

The Power of Speech

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord
(Psalm 19:14)

This week is 'Week without Words' and, being mindful of those who are not able to communicate as easily as we do, makes us aware that speech is a gift. How do we use this gift?

There is an old rhyme: *Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words can't hurt me*. But, as we know, that's not true! Words have great power: they can build up and they can destroy, they can inspire hope and motivate people to greatness and they can send chills down our spine; they can make us happy or sad, courageous or fearful, loved and included or alone and alienated.

Some years ago the topic of discussion on the SBS program *Insight* was 'trolling'. It was disturbing to hear the three trolls who appeared as guests on the program, representative of this phenomenon, expressing their defense of this particular way of exercising their right to freedom of speech. We are all familiar with that old analogy of breaking open a feather pillow and then trying to retrieve the scattered feathers. Impossible. But the extent of the damage today is frightening and sometimes tragic. One member of the audience told of how trolls had got into the RIP site set up by the friends of his fifteen-year-old daughter who had passed away, and within a few days, while coping with grief and funeral arrangements the family had to deal with that too. Words can and do hurt and destroy.

At the moment, freedom of speech is a topical issue here in Australia as it is more widely across the globe in this era of the Trump presidency. Freedom of speech as a right, while being an important part of any healthy society, does raise serious issues about the rights of all people and particularly the possible harmful effects on others when that right is exercised. This is a complex issue and is an essential debate to have in any society and it prompted me to think about what we find in our Judaeo - Christian spiritual tradition - about speech and how we use it, and in fact our Christian understanding of 'the word'.

There is much in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures about speech and this reflection will only be a taste of what is there. But there is a recurring and constant theme which, as we will see, is very much part of an authentic Christian spiritual path: use your words wisely and refrain from harmful, destructive speech. The Book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) is a collection of sayings attributed to King Solomon whose wisdom was legendary. They were written to guide people in their everyday relationships and through all the obvious human foibles, and they express the common sense, down-to-earth wisdom of the day. If we look beyond some of the no-longer-accepted cultural attitudes and prejudices of that time, there is much wisdom in these sayings for us today. Looking through the Book of Proverbs for references to speech, it can be seen that one of the most obvious things is to do with speaking with honesty and integrity: *Put away from you crooked speech and put devious talk far from you* (4:23). And Solomon says of himself: *All the words of my mouth are righteous; there is*

nothing twisted or crooked in them (8:8). This caution against dishonest speech is further developed in chapter 2 where a link is made between perverse speech and evil. To speak in such a way, we discover, is in fact, evil.

The fact that these proverbs or teachings exist, show us that there was a need for this guidance and wisdom in the society of the day. In fact, 'crooked' speech and 'devious' talk have always been part of human relating. The mythology in the Book of Genesis expresses the 'original' or essential understanding of humanity and 'how the world works', and it's interesting that right there we find this happening: the serpent beguiling Eve with devious talk. And this 'crooked speech' enticed her and overrode the words of God to both Adam and Eve commanding them not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge in the garden. This myth has many layers of meaning, but one thing we do see at work is the power of speech, the power of a persuasive argument. Eloquence and powerful rhetoric can be beguiling, and we have many examples of this in history and in our own lives. We can easily be taken in by persuasive speech and in some cases it can be the undoing of otherwise good and sensible people. Solomon, as we see, prided himself on the fact that his words had nothing crooked or twisted in them. In the prayer book of ancient Israel, the Book of Psalms, we find the psalmist lamenting this hypocrisy and deceit: *My companion laid hands on a friend and violated a covenant with me with speech smoother than butter, but with a heart set on war; with words that were softer than oil, but in fact were drawn swords* (Psalm 55: 20 – 21).

Jumping ahead to St Paul, in his letter to the new and developing community at Ephesus, in the 50s of the first century ce, we see that he admonishes them in like manner: *Let no evil talk come out of your mouths*, he says. But then he goes on to say, *but only what is essential for building up, as there is need, so that your words may give grace to those who hear* (Ephesians 4:29). Paul, in addition to telling the Ephesians to avoid evil talk or the crooked speech that is mentioned in Proverbs, in fact adds a further dimension to our understanding of how we are to use our words. He says we are to use our words in a positive way for 'building up' – and then he goes on to say, 'so that your words give grace to those who hear'. Grace is the freely given outpouring of God's life and love, a gift to us that strengthens and builds us up. Paul uses the word 'grace' a lot in his letters: he begins them by addressing the communities to whom he is writing in this way, *Grace to you*, and often he adds, *from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*. Paul himself had a most powerful experience of this grace or gift from God. You may be familiar with Paul's story: he was a Jew, a Roman citizen, who was one of the key figures in the persecution of the early followers of Jesus. However, Paul experienced a powerful conversion, a total change of heart, unexpected and undesired, what he came to see as the grace of God. This utterly changed his life and he became a zealous proclaimer of grace. Paul is saying something quite momentous. He is saying that our words can be a way that others experience God's love; they can be the means through which God touches the lives of others. In fact, more than just saying that this is possible, he instructs the community to speak in this way. That is an amazing thought really, and it certainly invites us to stop and think about what that might mean for each of us. How much of what we say each day is a channel of God's grace?

