

Sunday 30 August: Twelfth Sunday after Trinity

Speaking the language of God

Readings: James 1. 17-end; Mark 7.1-8, 14-15, 21-23

During my previous career in development in the film and television industry I spent a lot of time working with scriptwriters. The less experienced writers would always have their characters speak too many words. They would have them spending scene after scene talking *to* or *at* each other. The work of script editing meant paring all this down. Taking out reams of dialogue, cutting scenes and sometimes even characters, all the flab of the script; going through draft after draft until you ideally had something lean and tight which captured the essence of the story and linked to its original idea or source. Not until that was done did the story feel authentic and the characters real.

As important as the words they spoke, was what the characters did. The real drama was in the choices they made and in their actions. You would sometimes find that the most powerful scenes had no dialogue at all but connected powerfully with what the scriptwriter was trying to convey.

Both our readings today centre on words and actions and their source. Our words and God's words and how we work to align our language with his. Our life and actions with Jesus' life and actions. What is at the heart of all we say and do? What is authentic and holy.

In the passage from the letter of James he begins to explore the ethics of speech. When and how to speak, when to be silent and how to listen. The potential power of our words and actions. In order to speak and act authentically, with compassion for those who are most in need, he encourages his hearers to connect to the word of God.

Like that feeling many of us may have recently on return from holiday, of being overwhelmed with hundreds of e-mails drowning our inboxes; the constant chatter of the world, like the scriptwriter's garrulous characters, threatens to drown out the voice of God, that authentic source. It's hard to find the brain space let alone the space in the heart to listen for God's promptings. James encourages us to slow down, listen, and so make space for God to enter our thoughts and language and actions. Be like the script editor, constantly drawing ourselves back to his Word within us.

God's desire is that we dwell on him deeply so that we speak his language with our lives in action, decision, thought and care – become doers of his word.

Overwhelmed by modern living, it's tempting to skim along the surface of life and experience it a superficial way. Like that disarming image in the reading of the person who just glances at themselves in the mirror, not taking time to get to know themselves or God. Becoming '*doers of the word rather than merely hearers*' requires us to learn to speak the language of God with our lives and let go of the language of the world. To get to know this unchanging God who is always and utterly totally loving, totally giving, totally generous. *With whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.* God is love. His actions are pure love. In God doing and being are never separated. We cannot come close to God without feeling compelled to share his love with others, put what we hear into action. Speak his language.

At the Sunday Eucharist in a village on the island of Vis, the furthestmost of Croatia's islands, a couple of weeks ago, surrounded by villagers of all ages I found myself struggling with the

language. My Croatian is good enough to follow and understand a lot but not all. I attempted to pray in English but that didn't sit right either. I was at the interface of two languages; at times completely at home with those around me, at other moments at sea. With everyone knowing the words by heart and no service books, I didn't even have a text to fall back on. My answer was just to plunge into the experience, grasp the Croatian, abandon the English. Understanding most, floundering a bit, I found myself swimming along all the same. If you're visiting London you may be having the same experience if English is your second or third language.

We live our lives at the interface of understanding God's language, his Word expressed in the life of Jesus. Often we might feel as if we don't quite understand it. Grasping to make sense especially when it jars with our own understanding or sense of the world. Or requires us to change or do things differently; open our hearts to someone we'd rather not; look a bit deeper at our motivations and desires and find ourselves wanting. Often the language of the world seems clearer and more immediate and much easier to follow and speak, makes much less demand on us. But the longing of our hearts calls us to listen for the language of God - that is his gift to us. We are never going to understand it completely but we're meant to speak it, however stumbling the translation.

The Pharisees in our Gospel don't understand. Their lives are defined by the language of purity rituals, which set the parameters of their world. Once essential for defining their faith and marking them as separate from other nations, now they are at sea when Jesus and his disciples come living and speaking in a new way with a new language. No longer about what is clean and unclean, Jesus breaks through the old regulations with a language of the heart. The law no longer resides in rules and regulations but in Him - in a life and in a person - God's perfect law and word. His perfect expression of himself; of love. Following the law means transforming our hearts to become more like him. Much harder than following rules.

For us to speak his language we need to draw closer to him. I wonder what other people hear from us in our actions and speech. A distant echo or rumour of God or something louder and stronger perhaps?

I saw a dolphin swimming in an open sea for the first time just a few days ago. It made my heart leap and sing. There are times when we get that same feeling when we glimpse the sheer surprise, joy and beauty of the word of God through other people. When what 'comes out' from their hearts is beautiful. It comes alive in them in their kindness, sense of justice, strength or generosity.

Perhaps that glimpse of God may be seen in us, if we learn the language of his love, allow his word to dwell in us and dare speak it out with our lives. Then we'll be part of his script, part of his story.