

Words Matter

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at FBC, September 15th, 2024, Mark 8:27-38 & James 3:1-12)

Do you like word puzzles? Maybe you like crosswords or playing scrabble. When I was at Uni, my fellow residents and I would each night after dinner and before returning to study, work together on the crossword in The Age newspaper until we solved it. I really like the puzzles where you have seven or nine letters, and you have to try and find as many words of four letters as you can, making sure you always use the middle letter. I only buy the newspaper on Saturdays, and one of the things I do each Saturday is these puzzles, and I will not give up until I get at least the number of words they say is good, I am overjoyed if I can get more. And I think I have really achieved if I can get the seven or nine letter word.

Many clients I had in my previous job used to do Find-a-word to keep their brains active and ward off dementia.

In more recent years I have been drawn to poetry and the way in which it can say something so deep in just a few well chosen words. I have even dabbled in it a bit myself. Poets like Mary Oliver seem to be able to observe the world and capture its essence in just a few words that seem to resonate with me. I guess that is also what the Psalmists do, observe what is going on around and within and find words to capture it. In worship our hymns and prayers do the same thing.

Words are very important. Do you remember the saying we had as kids ‘Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me.’ We said it I guess to remind us, that whatever awful things people said to us or about us they would not define us.

Alas, it was not true. Words do hurt. Gossip and rumour can destroy people. Words can condemn, hurt, harass, intimidate, frighten, cause division and exclude others. Words can cut down and silence people. This week we have just learned that in Afghanistan the Taliban has outlawed women speaking in public. How do women seek justice when they are forbidden to speak?

On the other side, words can encourage, build up. Words can inspire and motivate. They can bring comfort and peace to others. They can explain situations and they can be used to teach. They can be used to stand up for others – to advocate for or defend another. Words can challenge and call for justice.

People usually mean what they say don't they, or do they?

Let's look at Peter. Jesus was with his disciples on their way to Caesarea Philippi when he asks them what the people are saying about him, who do the people seem to think Jesus was. The disciple's response is that the people place Jesus in the line of the prophets. Jesus then delves a little deeper, and asks his friends who do they think he is. Peter, always ready with an answer, correctly says – you are the Messiah. But does he really mean what he says? Does he really understand what he is saying?

Jesus then goes on to talk about how he must suffer. Jesus' words are too much for Peter who begins to rebuke Jesus! Before he can finish however, Jesus rebukes him. Why, because Peter hadn't really thought through what he was saying. He hadn't thought through what it might mean to say Jesus was the Messiah. He probably understood Jesus to be a Messiah in the sense of one who was going to liberate the people, but he hadn't thought about the suffering and dying part.

Jesus then addresses the crowd and continues to lay down the framework for life for those who are his followers, for those who dare to call him Messiah. Deny yourself, take up your cross and follow me. Don't ever be ashamed of me or my words. Let your yes be yes! Let your yes be yes to the whole package not just the parts that suit.

We each have a "Peter" side, we want to call Jesus the Messiah, but we aren't always ready to take on all that it means. Sometimes we resist following Jesus, resist because it is hard - it is hard to love your enemies, it is hard to put others first, it is hard to stand up for justice. Faith without action is not true discipleship.

So, what do you say when Jesus asks you - Who do you say that I am? Will you take up your cross and follow him? What words will we say in reply? Will we mean what we say? Let's learn from Peter and make sure we think carefully before we answer, let's think carefully about what we say as we respond to Jesus.

In reading from the book of James we have more warnings about our use of the tongue or in other words our speech, our words. Using very powerful images - rudders, fire the author gives us a very strong message about how we speak, how we use words and the damage or encouragement they bring.

Of all things in the world the tongue is the one thing we cannot tame or control, it is like it has a life of its own. What we say and how we say it can set things on fire, inflame things if we are not careful. With our words, according to James, we have the ability to both bless and curse.

So, let's remember that words matter.

In our worship - singing and prayers we need to remember that the words we use should honour God, should include all, and will convey specific meaning, so we need to think about what we sing and say. It is for this reason that I am reluctant to use words like 'Me', 'Men' and 'Father God', as in my experience such terms exclude some. We have so many more words to use when describing God, addressing God, that give us a more comprehensive understanding of God. I would rather use words like 'us', the plural as that captures the reality that together we are the people of God, together we are the church.

Jesus reminds Peter and us that we need to be careful about how we describe him. Whatever name or words we use we need to be ready to live into the meaning of that which we say.

James reminds us that words matter, that they can be used to curse or to bless and that as Christians, we should only use them to encourage and build up one another.

Let us pray that we might each consider what we say carefully, and let us take responsibility for what we say and how we say it, whether it be in our praying, our conversations, in church meetings or as we profess and share our faith in Jesus. Amen.