



Sermon

Who can Tame the Tongue?

Isaiah 55v6-13; Luke 6:39-49

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I want to ask a question: “What is the word of the Lord for St Stephen’s at this time?” For it is the word of the Lord, that living word, that interactive word that will determine our future, if we grab hold of it and act upon it.

Let’s start with Isaiah 55. This is a complex and fascinating piece of writing. Here is the observation of a natural scientist – and the instruction of God himself, the one who brought order out of chaos. V10: The rain and snow come down to earth from above and they return upwards. How did Isaiah know that piece of scientific truth? God told him. There is such a cycle in our natural world. The rain is necessary for the plants to flourish. God’s amazing design means that the plants both provide food for humans and also seed for the next year’s crop. Thank you, Lord, for your amazing, beautifully-crafted design.

V11 tells us that that God’s spoken word has the same effect: a multi-faceted effect. His word to us tells us we are not alone in the universe. It tells us that we are known and loved. It tells us that there is a plan. We came forth because of love and are not the victims of irrational and unpremeditated randomness.

V11 tells us that God’s spoken word has power. Just like the power within the seed to produce life, God’s word acting in our hearts and minds brings forth life, spiritual life that we can’t explain. In verses 8&9 He says, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so my ways and thoughts are higher than yours.”

Then he says, “These words which go out from my mouth will not return to me empty.” When words go out of someone’s mouth it takes split seconds before they return to the persons ears. Time is not the issue. The issue here, is who spoke them. The words God speaks intrinsically contain the power to fulfill them, just as a seed contains the essence of what it came from and the ability to bring that to fruition.

This is why we honour the Word of God as it is written in the Bible. It is not just black letters on a white page. It is what God chooses to help us human beings so that with our limited intellect and knowledge, we begin to understand our infinite God. When the Word and the Spirit of God work together, there is great power and wonderful effects. His Spirit can make the written words burn like fire in our hearts – so we can’t ignore them or pass over them lightly. Let it be so, today, Lord.

God’s words and our words are on an entirely different plane. In the letter of James, he says no-one can tame the human tongue – it is a restless evil! Be careful what you let out of your mouth, says James. He likens the trouble caused by the tongue to a fire. I have been reading a book on the Great Fire of London. It’s not great bedtime reading if you want to get to sleep :-)

Hanson describes small cinders shooting up in the air and travelling 200 yards before settling down on another tinder-dry house. Great updrafts of burning hot gases transformed into fireballs, making even churches erupt in flames. All the goods that frantic householders had thought safe inside the stonework – totally consumed. People trapped and dying. Such tragedy from a fire by can be caused by even a single spark if it is in the wrong place, unseen and the response is inadequate for various reasons.

The fruit of our mouths is a sure give-away to what is inside our hearts, Jesus says in Luke 6. Is it untrue accusation and condemning other people? Is it judging them and focusing on their negative points? Is it gossip, passing on certain tidbits of information, some untrue or embellished, that will make us look good in contrast? Is it harsh and diminishing to others?

Jesus is very clear. The bad things that we see so clearly in our brother are often nothing compared to our own bad behaviour, which we conveniently forget about or excuse and pass over.

Isaiah shows us the contrast between our thoughts and God's thoughts; our ways and his ways. God is merciful and will pardon if we turn from our evil thoughts. If we are deliberately choosing a wicked or harmful way, God will have mercy on us, if we change our minds. In contrast, as human beings our natural urge is to punish people who have hurt us, to knife them and twist the knife.

God does not react in a knee-jerk reaction against people who are nasty to him. He calls to them, saying, "Think again. Think my thoughts. They are different from yours." And as we pursue God's thoughts, meditating on Jesus' instructions, we will find God giving us the strength to think his way and act according to his ways. We will be laying down good foundations in our lives.

This is one reason why Jesus, when he was asked by someone, "What must we do to be saved?" he said, "Repent and believe the good news." In other words, don't rely totally on your own intelligence or reasoning. Listen to me he says; let my words sink into your minds and hearts.

"Repent" - which means, "Re-think stuff in the light of what I, the Son of God, have said." Then believe him. Believing is not just giving mental assent to the idea, just mentally ticking the box. This means put your whole weight and confidence in what I have said. Act on it. "My thoughts and my ways are higher than yours." God says.

Jesus was thinking of Isaiah 55 when His words in Luke 6 were reported. Both passages talk about exactly the same plants - the thorn bush and the brier.

Luke 6:44-45 ⁴⁴ *Each tree is recognised by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thorn-bushes, or grapes from briars.* ⁴⁵ *The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.*

Here Jesus is specifically looking at what kind of fruit they produce. He was talking directly to his disciples, not just to a huge crowd of the curious, the ill and the Jewish religious thought-police. Jesus here speaks directly to you, if you are his disciple.

He is keen that we learn to discern good from evil, good fruit and bad fruit. The fruit of someone's life and words sometimes take a while to become evident. Jesus talks in black and white terms to help us see that there is a difference. We are not supposed to cover up wrong and pretend it doesn't exist. Love covers a multitude of sins, but they need to be confessed and repented of – dealt with cleanly, then forgiven and covered.

Jesus is showing us how to discern, how to listen carefully to what people say in order to know whether to trust them or not. In some situations it is easy to wait and find out what quality of words are coming out of someone's heart. It's not always easy though – recently, one of our older parishioners was saying how he was robbed of several thousand dollars through a scam. If there is pressure to act now and lots of smooth, persuasive talk, it's best to wait.

The characteristic of God's way is not force, pressure, hurry and "There is no need to discuss this – I know best". St James asks a revealing question in his letter,

James 3:13 - 4:1 ³ *Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom.* ¹⁴ *But if you harbour bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.* ¹⁵ *Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil.* ¹⁶ *For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.* ¹⁷ *But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.* ¹⁸ *Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.*

Seed for the sower and bread for the eater. Righteousness, peace and wisdom multiply as they are grasped, used and treasured.

So what is answer to my question about the Word of the Lord for St Stephen's at the moment? We could start with following the lectionary readings. I suggest we read the Gospel passage again at home. Look for fruit in any situation you are concerned about and discern by that. Then continue to lay good foundations of the scriptures in your hearts and Godly actions, so you will not be knocked over in any flood. Jesus says that to have those good foundations, we need to come to Him, hear his words, then put them into practice.

“May you go out in joy and be led forth in peace; may the mountains and hills burst into song before you; may all the trees of the field clap their hands in joy to the Lord. This will be for the Lord's renown, for an everlasting sign, which will not be destroyed.” (Isaiah 55)