

## Sunday 14 October 2007: Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity

**Readings: 2 Timothy 2: 8-15; Luke 17: 11-19**

### Words and Silence

*'The word of God is not chained'.*

*'Warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words.'*

*'A worker... rightly explaining the word of truth'.*

We use or listen to thousands of words a day. They pour out whenever more than one person is gathered or fill a room from TV or radio. Language is a remarkable part of our humanity as becomes particularly clear if we are deprived of it for any reason. It is one of the distinctive aspects of being human. When God made the world he spoke and it was done. That creative word was an essential aspect of the nature of God as understood by the writer of Genesis. We share the creative power of making or unmaking with our words and there are some things that it's hard to express in any other way.

A small child, living in a riverside town was told, at school, to draw a picture of God. The little girl drew something that she loved and that was familiar to her – a swan sailing serenely along among the rushes. Her teacher was annoyed saying 'That's not what God looks like!' We might think that was actually a rather lovely representation of God but the fact is that, hard as it is to describe our image of God to someone in words it may be even more difficult to do it in other ways.

Words are really remarkable things and we should be in awe of them but we use them or listen to them so often that they cease to amaze us. Words are not haphazard. The letters are arranged in a purposeful order so that we can convey information, spark off memories or illuminate shades of meaning. Words are also very powerful things, a power that we don't always recognise because of their sheer familiarity. Nicholas Lash once, in a lecture, spoke about what can happen to the history of a word as its primary sense changes and how it can then be hard to recapture its original meaning. He used 'invention' as an example.

'Invention' first appeared in English sometime in the 14<sup>th</sup> century as the translation of the Latin word meaning 'to come upon something or to discover or find it'. Within two hundred years it was possible to invent something or come upon it just by sitting down and working it out or having a plan. And then a pejorative sense developed – to invent something coming to mean 'making it up'. By that point someone who had no knowledge of the history of the word might have wondered at an expression such as 'The invention of the Cross'. And he asks, where does God come into all this? In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the word 'god' came to be used, for the first time, to name the ultimate explanation of the system of the world. But then, when it came to be realised that the system of the world was such as not to require a single, overarching explanatory principle the word 'god' was dispensed with by many people and a new secularism was born. Such is the power of words.

'The word of God is not chained.' Paul talks of the hardship he suffered, even being chained like a criminal for the Christ that he had come to believe in. But he wants to make it quite clear to

Timothy that the word of God is not chained and that he's willing to endure terrible hardships for its sake.

In recent weeks, as we've seen on our TV screens, many people in Burma have been prepared to put themselves at risk in order to speak out for the truth. If they hoped that, by demonstrating in their tens of thousands that would protect them, sadly, as now know, that hasn't proved to be the case. Each day we hear of more stories of torture and murder.

Christians are a tiny minority in that country – perhaps less than 5% of the total population – and they've been persecuted for a long time. They know what that feels like and they're showing unequivocal support for the Buddhist monks who've been leading the pro-democracy marches against the military government. The monks, revered in Burma's Buddhist culture, are yet suffering their share of the torture. Desmond Tutu has likened the protests to those against apartheid and is confident they will succeed eventually. It's sometime forgotten that the fall of the Communist regime in East Germany began with prayers for peace said in a Lutheran church in Leipzig. It was an apparently small gesture of defiance but it started a huge swell. Within a few weeks 400,000 people filled the centre of the city in a demonstration and the Berlin wall fell 31 days later quickly followed by the regimes in Czechoslovakia and Romania. 'The word of God is not chained' and 'A worker, rightly explaining the word of truth.'

'Warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words.' This is something the church has a history of doing since its very earliest days. The exact meaning of a single word has caused rifts and schism down the centuries. We try and get round those things that divide us by the clever use of words. Endless hours are spent searching for forms of words that will enable conversation to continue but in misplacing our faith in words and putting too much value on them, however wonderful they may be, we may miss the point.

The Archbishop of Mexico who was with us on our first Sunday back in this building had spoken to the clergy of this part of the diocese earlier in the week. He talked of a meeting of Primates of the Anglican Communion in Ireland two years ago where they ate breakfast, lunch and dinner together and talked together over those meals but then some refused to share at the eucharist together – and the terrible pain of that. Imagine the person sitting in the pew next to you refusing to receive communion at the altar with you when the time comes. That's what's going on between some parts of the Anglican Communion at the moment. 'Warn them before God that they are to avoid wrangling over words.'

What would we do without words – in our everyday conversations, in particular conversations, in drama, in poetry. We often neglect them, ignoring the power of they carry – for good and bad, and taking their richness for granted. But we also neglect the obverse of words - silence.

Over the years a number of TV programmes have been made about centres of retreat. One was made about St Beuno's in N. Wales and then, of course, there was the series 'The Monastery' made at Worth Abbey where we spent our parish weekend this year. The general feedback after such programmes is usually pretty positive. People are impressed and attracted to the idea but terrified of the silence. Earlier this year there was that remarkable film '*Into Great Silence*' which lasted for three hours and was shot almost in real time in the midst of a silent order. There was no soundtrack, no commentary, virtually no speech and yet the audience when I went appeared transfixed and were totally silent themselves.

There is a growing lack of silence now and a fear of silence. Many of us don't know what to do with silence but there's also an increasing and understandable yearning for it. On the buses now there are signs warning people not to play their music without using headphones. And people seem to speak more loudly on a mobile than they do in normal conversation. I got caught on a bus for nearly an hour the other day while a demonstration was going on and the driver went this way and that trying to find a way round it. The person in the seat next to me carried on an animated phone conversation for the entire duration of the journey by which time it seemed as if the whole bus full of people was exhausted.

But our spoken words aren't always necessary. Jesus was travelling on his way to Jerusalem and he came to a village where, being near Samaria, he encountered ten lepers, one of whom was a Samaritan. The lepers called out to him but actually no words were required of them. What they were asked to do was to go and show themselves to the priests. It's rather striking that they didn't have to say anything, no words of explanation, no words of request – simply to show themselves and they were healed. They were made clean 'as they went'.

Then, when one, the Samaritan, did turn back it was to offer praise. It was words of praise and thanksgiving that came from his lips – not words of wrangling. And then he listened to the word of teaching.

We have been given the two wonderful gifts – of language and of silence. Sometimes we mis-use both by rushing to use words to fill silence that has become awkward. And we fail to wonder at the power of words – the words we use – to heal and to destroy - to convey the seemingly ordinary and mundane or the obviously extraordinary.

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