

20th February 2024

Words

**"So is my word that goes out from my mouth.
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."**

Bible, Isaiah 55:11 (New International Version)

I love words. Etymology is the history of a word: tracing its development since its earliest recorded occurrence in the language where it is found; investigating its transmission from one language to another; analysing it into its component parts; identifying its usage in other languages; tracing it to a common form in an ancestral language. It's a joy and a delight!

The etymology of the word *etymology*, for example, is straightforward. In Latin, *etymon* means "origin of a word", and comes from the Greek word *etymon*, meaning "literal meaning of a word according to its origin." The Greek *etymon* in turn comes from *etymos*, which means "true." But please don't confuse *etymology* with *entomology*. *Entomon* means "insect" in Greek. So *entomology* is the study of bugs! Didn't I say that my love of words is a joy and a delight?

Words matter. A great orator can sway a crowd using words in a stirring fashion. The effective words of a hymn, prayer or sermon can encourage faith. A word shared in a spirit of compassion can bring healing. A harsh word, thoughtlessly uttered, can cause untold harm. In 1837, Letitia Elizabeth Landon summed this up in *Ethel Churchill*:

*'Tis a strange mystery, the power of words!
Life is in them, and death. A word can send
The crimson colour hurrying to the cheek,
Hurrying with many meanings; or can turn
The current cold and deadly to the heart.
Anger and fear are in them; grief and joy
Are on their sound; yet slight, impalpable –
A word is but a breath of passing air.*

Yes, indeed, in the "strange mystery" of language, words have power! So, as well as valuing their etymology, let's make sure that, as Isaiah advises, they accomplish the good purpose that we desire.

A prayer for today

*Lord, "Your Word is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path."
May my words serve the same purpose for others. Amen*