

WORDS

During the last World War there was a poster campaign about watching what you said called “Careless Talk Costs Lives” and there were numerous posters about the dire consequences about what such careless talk could result in – information about troop movements getting into enemy hands, even ships being torpedoed.

That slogan would be a good summary of today’s epistle from that very practical Letter of James, for it’s all about watching what we say. Not just to stop us putting our foot in it when we open our mouths, but more importantly reminding us of the hurt and damage that can be caused to others by what we say. James likens careless words and hurtful words to a forest fire that can be started by just a small spark, and over the summer we have seen the catastrophic results of such fires.

According to Psychology Today, because we are human and prone to make mistakes, slips of the tongue are inevitable. In fact, they say that for every 1000 words we speak we make two errors, and sometimes things come out the wrong way – like the wife who was introduced to an ex-girl-friend of her husband, and blurted out, “Nice to beat you!”

Of course, Freud had his own theories about slips of the tongue, but for many of us they are just banana peels in the way of a sentence.

President George W Bush was famous for his slips of the tongue. At a commemoration for 9/11 he once said, “Our enemies never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people – and nor do I!”

About 130 years before Jesus a wise old Jewish prophet wrote

“The stroke of the whip makes marks on the flesh,
but the stroke of the tongue breaketh the bones.

Many have fallen by the edge of the sword,

But not so many as have fallen by the tongue.”

In today’s epistle, James says that it is essential that we are careful in what we say. “Careless Talk Costs Lives” as the war-time slogan had it.

And he recognises that slips of the tongue are a common human failure. For he goes on to say, “From the same mouth comes blessings and cursings: this ought not to be so.”

And in our Gospel today we get an example of this. Peter often spoke before he engaged his brain.

He is commended by the Lord for declaring Jesus to be the Messiah, but then, in the next breath he is contradicting Jesus about his forthcoming death.

Yes, Peter often said things he later regretted – as for example in the Courtyard of Caiaphas when he denied even knowing Jesus.

Echoing that war-time slogan, someone once said, “We have freedom of speech, but you’ve got to watch what you say.”

A 1st century Roman writer put it well when he wrote, “Speech is the mirror of the souls: as a person speaks, so they are.” (Publilius Syrus)

And Jesus agrees with the assessment of speech revealing character when he said, “On the day of judgement you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter, for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned.” (Matt 12:36, 37)

There is, as the Book of Ecclesiastes puts it, “A time to speak and a time to keep silence. There are times for words and times to shut up and stay quiet. And true wisdom is knowing the right time for both.

For example, how often do we take the easy way out and keep quiet when someone is saying something that is wrong or hurtful or harmful? How hard it is to speak up for what is right and true, just and fair? And how often do we regret not saying something, that we kept silence when we should have spoken out?

And how often do we not say the things that really matter to those close to us?

I remember a book I read a long time ago that had in it the relationship between a widowed father and his grown up daughter who lived with him. The relationship had grown tense. The father expected too much from his daughter, and she, caught up with a demanding job and a social life, was never much at home. Communication between them was sparse and when it did happen it inevitably ended in an argument.

Both held deep feelings of love for each other, but somehow they remained buried deep down in their hearts and were never expressed in what they said to each other.

The father suffered a stroke which left him paralysed and unable to speak. At his hospital bedside his daughter spoke, at last, the loving words she should have said but hadn't. She saw that his eyes were straining to say something but nothing came. In a sense they had both nearly left it too late.

We need, while we can, to speak the kind, loving words to those who are dear to us, and not assume that they know what's in our hearts.

It has been said that every person needs to feel that they are the most important person in somebody else's life and that that needs to be communicated clearly, frequently and unambiguously by the words we say.

And what is the hardest word to say? According to The Guinness Book of Records the longest word in the English language has 47 letters in it – I won't try to pronounce it, but it's the name of a lung disease that affects miners.

It might be difficult to pronounce but the hardest word to say is only 5 letters long – and that is sorry.

Yet every church service has a time of confession. We may not have the regular tradition of a parishioner making a verbal confession to a priest. Though it is available if requested. But in every service we are given time to be aware of those things we have done or left undone, those words spoken or left unspoken. Time to be aware of how we have fallen short and to ask God forgiveness.

Confession and forgiveness is a core part of our Christian practice and worship. Yes how much more difficult it is to say to a loved one that we are sorry.

I know of a situation where a young woman needed to apologise to her sister but the apology was too difficult to verbalise but instead she wrote it down. Thankfully the apology was accepted.

When we do something wrong, or say something untrue or unkind we are more likely to make excuses to justify our words and actions than we are to say 'sorry'.

But saying sorry is a sign of strength rather than weakness, a sign we're secure rather than insecure.

High horses can get very high the longer we sit on them, and sometimes become so high we can't seem to get down off them and say sorry.

Let me end with an old prayer which has so much to teach us. This is how it goes:-

“Set a watch, O Lord, upon our tongues,
That we may never speak the cruel word which is untrue
Or, being true, is not the whole truth,
Or being wholly true is without mercy.”

And it concluded

“Keep the door of our hearts that only love may enter therein

And the door of our lips that only love may speak through them. Amen.”