

MARK 8.27-38  
THE POWER OF WORDS

What is the best thing anyone has ever said to you? “I love you” must be up there! “You are a star!” “Thank you very much for being here with me”? Can you remember how it felt when you heard these words coming in your direction? Did your heart feel as if it was about to burst with joy and delight? Were you walking on air, it felt so good, you were so proud? Do you know these two people on the screen? These are the people from the TV advertising campaign for buying your TV licence; it starts off wonderfully well and they tell each other how much each means to the other, the plans they have for the future together and the ad feels as if they’re together forever. But then it changes and they begin to criticise and complain and the ad ends with them getting a divorce, having to decide who gets the car! The point of the ad is that you don’t need to do everything at once, but you can spread the payment of TV licence over the whole year. Words are powerful for good, but we also know how quickly words can put someone down, make someone feel small, destroy someone’s confidence, break up friendships, make people feel rubbish, or take away any self-esteem, all in a matter of seconds. This is the power of words!

What about words in church? We use words in so much of church life. We read God’s word to us in the Bible and it forms the bedrock of our lives. We use words to worship God when we sing; we use words when we pray, though there are also times when we can’t find the right words and our prayers are just a groan. We use words to profess our faith: “I believe in God the Father, maker of heaven and earth... and in Jesus Christ His Son our Lord...” and the creed becomes a great declaration of our faith, something we believe. There are times when we do that for the first time, when we profess our faith in public and someone says “do you believe” and we say “I do” and for almost everyone who does that and says these words, this is a moment of great importance and blessing; some hold off making that profession till they feel sure they will be able to keep the promises they have made. Elders and ministers also make promises about leadership in the life of the church and words are such a huge part in making and expressing that commitment. It is wonderful! However, church is not immune from human failings, of not meaning what we say, or of falling down on the promises we make; we are also not immune from using words in other ways and so churches can be places for gossip; people can be put down in church by bullying words. What lies behind the power of words?

Our story today in Mark 8 sees Peter speaking to Jesus in two very different ways. First of all, Jesus asks His disciples two questions: “*who do...*” “*but what...*” (Mark 8.27,29) This becomes a key moment in the lives of the disciples and their understanding of Jesus. People were saying different things: “*some say...*” (Mark 8.28) and the disciples simply report back on what they hear. But the second question is more personal; this is about what they themselves believe and we imagine some kind of awkward silence in the group as they look at the ground, wondering who will speak first. Peter speaks: “*you are...*” (8.29) there is his declaration of faith, the moment that was so significant for him, the profession of faith moment, standing up in public, saying “this is what I believe”. It is a fantastic moment! But the second half of the story is very different: Jesus is teaching them what it will mean for Him to be Messiah: “*the son...*” (Mark 8.31) and the rest of the conversation is all about carrying a cross and dying to self as disciples because the Messiah is going to be a crucified Messiah. “*Peter took...*” (Mark 8.32) Peter didn’t like this idea; he told Jesus off! “Never!” From declaring his faith and enjoying who Jesus is, Peter goes on to get it so wrong! Later, he will use words that deny even knowing Jesus, that will say he never knew this man; and then he will go on again to declare his love for Jesus and his willingness to serve!

“*You are the Christ*” Four words that say so much! This is the One we have been waiting for all these generations. This is the One Isaiah spoke about, the servant who would come with resilience, listening for God, a face like flint. This is the King who would come to reign. This is the centre of all the hopes, dreams and prayers in Israel. The Messiah has come. “*Jesus*

*warned...*” (Mark 8.30) why keep it a secret? Some theologians have developed theories about this messianic secret, but the simplest idea is that Jesus saw people would get it wrong. To call Jesus “Messiah” for some meant that He would head up a great army and march on Jerusalem to throw out the Romans and win people’s political freedom. This was not God’s plan for Jesus, as we shall see, but it seems to me that this is why “don’t tell” is the order of the day. Nonetheless, this is who Jesus is, the Saviour of the world, the Son of God, Lord of heaven and earth, the One who has come to open the way to God for us and save us for ever. Today, people would answer this question by saying that they’re not sure Jesus ever existed, that He is some kind of mythical figure; if He did exist, He would be a teacher alongside all the others; when He died there was no resurrection and so on, but the tomb is empty and people’s lives are still changed by an encounter with Jesus. *“You are the Christ.”*

