



Weekly Worship Resource for Gladsmuir and Longniddry

Available in printed form and online at:
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Issue 59

Sunday 2nd May 2021

Today's reading

James 3: 1–18 (“Taming the tongue”)

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is 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. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. Amen. (NRSV)

Today's hymns

- 1 *Now the green blade riseth* (CH:417)
- 2 *Jesus is risen, alleluiah* (CH:409)
- 3 *Come down, O Love Divine* (CH:489)
- 4 *Away with gloom* (CH:418)
- 5 *Christ is made* (CH:200)

In the Name of the Father and of

A few weeks back I was watching *The Boat Race* on TV: not just any old boat race but *The Boat Race* in which 16 astonishingly brainy, astonishing tall, astonishingly fit-looking students of Oxford and Cambridge race each other in two boats. Each glistening vessel is guided by a very short, very light – but still astonishing brainy – student. The cox of each boat has the job of steering their team around the course. It's not the most athletic of roles, but it is nevertheless a vital one. In the end, as you may recall, Cambridge crossed the line to whoop with glee, while Oxford looked like they wanted nothing more than a hot bath and an early night. (Not without reason is this fixture seen as one of the toughest of all sporting contests – you wouldn't catch me doing it.)

This year, I was struck by one fact which emerged from the BBC's expert commentators. Of all things, this concerned the rudder of a competitive boat. I would have imagined that a great long boat occupied by no fewer than nine adults would need a steering mechanism of some considerable size and heft. Not so. The website of Darwin College, Cambridge, helpfully tells us that the device is simply a "small piece of metal the size of a credit card which your cox uses to steer a boat the length of a lorry whilst their view is obscured by eight great big rowers". Neatly put.

I find it utterly mind-boggling that something so tiny can be quite so crucial. Never mind all the training, all the effort, all the discipline of a boat race crew; if your credit-card-sized rudder fails you on the big day, then you're done. It's off to the bathtub then back to the drawing board for another year. The rudder is small but significant.

Surprisingly, perhaps, this very issue was addressed head on almost 2000 years ago in the letter of James. Speaking about the power of a tiny little tongue to do tremendous good or terrible wickedness, the writer came up with this handy illustration:

"... look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits."

The heading for today's reading says it all: "Taming the tongue". The fact is that our tongues (in other words, the things that we say) are our own personal rudder there to steer us through all of life. Our voices help us to communicate with tiny babies. They work hard for us day by day, getting us to where we need to be in so many settings ... including preaching. In conversation, in song, in prayer, in laughter or in tears – in all sorts of ways! – all the things that come out of our mouths form a pretty good body of evidence of who we are and of what we are thinking.

Kind words, wise pronouncements, high oratory and songs of beauty: all of these are central to our life in community, making our language, our voices, our tongues instruments of incalculable blessing and wonder. But what if we allow ourselves to position that tiny rudder, the tongue, so that – knowingly or unknowingly – it takes us in a different direction altogether? The words we use so freely and thoughtlessly can bring hurt rather than healing, driving a destructive wedge into the heart of once healthy relationships.

And as we might recall from Second World War posters, in the worst of scenarios, "Careless talk costs lives." The harsh reality from 80 years ago was that you didn't need to know any big state secrets. All it took to sink a battleship was idle chit-chat in a naval port: "He told me they're heading north to Iceland. That could be chilly this time of year." And soon the news would be passed on to Berlin. Careless talk could indeed so easily cost lives.

the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .

If people think about the rudder of the tongue and its misuse, I suspect that what springs to mind for many is the issue of bad language, as older folk moan about the words they hear shouted in the playground or on the playing field or, of course, on TV. And yes, I think that such complaints can be a fair representation of the decline in values over the generations. Sometimes in the street I hear harsh or demeaning or crude language used by a young parent towards their toddler, and I feel sad that the poor wee sponge-like kid is soaking up all the anger and venom and frustration that the mum or dad might be sending out.

