

MIND YOUR LANGUAGE – REV. DAVID WINFIELD



At various points in the Bible, we are reminded that words have the power to encourage and build up, but conversely they have the power to discourage and tear down. For example the writer of Proverbs had said *"The tongue has the power of life and death."* Then he said *"He who guards his lips*

guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin." Or again *"Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing."*

In the New Testament the epistle of James also spends time on this theme. Scholars tell us that his intended audience was Jewish Christians who had been scattered throughout the Mediterranean world because of persecution. They lived therefore in often hostile surroundings and would have been subject to attacks because of their faith, verbal if not physical. So how were they to react? James is encouraging them to hold fast to the way of Christ and not to revert to reacting in kind. Tit for tat was not to be their attitude. Of course we all know, as they would have, that when hurtful things are said to you it's so easy to reply in similar vein.

The truth that words are powerful we learn from an early age. Oh we might try to deflect their hurtful effect with that very common reaction to some schoolyard bullying, *"Sticks & stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me."* But we know deep inside that's simply not true. Words can hurt, often with very long-lasting effect. Words matter, they have consequences. One commentator has reminded us that in our technologically advanced world, thanks to the connectivity of social media *"Not only can our words spread to even more people with the click of a button; it is also easier than ever to hurt others with our words. Not only can we verbally abuse others, we can do it with a wide audience, even giving others an opportunity to pick a side and join in. If social media has taught us anything, it is how destructive words can be, and how easy it is for us misuse and abuse our words, how quickly we can lose control of our tongues. Many have become very proficient in the inappropriate use of 140 characters or less. And of course, there is the text message. It seems that many people don't talk anymore, they type. Even with all of its benefits to quickly share information with one or many*

at once, text messaging has also made it even easier for us to demonstrate our inability to control our tongue."

How much damage can our words inflict? Look no further than the Columbine school massacre in 1999 when thirteen young people lost their lives. Students and psychologists alike agree that one of the main catalysts that drove those two young gunmen over the edge was all the teasing and ridicule that they had endured for some time before, a good example of how our words, which we sometimes utter without even thinking, can bring about unwarranted and catastrophic results. Now we will never have instigated such fatal outcomes yet it remains possible that we may well have caused real hurt to someone by our ill-chosen words. So how do we avoid such harmful results?

One person suggested asking ourselves five questions before engaging the mouth, captured in the acronym THINK.

"T" ..Is it True?

"H" ..Is it Helpful?

"I" ..Is it inspiring?

"N" .. Is it Necessary?

"K" ..Is it Kind?

Think - think before you speak.



The Scriptures constantly remind us to encourage one another - with our words.

Complaint, carping, criticism should find no place in the Christian's conversations; rather we are all to be encouragers.

The instruction of the New Testament is quite clear; as the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews puts it, *“Spur one another on toward love and good deeds”*.

In the first letter to the Thessalonians *“Therefore encourage one another and build each other up as you are already doing”*.

Colossians, *“I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding.”*

Paul to Timothy *“proclaim the message; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching.”*

Often we have to confess that our words may be chosen depending upon who’s in earshot. So we do well to remind ourselves that there’s one who hears all.



As the Psalmist said, *“Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight O Lord.”*

(Excerpts from a sermon by Revd. David Winfield in St. Peter’s Church on 16 September ‘18)