He is the Christ who will suffer and who will be a model for His disciples. Jesus speaks about the cross: “it is necessary” for Him to go the way of the cross. This is God’s way, this is the mission in God’s mind; this is the work the servant has to do and Jesus has listened and will set His face flint-like to Jerusalem, to suffering and death. So it is for His disciples: here is what it looks like to be a disciple. You have become a Christian in first century Rome; you have professed your faith and said “Jesus is Lord”, but then, if you are a man, you have been conscripted into the army and the pledge of allegiance says “Caesar is lord”. What do you do? You can’t say both! Do you keep hold of your Christian faith, or do you make every effort to preserve your life and deny Jesus? For Jesus, the way to become the Saviour was to carry the beam of a cross and go to Calvary. For Jesus, the way of salvation for the disciple was to do the same, to be humble, to die to self, “ego”, and go the way of the cross too, either metaphorically, or in some cases literally! Peter didn’t like that idea. What should he do? Should he stay quiet, watch and wait, see how things developed? Or should he speak out and challenge Jesus? He chose to challenge; it proved to be a mistake, to be humbling; his only saving grace was that nobody overheard the conversation.

The power of words is all through this story. “I do” – two little words but they are among the best words I’ve ever spoken in my life; they have come at the most important days! They came at the day my wife and I got married; at the baptism of our children; on the day of my ordination as a minister, and the day I became your minister. These may be two little words but they express my love for my wife then and even more so now; they express our desire to nurture and care for our children, physically as they grew up and spiritually in the Christian faith. The same words express my response to God’s call on my life and my willingness to follow that calling into the ministry of the Church of Scotland. Peter said, *“You are...”* (Mark 8:29) four words that declare his faith and make his heart soar as Jesus says “well done, Peter!” The power of words to do good in the world is clear; we tell people the gospel, we use words to share the stories of Jesus and share what these stories mean to you. We use words to sing Jesus’ praise, to confess our faith, and to pray for others; these are such high and honoured things to do.

But we can also use words to do the very opposite: to tell lies, to hurt other people, to bully. It is not always meant: I’m sure Peter meant well when he told Jesus that suffering and the cross was a bad idea, but he still got it wrong. We had a story recently of a member of our church family who was told that they didn’t belong here anymore and I’m sure that it wasn’t meant to hurt, but it caused grief, hurt and disappointment and needs to be sorted with an apology! Trump knows power of words: his Twitter account is his most powerful tool because he can put words out there without being censored and he tells the world what he thinks and he doesn’t care. A tennis umpire and Serena Williams last Saturday in New York have caused a storm by the words that were used and people are divided, reputations are damaged and it is all said and it can’t be taken back! Here’s an experiment: if you have a spare tube of toothpaste at home and you’re willing to give it up for an experiment, take it and squeeze it out onto a plate, and once you’ve done that then try to put it back in tube. You can’t! Neither can we un-say words that hurt others; we can simply beg their forgiveness.

There is a time to be silent! Jesus warned His disciples not to say anything about Him being Messiah. Why? You'd think He'd want the world to know! He knew it would be misunderstood; there was a time to be silent; a time to say nothing. He wasn't there to be a great king, to ride at the head of an army, to rebel against the Romans. He was a different kind of Messiah and the time would come to tell the world, but now is the time to be silent. There is a time to say nothing! There is a time to hold your peace! There is a time to be quiet! Ask God for wisdom to know when that might be!

The power of words: words can transform people's lives as we tell them the stories of Jesus – God give us courage to do that; we can express love, thanks, delight, and worship. We should use these words more. Words can cause untold damage – we should use these words less! There is a time to be silent, to wait and watch. Peter discovered all of that in his conversation with Jesus; when Jesus is king, we need to learn the power of words for good, repent of times we have hurt others, and learn the time to be silent. This is God's grace in us.