

12/09/2021 James 3:1-12

If you are anything like me,
Then sometimes you could have wished for a rewind button on life.
For example: Not so long ago I cooked Yorkshire pudding at a high heat
And as I was taking it out of the oven I got distracted and burnt my hand.
At that moment I wished I could rewind just a few seconds
And start over again, but life's not like that.

Of course, it's not just with physical injuries
That we could wish to rewind and start again.
Have you ever said something and wished almost immediately
That you could take back what you'd said?
That you could rewind and start again?
This is a very human experience,
And sometimes we suffer long term consequences
From things we said without thinking, or that we said in anger, or in revenge.
Or things we said in our immaturity, or when we had too much to drink,
Or when were provoked by perceived or real injustice.

I don't think anyone here
Would like to have *everything* they've said played back
To an impartial audience: it would no doubt make us blush with shame.
But to have our words recorded by *God*, the just judge,
And for our own lives to be held to the standard
Which we have said *with our own lips* should be applied to others?
That surely would be unbearable.
According to our nature we would rather flee God's presence
Than to suffer such scrutiny; than to be judged in this way.

Now on the one hand today's reading from James
Confirms our worst natural fears.
We do indeed say many things that come under the just judgement of God.
And, indeed, the more authoritatively we speak,
The more we put ourselves under the spotlight of judgement.
But along with this teaching is good news:
We receive this teaching not as the accused standing in the dock,
But as brothers and sisters in the household of God.
We receive this teaching as people who are loved by our Father in heaven,
Who have a word of mercy and grace spoken to us by the Son,
And who by the Holy Spirit are free to learn a new way of speaking,
Where forgiveness is like a spiritual rewind button,
That can reach back into our lives
And bring healing and peace and restoration

Let's listen to how the reading begins: **Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle.**

Note first of all how St James starts this section:
With words to those who would be teachers:
To those who would stand before others to instruct them in the way of faith.

Now on the one hand to be a teacher is to be in a position of honour,
And the church needs teachers,
But notice how St James says
That teachers will be judged *with greater strictness*.
Particularly, we could say from how St James goes on,
That they will be judged with greater strictness *for what they say*.

There is teaching from Jesus that is evidently similar to this from St James.
So Jesus, in Matthew's Gospel, says these words to the Pharisees
When they accuse him of 'casting out demons by Beelzebul':
'I tell you, 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.' Matthew 12
A time of judgement is coming when God will judge human beings,
And especially those who are in positions of leadership.
According to what they have said.

And it's not as if Jesus gives teaching like this only to those outside the church.
In St Luke's Gospel we hear these words
That Jesus spoke to St Peter and the disciples: **That slave who knew what his master wanted, but did not prepare himself or do what was wanted, will receive a severe beating. But one who did not know and did what deserved a beating will receive a light beating. From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded.**
Luke 12

So it's good for us to understand that when we teach,
And especially when we teach in the church,
We do well to be careful in what we say:
It is not only the human community that has ears:
God hears, and he will hold to account those who teach in his name.

This is one of the reasons, by the way,
That I try to be careful in letting you know from this pulpit, and in bible study,
When I am offering a pastoral opinion
Rather than what I understand to be God's word:
I don't want to dress up my opinions as if they are God's word
And I'm sure you don't want that either.

But I don't want to put myself forward too easily as a good example.
St Peter, after all, could make a good confession of who Jesus is:
He could teach well, if you like, the truth about Jesus' divine status.
But listen again to what we heard in the Gospel today:
Then [Jesus] began to teach [his disciples] that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.' – Mark 8
Just because a leader in the church can speak the truth
Doesn't always mean that they always will.
Jesus holds St Peter to account for his false teaching,
He rebukes him then and there in the strongest language.
If St Peter can earn Jesus' rebuke, then I can,
And so can we all. We are not yet perfect, we are not yet fully mature:
We have not yet reached to goal of our life of faith in Christ

Which is the complete life of love.

What St James goes on to say,

Even though he has started in reference to teaching in the church,

Evidently has applicability to the whole household of God,

And, we could even say, to the human community generally: **Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.**

Now St James uses imagery here that needs very little unpacking:

We can picture how a bit goes into the mouth of a horse

And how horses, which are so big and strong,

Can be controlled by the bit.

We can also easily picture the power of a rudder with a ship:

Compared to a ship, the rudder is small,

But what power of direction it has.

St James is using this imagery to picture the power the tongue has,

And in particular, its power to boast.

This is not far from any of us: According to our sinful nature

It can be difficult for us to hear others talk about themselves

Especially if they are talking about success they have had

Or good they have enjoyed.

We can feel the need to get in, even in trivial matters,

Even to assure others, perhaps with subtlety, that the holidays we enjoyed

Were at a better, more exotic, more memorable location than theirs.

We can know that it's at best childish to do this,

And yet never to fall into boasting at all can take superhuman maturity.

St James goes on with easy to picture concrete imagery.

Let's listen again: **How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.**

We understand how great fires can start with small flames, even embers.

One way to understand this part of St James' teaching

Is the power of gossip and rumour.

Or perhaps in today's context, the power of a twitter mob,

That can arise amazingly quickly and just as quickly

Destroy careers or marriages or lives.

And the destruction that comes through this sort of speech

Has a spiritual genesis in hell:

In that which is opposed to God and his righteousness.

Listen again to how St James goes on,

And picture in your mind's eye what he is talking about: **For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.**

We can use our power of speech to curse people

Even though we may not use the word 'curse' to describe what we are doing.
When we, in our ignorance, portray someone's motivations as evil,
And talk about them behind their back as if they are simply wicked
We are indulging in a form of cursing.
It seems to me that alarm bells should ring when we start to use
What we might consider pejoratives in describing other people
Such as 'liberal' or 'conservative': Especially if we consider these terms as code
For stupid, or deceitful, or legalistic, or lawless.
And if we write off people as condemned by God, as cursed
By the way we label people with our speech.
This can be a temptation, of course, in the life of the church.
But this brings us to the good news.

We are receiving this teaching today as God's people
As brothers and sisters in the household of God.
We don't need to *boast* about ourselves
Because we have the love and the care of the God who made all,
Of the one who is the true source of power and glory.
We don't need *build ourselves up by bringing others down*
Because Christ Jesus has descended into hell for us
To conquer death and the grave
And to bring us with him to reign at the right hand of the Father.
And we don't need to *curse* others
Because we confess that Jesus is Lord
By the same Spirit that that grows us in the love of God
A love that is marked by patience, kindness, and gentleness.
And we can forgive each other when we fall.
It is forgiveness that comes first from God in Christ Jesus, that redeems us
And that can rewind even our words of pride, of folly, of hate.
So let's continue in the life of faith,
Listening together to the word of God:
Especially the word that God speaks to us from the cross of Christ.
In Christ we have the forgiveness of sins,
Including the forgiveness of our sins of speech.
And Christ, who was crucified, now lives
And shows us the good that God can bring out of sin, suffering, and death,

So let's trust that Christ can take the sinful words that we have said,
And by the power of his resurrection *work a kind of rewind*.
As we trust that *we* are forgiven;
As we forgive those who have sinned in their speech against us;
And as we live in reconciled love with each other,
To the Glory of God the Father.
In Jesus' name. Amen.