

Worshipping God Together

Call to worship

Minister: When words are many, sin is not absent,
 but he who holds his tongue is wise.

**All: The tongue of the righteous is choice silver,
 but the heart of the wicked is of little value.**

MP 496 O for a thousand tongues to sing

Opening prayer and the Lord's Prayer

The letter of Hebrews says: Before God no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account.

Let us pray:

Living God, whose Word is life,
we come before you with our faltering words,
incompetent and inadequate.

Lift us from the mire of our ceaseless chatter,
to hear your Word,
to do your will,
to live your life.

you have given us the gift of speech,
but we have not always used it wisely.

We have cursed and condemned our fellow human beings,
and committed sin of every shade.

Forgive us for failing in our responsibility
to use the gift of speech well, and help us to mend our ways.

We ask this in the name of Jesus who taught us to pray:

ALL: Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily

bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory for ever. Amen.

Children's address – Catherine Alexander

JP 291

With Jesus in the boat

Reflecting on God's Word

Reading: James 3:1-12 (NT page 1214-1215)

Reader: Bob Rendall

Background to the reading

The letter of James was written by a scholar who pretended to be "James, the brother of Jesus". In Antiquity this was not unusual. We know that other writers did the same. The letter is written in good Greek and most scholars agree that it was during the second quarter of the second century about *AD* 125-150. Why? Well it seems that the writer knew about Romans, Galatians and others and the letters of Paul was published by *AD* 95. So the letter of James could only be written after this.

It is also clear from the letter itself that James condemned the misuse of Paul's teaching by heretics during the second quarter of the second century.

In the past scholars focussed on the differences between the theology of Paul's justification by faith versus James' theology of the justification by works, which I do not think is fair. James wanted to emphasize the righteousness that God approves in a time where the early church lacked competent leaders. The letter of James can therefore be divided into three parts namely:

- Genuineness versus pretence (James 1:2-2:26)

- Credentials of leaders (James 3:1-18)
- Christian godliness (James 4-5)

In our reading it seems as if James is criticizing the leadership of the early church by means of a strong argument to deter anyone to be a “teacher”. James makes it clear that personal qualities and not status are important. James is arguing that not anyone in the church can be a teacher because God will judge them more strictly. And then in a very clever way James exposes this by means of the one body part that teachers always use namely the tongue.

Everyone sins or *stumbles*, and the easiest place to stumble is in the use of the tongue. It is very easy to let a critical word slip out! The tongue is the most difficult bodily part to get under control. Control over the tongue typifies the thoroughly disciplined life. It is a mark of maturity and because few Christians are so disciplined, the number of aspirant teachers should be kept to a minimum.

James gives a series of examples that illustrate this fact. A horse - one of the most powerful animals in Antiquity - is controlled by a bit in its mouth. A ship, the largest moving vehicle of his day, is controlled by a rudder. Controlling horses with bits and ships with rudders were common illustrations in the ancient Mediterranean, because everyone understood them. James’ point is simply to point to the power of a small instrument just like the tongue.

James shifts his direction of argument at this point and compares the tongue to a spark which can set a forest on fire.

James adds some more examples. In church (and he is writing to believers) the tongue is used to praise God. But later the tongue curse other people, and they are made in God’s image. In James’s day the king or emperor would set up his statue in the cities of his realm. If anyone insulted or cursed the statue, they were treated as if they had cursed the emperor to his face, for the statue was the image of the emperor. Therefore the insulting of a person,

made in God's image, is like insulting God himself. This duality, two different and contradictory words coming out of the same mouth, is a type of hypocrisy.

James gives two examples to drive his point home. The first is drawn from the land of Israel where in the dry Jordan Valley one might see, in the distance, a stream flowing down the valley wall on the east side. Sometimes the water is fresh and good. Sometimes it is full of salt and is undrinkable. But one thing is sure, the two types of water will not flow out of the same spring. Likewise one does not get a different type of fruit from a tree or vine than that which grows according to its nature. Figs, olives and grapes were the three most common agricultural products of the Judean hills, and alongside wheat they would have constituted the most common crops of the Mediterranean region as a whole.

The implication of his argument must have been very clear to those who wanted to be teachers in the early church. I do not think anyone could counter James on any of his arguments.

MP 544 **Open my eyes that I may see**

Sermon

The text verse for the sermon is verse ⁶: "The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell."

What is the meaning of our reading to us living today who have different issues with different circumstances?

Well I think we can wholeheartedly agree that the tongue is a very dangerous instrument. But actually we know that it is not the "tongue" that is at fault but our thinking and reasoning minds. Usually we express only with our tongues what is living in our minds. The tongue becomes a vehicle of our

minds which proves the validity of James' argument. And yes it is most certainly true that most of the times we see the destruction when people "speak their minds" in an uncontrolled environment causing havoc, hurt and separation.

I think what James was not saying was the fact that we need God in our lives to control our minds and help us morally to make the right decisions. If we do not have God, our whole world will become something similar to a "Jeremy Kyle" show where I can just say what I want to anyone in the way, I want without thinking of the hurt and upset it may cause. Our lives will then be nothing more than a soap series where the key is deception and lies.

Then indeed the consequences will be like that passenger ship who sunk in Italy a few months ago.

If we want to be on a passenger ship that we can call life, we need someone like God to steer us in the right direction. We need his Holy Spirit to direct our thoughts and minds. We need his presence each and every day to speak words of His peace everywhere we go. We need his disciplining hand to prevent us to destroy other people through our words and actions.

We need to show other people that faith hope and love directs and governs our lives in everything we do say and think!

May we find the strength to use our tongues more wisely for the good of everyone but more so to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ with honesty, and righteousness that can only come from God!

Amen