I can tell you from my own experience in classrooms that schools are still doing their best to counter the trend towards language which harms the listener (and, indeed, the speaker). I'm really impressed that in our local schools standards remain every bit as high as those I recall from the 1970s and '80s in this area of conduct.

But let's be clear: if the writer of the epistle of James has a concern over the things we say, it's about so, so much more than idle swear words. Listen to James once more and hopefully you will hear what I mean:

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is 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. For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

How often in the Bible do we come across a passage quite as vitriolic in its message, quite as determined in its tone? Not often, I would say. So what is it that James is saying? He is telling his readers that people need to be aware that they have in their mouth a potent, deadly weapon, fully loaded, without the luxury of a safety catch. Our speech is, and will always be, an ever-present danger that needs to be taken extremely seriously.

And in an age of burgeoning social media, the words we allow ourselves to say or text or type can have terrible effects on a *global* scare. Through hate-filled messages sent out far and wide, everyone from unknown teenagers to not-so-great world leaders can conspire to steer public opinion down some pretty dangerous avenues.

So talking tongues (and typing fingers) become a fire which breeds fire upon fire upon fire.

Beware, says James. Beware the words you set free each day. Keep your tongue reined in and your mind alert because – as previously noted – there is no safety catch. This epistle's message is one of grave personal responsibility. We need to get it right.

Years ago a good friend came to our house in Edinburgh with his toolkit to rehang a door. I was his clueless assistant in a job that proved to be surprisingly complicated. He took extra special care in all that he was doing, because he realised he had taken on a big responsibility to get this job done properly. At one stage I heard this gifted DIY enthusiast mutter a useful line which had become his mantra: "Measure twice, cut once."

What I use my tongue to say to you is my responsibility, not anyone else's. This means that anyone who speaks needs to *think* twice before letting themselves *speak* once. And when, in those most challenging of situations in which difficult truths need to be uttered by one person to another, let the words used be firm *and* fair, critical *and* encouraging, direct *and* constructive. That is how serious communication should be done.

The words we speak each day may be invisible, but still we all need to watch them. Amen.

Praying for others

*Carol Wardman, the Bishops' Adviser for Church and Society for the Church in Wales, has written this prayer for the elections on Thursday 6th May.
(Reprinted by kind permission.)*

Incarnate God,
at our creation you made us not separate from the world,
but of the same substance; and you entrusted us
with the care of the Earth and of one another.
You gifted us with intellect, imagination and freedom
to consider different models of government;
and you call to public service women and men
with hearts and minds set on creating
a harmonious and flourishing society.
Grant us, we pray, the discernment to use wisely
our privilege of choice at this election,
treating with respect all those who put their time,
energy and talents at our disposal.
Guide both electors and candidates
with insight, compassion and unselfishness,
that together we may understand what are your priorities,
and make our homeland here on Earth
a place where all people and all of your creation can thrive.
In Jesus' Name we pray. Amen.

And finally . . .

Abigail Morrison considers how we have helped others living with HIV:

A couple of weeks ago I talked about our donations from our "Away Fund". Last time I told you about Christian Aid. Today I wanted to tell you about the Church of Scotland HIV Programme. We donated £1,280 to them from our Away funds given during 2020 and we also gave them £265 from Souper Sunday in January 2021 – even though we didn't actually have an event!

HIV and AIDS may not make the news so much these days, but there are still challenges for the many around the world who are infected or affected by HIV, especially with the difficulties that Covid-19 brings to healthcare services around the world.

The HIV Programme's aim is to break the silence on HIV and AIDS, stand together with partner churches, offer practical support, speak up for the voiceless, and involve every member of the church.

The Programme supports 17 projects run by partner churches in such places as Scotland, Africa, the Middle East, Asia and the Caribbean. In this country they support Positive Help, a small Edinburgh-based charity, offering practical assistance to people affected by HIV. The Programme's grant supports their volunteer transport service and recruitment and training of volunteers.

They support seven projects in Africa. They involve care and support to people living with HIV and AIDS, including children, by providing counselling, physical and spiritual care, nutritional supplements, educational support and access to health and social services.