

Sunday 26  
20/9/2015

Mark the Evangelist

James 3:13-4:8

Psalm 1

Mark 9:30-37

### Watch your tongue

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To raise a child is to become acutely aware that we are *made* by the world around us. With rewards for certain behaviour and punishments for other behaviour we are taught the rules by which our particular shared world is ordered: how people are to relate to each other, who can relate to whom, and when. We learn where the boundaries are, what we might expect of others and what they might expect of us. For most of us, most of the time, this set of expectations shapes what is “normal”. And, for the most part, these normal expectations form the basis for what we call *morals*. A moral person observes the social *mores* of his community – the customary expectations of a society. It is our expectation of the observance of these mores which binds us together.

This is important for understanding what James writes of the power of “the tongue”. Consider how many ways we have of commenting upon how people might misuse their tongue: “mind your tongue”; “button your lip”; suffering from “foot-in-mouth disease”, “if you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all,” as well as a few more less polite ones. Our very familiarity with such sayings about our speech indicates how often we note that people’s mouths get in the way of smooth human relations. We recognize, then, quite apart from any religious input, the wisdom of James here: “How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire...”

But, at the risk of seeming to be asking a silly question, in *what sense* is it wrong to speak critically of others? What are we actually doing, apart from the obvious failure to “Do to others as you would have them do to you”? Moral instruction such as James gives here is very often simply a heavy lid we try to place on our natural, if not always desirable, inclinations. Speaking “nicely” to and of each other is just another such lid, and when that lid is thrown off we accuse the speaker of breaking the rules.

But the irony is that criticising others, while it might break rules about being *civil*, is at the same time an *application* of social mores. Critique of others is not simply another moral failure but results from a judgement about how we think the world should be ordered, how people ought to behave. To speak ill of another is to measure her against some kind of standard – presumably a standard against which I, of course, measure up well. She is the one who has *transgressed*, who has failed to do the right thing in my eyes: failed to wear the right clothes, failed to have the right mobile phone, failed to vote correctly, to have the right skin colour, failed to have helped when I thought she should have.

In speaking ill of each other we are not simply being “mean”; we are declaring what is normal and what is to be rightly expected, and we declare who is, therefore, *not* normal, who has ostracised *themselves*. The safe ones are the ones who do the “right” thing, whatever we think that is. “Right” will not necessarily be the same in a classroom as it is within a criminal cartel, but in either case the people involved know what is expected of them and know about the tongue-lashing – or bullet in the back of head! – which can arise from transgression.

Schoolyard bitchiness and workplace bullying and even more moderate gossip are, then, not just about victimisation, not just about the strong and the weak, not just simply mean-spiritedness. They are about defining boundaries of behaviour or character and applying those boundaries to punish by exclusion. The critic is the one who knows the rules and sees where there has been a transgression; the critic is the righteous one.

And so “the tongue” of which James writes here is not wild and random; it is *precise*. It has its destructive effect not because it is wantonly untameable but because the engine behind it is a self-righteous heart which sees and knows exactly what is wrong.

Simply holding your tongue, then, is not going to get to the heart of the matter, for that heart concerns not what we believe about the other person but what we believe about ourselves. It is because we have adjudged ourselves righteous that we can judge others otherwise. The moral injunction to say nothing if you can’t say anything nice may put a heavy lid on destructive talk and, so, give a semblance of peace and harmony, but it will not change that self-righteous centre.

The way of peace begins with peace. And so a gentle tongue requires a gentled heart. A gentled heart springs from a humility taught by God’s mercy.

Mercy is the unexpected willingness to *relax* the rules which make it possible to be part of human community. A lack of mercy is a trait in those who do not know themselves to be the *recipients* of mercy. Mercy *given*, if it truly is mercy and not just a hidden manipulation for our own interests, springs from the experience of mercy *received*.

Our talk about each other is to be speech which reflects the knowledge that we, too, are under consideration by others: someone else is judging, or has judged us – be it God or the person you’re sitting next to.

Our talk is to be speech which knows that, were we to be held account for our adherence even to our own personal moral code, we too would be found to fall short.

Our talk is to be speech which reflects that we have been given what we could not produce for ourselves: a standing, a righteousness before God, which is not deserved.

And so *our* tongues cannot to be driven by self-righteousness; for these are tongues onto which are placed the bread and the wine, the signs of a righteousness which comes not from within but from without.

Grace, forgiveness, mercy – for those who are wrong or just different – these are to be the grammar of our speech, if we are to lift each other up rather than keep each other down, if there is to be an “us” which will finally be life-giving and not life-denying.

All of this is because this is the way in which God speaks to us. So, watch your tongue, for Christ’s sake, and for the sake of those around you. Amen.

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