Back to the Book of Proverbs, and we find a similar understanding: *The mouth of the righteous is a fountain of life* (10:10); *The tongue of the righteous is choice silver – the lips of the righteous feed many* (10:20 – 21). There are some beautiful and powerful perspectives here: our words can be a fountain of life and they can feed many. I think this is an image worth reflecting on. 'To feed' is to provide what is essential for life. What are we offering through what we say? The 'building up' that Paul writes about or the 'feeding' in the Book of Proverbs, is not about flattery or platitudes, nor is it about just any sort of wisdom or ideology or fashionable perspectives of the day. In fact, Paul alludes to this when he says, *Let no one deceive you with empty words* (Ephesians 5:6). What he is talking about is the truth of Jesus – Jesus' message, person, life, death and resurrection. So within our Christian tradition, to feed others through our words will mean that we speak words of forgiveness, love, hope, healing, reconciliation, peace, justice, joy and challenge too. They will be words that bring light into the darkness. They will be words that enable those who hear them to discover and live the fullness of life that Jesus embodies and offers to all.

So we see that our words have the potential to be channels of grace. But we also know that we can use our words irresponsibly. This may not necessarily intentionally be so, as in the case of deliberately devious speech, as we saw. In the Book of Proverbs we find a caution against what we might think of as mindless babbling. *When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable; but the prudent are restrained in speech* (10:19). In other words, think things through before you speak! Be mindful of inadvertently causing hurt or offence. Restraint is advised. This may not be a fashionable idea in a culture where many of the protocols of the past regarding what is appropriate have been put aside in favour of 'honesty', telling it as it is. In such a culture restraint may be seen to suggest some sort of suppression. But restraint may also be seen as a virtue. It is about developing the wisdom to know when something is appropriate. It is about enjoying things at the right time and in the right manner. And this applies to speech as well. Restraint invites us to really value the gift of speech and the ability to communicate with others.

There are a number of references to slander in the Scriptures too. Again, in the Book of Proverbs we find this: *Whoever spreads slander is a fool* (10:18). And Paul, in that same letter to the Ephesians says, *Put away wrangling and slander*. Slander, as we know, refers to harmful statements, defamation. This use of speech is harmful in many ways, including the fact that it takes away the freedom of the other. It can deprive someone of the right and ability to develop positive relationships; it can result in alienation; it can destroy reputations and lives. Slander really is a form of theft. And let's remember the feather pillow analogy: it is impossible to undo the harm. Slander can happen in the most benign settings: the gathering for a coffee which turns into a good gossip about someone - just how often do you find yourself in a café and become aware that someone is being utterly decimated in the conversation going on at the next table. It's clear that the people of ancient Israel were well aware of these harmful effects and that is why in chapter 6 of the Book of Proverbs it states that, *there are six things the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to God*, and two of these are, a *lying tongue* and a *lying witness who testifies falsely*. This statement that God 'hates' these things is saying in fact, that engaging in slanderous talk is harmful to us too, for it alienates us from the Source of Life and

Love. We ourselves turn away from communion with God, from what is good and life-giving when we harm others through our conversations about them. Jesus too spoke of the harmful effect of slander on the one engaging in it: *Listen and understand; it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles ... what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles – for out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander* (Matthew 15: 10). And in fact, one of the commandments of the Decalogue (The Ten Commandments) is, *You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour* (Exodus 20:16).

Just this brief look at Scripture reveals that we are called to become aware of the sacredness of speech and the potential for our words to be a means of grace, building up rather than destroying. There is a further dimension to this understanding of ‘the word’ in our Judaeo – Christian tradition which teaches us to value the word. God’s activity in the world, God’s relationship with creation, is expressed in terms of word and speech. In the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, the creation myth, we find repeatedly, throughout the story, the phrase, *And God said*. Shape, form and life come into being through the power of the word. This is expressed too in some of the psalms: *By the word of the Lord the heavens were made* (Psalm 33:6) and, *Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of the Lord, for he spoke and it came to be* (33:9). In Psalm 50:1 we read, *The mighty one, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting*.

The ‘word’ refers to the Divine will and it enables God’s will to be realised in the world. The prophet Isaiah says that God’s word will accomplish its purpose (55:11). The word reveals God’s Law. The word is a healer, *He sent out his word and healed them* (Psalm 107:20). The word is a messenger: the Hebrew prophets all talk of their call by God in this way, *The word of the Lord came to me*. And then, in the Annunciation story in Luke’s Gospel, there is Mary’s response to the Divine message, *Let what you have said be done to me*.

John, in the first chapter of his Gospel, what is known as the Prologue, states: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life*. A number of verses later he proclaims: *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth*. The Gospel of John was written in Greek and the Greek word used in this context is ‘Logos’. Logos means cosmic mind, reason, and is translated from the Greek as ‘word’. As we have seen, the Jews understood that ‘the word’ created the world, gave life and accomplishes the Divine will. And John sees Jesus as the divine logos – the Word – who has become incarnate, become human in the world.

Well, what do we take from all this? The word is sacred; the word is the Divine decree and activity in the universe. In our Catholic tradition we acknowledge the power of the word each time we say, *The word of the Lord* and respond with, *Thanks be to God*. But the word is spoken intimately to each of us too. There is a line from a contemporary song by a young Catholic singer / songwriter, *You speak your word into my life* - and that is exactly how we are invited

to hear and relate to God as word, speaking into our lives, and God speaking to us through the written words in Scripture. It is also how we are invited to use the word, the power and gift of speech that we have. The use of speech is a complex and important issue, but as a spiritual path, what we say, the words we use and how we use them, are the way to bring God into the world. They can be a fountain of life. As Paul says, grace can come through how we use words.

A prayer for this week:

*Let the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you, O Lord
(Psalm 19:14).*

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