

The Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity

Isaiah 50.4-9a

James 3.1—12

Mark 8.27-38

The disciples are quite enjoying the discussion, to begin with. Everywhere they've been with Jesus, they have heard speculation. People must have asked them, over and over again, 'Who is your master? Where does he get his power from? What's he really up to?' The disciples are very tactful. They only pass on the repeatable theories they have heard. They don't say, 'Some people think you're mad, and some people think you're demon-possessed, and some people think you're a revolutionary.' No, they stick to the complimentary and religious options. They do this partly to be kind to Jesus, but partly also for their own sakes. After all, if they're his followers, they are going to be tarred with the same brush as him.

It's very easy, passing on the gossip. Lots of voices are raised with contributions to the conversation. But when Jesus asks the next question, there is sudden silence. The next question is going to commit the one who answers it. It might make him look stupid, if he gets it wrong; it might make him look overcommitted or undercommitted to Jesus. Suppose they say they think he is just a prophet, and then he tells them that he is really the great prophet Elijah, returned from the dead? Or suppose they say he's the Messiah, and he laughs and says, 'Don't be silly, I'm just a minor prophet'? So, as usual, it is only Peter who has the courage of his convictions. He knows who he hopes Jesus is, and he doesn't care if saying it makes him look silly. His answer is right, of course, but he still looks silly.

Words are terribly important. Peter uses the word 'Messiah', and even though he has no idea at all what it means, the word is to become his whole vocation. As Jesus describes what Peter has actually said, the word, which has already shaped Jesus, is beginning to shape Peter too. He doesn't know it, but he has already accepted the definition that that word will give to his life — and death.

We don't usually believe that words have that kind of power. 'You are what you eat,' we say, but what about, 'You will be what you say'? What if our increasingly wordy and foul-mouthed world is actually choosing its destiny, with every word it utters? What if we are making ourselves vile, crude and debased, with no belief in the truth or the bindingness of words any more? As all our media sit increasingly lightly to the truth of what they report, they make truth something that we are no longer sure we can recognize. Distrust breeds. As more and more of us casually use disgusting language, we increasingly believe that others are the dirty and worthless things we say they are, and treat them accordingly.

That is what James suggests. The community to which he writes has a bad word problem. It is full of people who don't really think that words matter. You can say religious words without them affecting your lifestyle, and you can say horrible things and still call yourself a Christian, they think. But James says that your words are the things that guide your whole life. Whether you know it or not, you are judged by your words. Whether you know it or not, your words shape your future. James uses the illustration of a stream — it either gives good water or bad. It cannot do both. Words can contaminate the stream of life.

This concept of communication is so basic because God himself is the great communicator. The reading from Isaiah today pictures somebody whose ear is really attuned to the voice of God, so that he can 'sustain the weary with a word' (Isaiah 50.4). But those who constantly misuse words, and divorce them from their starting place in God, will eventually not recognize God's words — or his Word — at all. In Jesus, God's spoken word is lived and God's lived word is spoken, because in God there is never any separation between word and act. But the people around Jesus are reluctant to allow him to remake or recreate their speech. They try to make God's Word conform to their own language. When Peter speaks the word 'Messiah', he thinks he is defining Jesus. But really Jesus, the creative Word of God, is taking our words and remaking them into a language that we can again share with God. The process is painful and costly, as all three readings agree, but vital. Unless we give our language back to God, and allow him to retranslate all our ideas, we will continue to move further and further away from the truth that sets us free to communicate in God's language.

*Jane Williams
from Lectionary Reflections*

Prayer

God, who in generous mercy sent the Holy Spirit
upon your Church in the burning fire of your love:
grant that your people may be fervent
in the fellowship of the gospel
that, always abiding in you,
they may be found steadfast in faith and active in service;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.