

Words

Words matter. That's what the Bible readings teach us today. Words matter. Consider what we heard:

The heavens declare the glory of God.

Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect.

No one can tame the tongue, a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

Who do people say that I am?

Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, in this adulterous and sinful generation,
of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed.

Those verses are enough to keep us silent for a long time. They're also enough to make a preacher worried about getting up in the pulpit. Fortunately, we also heard Psalm 19 this morning. Its last verse is what you just heard me say before preaching: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my strength and my redeemer." I usually make it plural, that the words of *our* mouths and *our* hearts be acceptable in God's sight, because even if I'm the only one speaking at the moment, we all need that verse.

Now that Morning Prayer has returned to the cathedral thanks to Father Sinclair, more people are encountering one of its most striking canticles which also talks about words. Cantic 10, usually said on Wednesdays, is taken from the 55th chapter of Isaiah. After describing how rain brings forth life and gives growth, it has these startling verses spoken by God:

So is my word that goes forth from my mouth; it will not return to me empty;

But it will accomplish that which I have purposed, and prosper in that for which I sent it.

God's speech is God's action. We're lucky that's not true for humans. If it were, we would be a lot more careful about what we said, and we'd be in a *lot* more trouble.

In the letter from James we heard this morning, he writes as though words *do* have action. They certainly have an effect. James warns about becoming teachers because he knows how much damage the tongue can do. Like a bridle bit or a ship's rudder, the tongue is small but mighty. It is a fire, he says, "placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell." The tongue is "a restless evil, full of deadly poison." One doesn't have to watch the news for very long to see how true this is. In our world, everyone accuses everyone else of lies. From the same mouth come cursing and blessing. Words are used as weapons, and truth is relative, whatever one says it is. This, too, is enough to make a preacher fear to get into the pulpit. Why should my words be taken seriously when so many in our culture use words so carelessly, disputing who tells the truth?

Jesus talks about words as well. He is with his disciples "on the way" – which is Mark's code for Jesus' journey toward the cross, a journey on which he will say many things to his disciples and they will become more and more confused and frightened. Today Jesus asks them, "Who do people say that I am?" They give the traditional responses: John the Baptist, Elijah, a prophet. Then Jesus zeroes in: "But who do *you* say that I am?" Peter finds the few words that speak for all: "You are the Messiah." Bingo! Paradoxically, Jesus now sternly orders them to be silent, and then goes on to describe a gruesome future. It's more than Peter can stand, so he opens his mouth again. This time he rebukes Jesus, only to be rebuked himself. "Get behind me, Satan!" If Jesus said that to me, I'd keep my mouth shut for a very long time.

With Peter silenced, Jesus calls all of his followers and tells them to take up the cross and lose their life. He sets their bar high – for them and for everyone after them, including, presumably, the community for whom Mark wrote his Gospel. No one is to be ashamed of Jesus *or his words* “in this adulterous and sinful generation.” That last phrase is unique to Mark. Maybe that’s why his Gospel seems so topical these days. If you’re ashamed of Jesus, Mark says, Jesus will be ashamed of you. Don’t be quiet. Speak up.

So how do we speak? What do we say when the risk is so great, when the chance of saying something wrong seems so high? Once again Psalm 19 comes to our help. “The heavens declare the glory of God,” it begins, telling us that as part of God’s creation, we, too, are made to glorify God. That’s why we’re here today, in part. Thomas Merton captures the same idea in a wonderful passage where he says that a tree glorifies God simply by being a tree. Creation has no words or language and yet its message has gone to the ends of the world. Can we do any less with the words that we have been given?

The second half of Psalm 19 is a hymn to the Law, the Torah, which guides the life of the psalmist so that his words will be true. For us, Jesus Christ is that truth, the eternal Word of God. Through Christ we pray that the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts will be acceptable in God’s sight. For those words to be acceptable, we must speak them boldly in resisting evil, in repentance, in proclaiming God’s word, in striving for justice and peace among all people. The words each of us uses will be different – that’s why we need to listen carefully to one another.

Words matter. God speaks through each of us. Let us always be careful that it is God speaking, not our ego, not our culture, but God. Let us speak the truth in love. And let us listen to one another also in love, the love of God shown to us in Jesus Christ, to whom with the Holy Spirit be honor and glory and praise, now and forever.

[Pentecost 19: Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38. I wrote a thirty-page paper in seminary on the Gospel passage. Be glad I didn’t include those words!]