

“God be in my mouth and in my speaking.”

All teachers fear the consequences of an unguarded remark. In a lesson to children aged about 11 or so we were discussing the ‘Moral of the Story’ or the messages of tales and fables for children. For example, Ring-a-Ring-o’Roses could possibly owe it’s origin to the Black Death (although, of course, seriously disputed and open to several other possible explanations); a rosy rash being a symptom of the plague; posies of herbs were carried as protection and to ward off the smell of the disease. Sneezing or coughing was a final fatal symptom, and ‘all fall down’ was exactly what happened. “What about Jack and the Beanstalk” I was asked. I blurt out without a moment’s thought “Never listen to a a word your mother says!” But I got away with it. What open-minded parents those children had. At University, the lecturer who taught the course on the New Testament epistles, Colin Hickling (who was nicknamed ‘Fifi’ the theology students for some reason) started the whole series of lectures with the ‘Catholic Epistles’ - so called because they are directed to a more universal readership than the Pauline letters which were addressed to specific churches or in one case, a person. He started with James, probably solely because of the following words, which he’d written up on the board in advance, then pointing to them to those of us who’d turned up, gave us a steely glare. “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” He didn’t even have the grace to blush! (I should say that Colin Hickling ended the three year course not just in mid-sentence, but in mid-word:- “I refer to Paul’s doctrine of Just..if..ic.” and that was it! Out he walked, frowning with his usual look of deep contemplation.)

But, given the nature of these opening words of today’s epistle, I am sorely tempted to suggest, in lieu of the sermon, that everyone here spends the time engaging in contemplative, silent prayer. . . . .

So our epistle begins with this stern warning to those who teach, and proceeds to a set of pronouncements, nearly a tirade, on how the human tongue is dangerous and evil, that inevitably it does more harm than good, and that our only hope is to some extent to keep it under control. Whoever the author of this open letter is, he has clearly been upset by what some people, claiming authority, have been saying. James casts his warning to those who teach, including himself, by using the first person plural, thus indicating clearly that he understands himself to be a teacher and interpreter of the true gospel. Well, he could hardly do anything else. In any case, he makes it clear that, far from garnering special favour from God, the act of teaching earns one extra scrutiny, since the ever-dangerous act of speaking is fraught with even greater peril when the speech claims, and is accorded, real authority. The observation that no human being is perfect may well be commonplace, but James links that authority to a greater risk of harm stemming from imperfection in speech. The three metaphors developed in verses 3-7 are worthy of some exploration. Each involves a different aspect of the tongue, which is itself a metaphor for the power of human speech. So James piles metaphor upon metaphor, yet the images he portrays are clear, so that we are able to follow his points. But a warning – we must be careful that we treat all metaphors with care, since they are only pointers to a deeper understanding. Take them too far and we lose the insight they can give.

The first metaphor of guiding a horse with a bridle is the most simple and straightforward. The rider (or driver) directs the speed and direction of a horse, much larger than himself (or herself) by means of a bit in the horse's mouth - an implement which, incidentally, functions by pressing against the animal's tongue. Quite literally then, the one who is able to control the horse's tongue with the bit in its mouth is controlling its whole body. The metaphor of the ship's rudder introduces additional aspects. The captain, rudder, and ship are analogous to the rider, bit and horse in the previous image. This time, though, we also consider the influence of outside forces, namely the wind and waves that would take the ship on a different course, more especially in the time of sail power alone. The captain who is able to keep control of the rudder, whilst judging the vagaries of wind and waves, is like the person able to keep control of one's tongue in difficult circumstances and emerge intact and on course. The third metaphor develops in a distinctly different direction from the first two. After all, the bit and the rudder are simply tools. The metaphor of the small igniting flame, like those of the bit and the rudder, deals with small entities with large effects. Unlike the bit and the rudder, though, the flame is uncontrolled and uncontrollable, and what it sets in motion is not purposeful but destructive.

This aspect of the danger of uncontrolled speech is of particular importance to James, and he goes on at some length to describe its disruptive nature, upsetting the entire created order (verse 6, τροχὸν τῆς γενέσεως, literally "wheel of birth"). He finally states that the force that destroys our tongue, namely this fire, has its source in Hell; or Gehenna (γεέννης) in the Greek. Gehenna is a real place, called the Valley of Hinnom near Jerusalem. In the Hebrew Bible, Jeremiah especially, Gehenna was initially where some of the rather more criticised kings of Judah sacrificed their children by fire. Thereafter, it was deemed to be cursed, and subsequently in Rabbinic literature and Christian and Islamic scripture, Gehenna is the ultimate destination of the wicked. In the time of James, the Valley of Hinnom had become a most loathsome place where fires were kept burning perpetually to consume the filth and cadavers thrown into it; a place where every conceivable piece of utter rubbish was burnt; a dump which smouldered continuously. The fires of Hell could be vividly imagined for those who lived in the vicinity of Jerusalem.

James returns to a figure that perhaps recalls that of the bit in the horse's mouth, but with a difference. The horse is tamed by human beings in order to be controlled by a bridle; likewise, creatures of all species can be subdued by us humans. The tongue alone remains untameable, "a restless evil", he says in verse 8, "full of deadly poison." Are we now to assume that James sees the tongue as inherently evil, controllable with effort but incapable of real change? Or should we read the other side of his metaphors, to recognize, for example, that the spark that starts the raging, destructive forest fire, can also light the home fire that cooks our food and warms our weary bones? Such is the nature of metaphorical language that we must make our own mind up as to which way the images should turn. It seems, however, that if we do not allow these metaphors to bear different interpretations, the next section of the passage is unrelieved cynicism. If the tongue, namely human speech, is inevitably evil, our attempts to do good in our speech are self-deception at best, at worst malevolent insults aimed at God. It does not seem likely that James intends the picture to remain so gloomy.

Rather, the end of our reading opens up new possibilities in James's metaphors, signalling perhaps a major shift in perspective. Despite our own experience that the tongue is unruly, that controlling our speech is a never-ending struggle, we can affirm other, quite different experiences. We do, in fact, bless God with our voices, and we do so sincerely, hopefully without reservations or false motives. And if this is the case, then we begin to imagine a situation in which all the dire warnings James has issued about the tongue may not necessarily doom us. In fact, if we *are* able to bless God with our tongues, maybe we are not the kind of people whose tongues lead them astray, a point James immediately follows up, as before, with images drawn from nature. If we are fig trees, we cannot bear olives. If we are grapevines, we cannot bear figs. No more can we bless God and curse people made in the divine image.

Ultimately James calls on us to examine ourselves closely, an examination focusing largely on the words that come out of our mouths, thus determining who we truly are. Perhaps we can control that unruly tongue, after all, but it needs constant attention. Somewhere in an English countryside graveyard is an epitaph dated 1771, which carries the following:-

“Beneath this stone a lump of clay lies Arabella Young - Who on the 21st of May began to hold her tongue”.

Let's hope we can all do better than that. Amen