about teaching them what it means for him to be the Messiah, and what it means for them to be his disciples. From now on he will be walking towards Jerusalem where he knows he will face suffering and death. Jesus' understanding of what it means to be the Messiah is drawn from the prophetic tradition, and the prophet Isaiah in particular, who speaks of the 'suffering servant' who is to come. Here are some of Isaiah's words:

"I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheek to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting." (Isaiah 50.6)

But when Peter says Jesus is the Messiah, he is expecting a great triumphant leader, drawn from other pictures in Daniel and the some of the writings in the Apocrypha. Someone who would overthrow the Romans and restore Israel to her former glory. Jesus rejects Peter's view as coming from the Devil – or perhaps from all too human wishful thinking. Again and again through the rest of the Gospel he tries to make the disciples understand what it means for him to be the Messiah. Suffering, death and resurrection.

The disciples' understanding of that word 'Messiah' will also shape their understanding of what it means to be his followers when he is no longer with them. So Jesus goes on to talk about this too. Now his words are not just for the twelve, but also for a greater crowd who he calls to him at this moment. So we can feel ourselves included in what follows.

What does it mean to follow a Messiah who gives up his life? Far from participating in the triumph of a great King and ruler, all of us who seek to be Jesus disciples are called to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him.

What does this mean? First - It means placing the demands of discipleship above all the other desires and plans that we might cherish. It doesn't mean we can't have hopes or ambitions for our lives, but they come second to our following of Jesus. Second – it means being ready to follow Jesus to the point of death – if that is what is required of us. Fortunately, that is not the case for us here and now in the UK – but it certainly is for many Christians around the world today. Whatever happens, discipleship is going to be costly. But, Jesus says, paradoxically, by apparently losing our life in this way, we shall be saving it for all eternity.

Who among us hasn't experienced this – in a small way - when we have given of our time and energy, reached out in some small act of service. How much more we get back than we ever give.

As he goes on explaining the implications of following him, Jesus refers to “this adulterous and sinful generation”. These are words which could well be applied to our own generation. People run after all sorts of gods, - and I'm sure we could all name them – all of this supported and amplified by social media - and seem to pay little attention to God Himself. And all of us are tempted to join in. As we were reflecting on our hike yesterday – humanity doesn't change much over the generations. Sometimes it feels hard to see how we can change any of this. How can we stand out against it? How can we stand for Jesus as his disciples in a world where nothing or anything can be true?

Well, words matter. And they are still powerful. Going back to James perhaps gives us a starting place. Next time we are tempted to answer back anger with anger – whether in the real or in the virtual world, perhaps we can resist. I have learned sometimes to leave an email in the draft box until I'm sure it is really the right thing to say! Next time a conversation turns sour or unkind,

perhaps we can gently turn it to something more positive. Or at the very least, walk away.

And perhaps we can ask God to give us opportunities to speak his words, words of life, to others. We may be surprised how much difference our words can make.

Amen

Revd Diana Young