

WISDOM FOR WORDS

(Assorted Proverbs and Matthew 12.33-39)

We read in the very first verse of the whole book that the Proverbs were those of King Solomon. That's not entirely true but I did a bit of research and found some of his early drafts. Here are a few:

Too many cooks publish books

Wisdom builds a house in the Holy City but Folly lives in Liverpool

If at first you don't succeed, call technical support.

Perhaps it's just as well that Solomon was the source of only a few of the Proverbs in the book!

We have advice in the Bible about our use of words. In our Matthew reading Jesus tells us that, on the day of judgement by our words we will be acquitted or condemned and James in Chapter 3 of his letter urges his readers to 'Tame the Tongue'.

So this is serious stuff. And let's not forget, right at the start, that words can be both spoken and written and these proverbs apply to both.

One of the things that comes through the Proverbs we heard read is the importance of listening. It's implicit in proverbs 17.28 (Fools and their tongues), 18.2 (airing our own opinions), and 29.20 (speaking in haste before we know the full picture).

At a recent PCC meeting, Janet Russell, who is a qualified counsellor, advised on how to listen correctly so as to understand fully what is being said and what lies behind what is being said.

Only if we do that can we respond in discernment and love. It is easy to only half listen or to hear what we expect to hear so that what we say in reply is meaningless and trite or less than helpful or leaves the person we are speaking to feeling that we don't care about them – just about ourselves. Someone called Lisa Kirk once said: *A brilliant conversationalist is one who talks to you about yourself*. Wasn't Jesus a brilliant conversationalist?

Now let me tell you a story:

A Regimental Sergeant major is drilling some recruits on the parade ground when he gets a message that the mother of one of them has died.

'SMITH, YOUR MOTHER'S DEAD'. Smith drops down in a dead faint.

The RSM's superior officer takes him to one side afterwards and tells him he should be a bit more tactful about such things.

'CERTAINLY SIR, I WILL BE MORE TACTFUL IN FUTURE, SIR'

A week later a similar thing occurs.

'ALL THOSE WITH MOTHERS, TWO STEPS FORWARD!....JONES, WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING?'

Truth, perception, gentleness, sensitivity. These are some of the watchwords we find hidden in proverbs 12.19 (truthful lips and a lying tongue), 15.1 (gentle answers and harsh words) and 26.21 (quarrelsome people and kindling strife). Our RSM told the truth but where was the appreciation of the situation? Where was the gentleness; where was the sensitivity?

Sometimes, particularly if we are in leadership roles, we do need to say things which, though absolutely true, will be unpalatable or hurtful to our hearer. The truth about ourselves or our actions is often difficult to bear. So in speaking the truth we need all those qualities of truth, perception, gentleness and sensitivity.

I came across this in a book I am reading at present: *Jesus meets each person at his or her point of need. Some need the gentle touch, others firm. Some lack encouragement, others clear guidance. Some crave nothing more than attention and friendship, others a view of his eternal power.* Jesus is always a good teacher.

It's always tempting to show off – talking about ourselves and what we have achieved. The *what a good boy I am!* syndrome. Like the young pilot who wanted to sound cool and show who was boss on the aviation frequencies.

So the first time he approached an airfield at night, instead of making his official request to the control tower, he said *'Guess who?'* The controller switched the airfield lights out and replied *'Guess where!'*

Or we find ourselves sharing something about someone which they might not want to be known. The *Did you hear about Josie?* syndrome.

Relevant here are proverbs 17.28 (Even fools look good if they keep quiet), 18.2 (Fools and their own opinions), 18.8 (Gossip words being choice morsels) and 20.19 (Gossip and talking too much)

Keeping quiet if we have nothing helpful or useful to say is a good policy, St. James reminds us in chapter 3 of his letter that the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts.

How do we go about telling someone that they are mistaken? Sometimes we do need to do so, perhaps because they have got their facts wrong, perhaps because they are mistaken about some aspect of our faith or for some other reason. We should not shy away from doing so. The question is – how? A good rule is: *Try to fix the mistake, not the blame.*

Proverbs 15.1 (gentle answers and harsh words) (26.21 (quarrelsome person kindling strife) and 28.23 (rebuking and flattering tongue) are in point here.

From time to time we may need to put someone right about something and we should not shrink from that but let's not go at it like the proverbial bull at a gate (another proverb there!).

Which of us deliberately goes out of our way to pick a quarrel? None of us, I'm sure. But perhaps, just perhaps, our reaction to someone who, consciously or unconsciously, is out to pick a quarrel with us, is to respond in kind. It might happen when someone who knows we are Christians deliberately seeks to trip us up – perhaps by misusing a Bible quotation or perhaps by maligning the name of Jesus.

We do need to distinguish between quarrels and disagreements. We (and other Christian fellowships) will not always agree on a particular course of action; but we can and should disagree with grace and respect for the other point of view.

You may have heard about lawyers in court (you may even have heard me) saying: *with great respect ...* as a preliminary to confronting the opposition's argument. That is not a mere formality. It is politeness and keeps the situation from getting heated and quarrelsome.

Proverbs 26.21 (quarrels producing strife), 15.1 (gentle answers and harsh words) and 29.20 (speaking in haste) all in one way or another remind us of the ways to deal with disagreements as they arise.

So let's bear in mind St. Paul's advice to his protégé in his second letter to Timothy. Speaking about false teachers he says in the fifth chapter: *They have an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction.*

You will have noticed how I've suggested that these proverbs we have been looking at may have more than one application and some feature in more than one of the subjects I have identified in this talk.

One way of looking at the subject of words, is in this little poem:

*I try to keep watch on the words I say and keep them soft and sweet:
For I don't know from day to day, which ones I'll have to eat.*

Well, that's OK. But it does not get to what lies behind these principles, these proverbs about words – written or spoken.

St. Paul spends a big chunk of his first letter to the Christians at Corinth chiding them for all sorts of things: their divisions, their arguments extending to resort to the courts, their immorality, their wrongful fussiness about foods, their mixing up idolatrous feasts and the Lord's supper, their disorderly worship.

But then, eventually at Chapter 13 of his 16 chapters, he tells them the very best way and launches into that wonderful, uplifting section which ends up telling his readers that, of faith, hope and love, the greatest is love. And he ends the letter with these words:

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love to all of you in Christ Jesus.

We have looked in some detail at these proverbs about words and our use of them. I suggest we cannot have a better antidote to all the evils warned against in them than, like Paul, to accept and show the grace and love of our Lord Jesus.

Father, help us particularly here at St. Mary's, but also wherever we are, always to show your love and grace in what we say and what we do. We pray this in the name of Jesus whose words always enshrined that love and that grace.

Amen.

