

May I speak in the name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Did you notice in today's readings all the references to speaking and to words? Starts off, the Old Testament reading: "The Lord has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I might know how to sustain the weary with a word." The psalm says this. The psalmist says he loves the Lord because he has heard the voice of my supplication. Then the gospel starts with Jesus asking the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Then of course our epistle has much to say about the tongue - a small member he says, yet one that boasts of great exploits, a small member like a bridle that can tame a horse or a rudder that can steer a ship.

Saint James reminds us that the tongue can say many things both good and bad. Just in today's readings we can see how words can teach and edify. They can cry out to God. They can praise God. Words can curse and bless. Words matter. We're shaped by words, beginning with when we're born and we're given a name.

My first school report when I was four years old began with the following line, "Mark is a big and clumsy boy." I've spent a lifetime living into that epitaph. Every time I dropped something when I was young, my mother would say, "Oh, your teacher was right. Mark is a big and clumsy boy." You'll have your own examples. And sadly my guess is that most of the examples you can think of where words have shaped you are negative ones, because it's the negative words that seem to go deepest. Or do they say that you need to say 10 positive things to counterbalance one negative?

I'm still scarred by the words of Mr. Skinner, my music teacher. I was 11 years old. We went to a new school. First lesson, 30 boys in the class, Mr. Skinner had us sing a song. He said, "Boys that was the most glorious sound I've ever heard. No class has ever made such a beautiful sound. I want you all in the school choir. I'll just come round and check and listen to each one of you, to check that you're okay." So we all carried on singing the next

verse. Mr. Skinner came and put his ear next to each of our mouths. At the end, he said, "Boys that was wonderful. You're all in the choir, except for Hargreaves. You're not in the choir."

Those words all through my ministry, when I've been called to sing, "Hargreaves, you're not in the choir," they've echoed round my mind. I did hear of one exception. I knew a woman who was born with a harelip and school for her was a horrible experience because she was teased mercilessly and bullied. But there was one teacher who was the most popular teacher in the school who everybody wanted to be on the right side of. This teacher, every lesson would come into the class and lean over and whisper in this girl's ear, just some sweet nothing. One particular refrain was, "I wish you were my little girl." Then she'd carry on and teach the lesson.

This girl said, as she grew into a woman, that it was just that encouragement. That was all she needed, that encouragement from this great teacher, to keep going through school, to face up to the bullies and to flourish in later life. Perhaps that's why there's that reference in the reading to teachers and the greater responsibility there is on teachers who speak words to young people, and to an extent we're all in that position. Our words make a difference. Words matter.

They can bless or curse. Words can build up or tear down. James calls the tongue a fire. We in California know above everybody else, how a massive fire covering thousands of acres can begin with a small spark, with a match. Can set a forest on fire. Yet, that same match, taken into a dark room, the same small match can light up a dark space. The tongue can be used for good or ill, light or darkness, blessings or curse.

What are we doing with our words? Are we using them to build up and to encourage? I went to this doctor this week. The first thing he said to me was, "Stick out your tongue." He examined my tongue, and I was thinking of the sermon at the time and I thought, strange. What can they see in your

tongue. You must be able to, a doctor must be able to get your general health just from looking at your tongue.

I reckon there's an equivalent in church. I think if you want to be able to tell the spiritual health of a church community, get them to stick out their tongues, or metaphorically speaking. Look at what their tongues are saying. What's the congregation saying? Are they using their tongues and their words to build up, to encourage, to be positive? Well you know the opposite. Gossiping, slandering, tearing down.

I'm please to say that at St. John's, St. James', maybe St. John's as well, but I've never served at a St. John's, just in case you ever realize. At St. James' here, I'm pleased to say I think it's the former, that we use our words wisely. That's what we need to do to be positive, to be building up, to be encouraging one another.

Abraham Lincoln is reputed to have said, and this was a favorite saying of Dennis, Margaret Thatcher's husband, "It is better to remain silent and to be thought a fool than to open your mouth and remove all doubt." I don't think St. James in this reading is suggesting we refrain from using our tongues. He's not advocating some sort of Trappist silence. Rather, he's encouraging us to be careful with what we say, to be sure we build up, not tear down.

Let's not be like Annabella Young, an English woman we know nothing about other than what's written on her tombstone in a far flung English cemetery. It says this, "Beneath this stone, a lump of clay, lies Annabella Young, who on the 24th of May began to hold her tongue." It would appear poor Annabella did not get to use her words wisely.

I told that story at the 7:30 and someone came up to me and said that their boss once told them in a meeting, somebody had made some really crass, long contribution to a meeting and their boss leaned over to them and said, "Never miss an opportunity to keep your mouth shut." Before I

move on, let me offer you an acronym. THINK. We're to think before we speak. T, is it true because sadly it's a fact of life that the best gossip is normally false. T, is it true? H, is it helpful? I, is it inspiring? N, is it necessary? And then most importantly of all, K, is it kind? We're to think before we speak.

Words matter and words should lead to action. My wife has taught me this. I can hear the words in my head now. "Mark, I don't care if you say you love me. Wash the dishes." The same principle in the gospel reading. Our gospel reading begins with Jesus asking his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter got it right. "you are the Christ, the messiah," he said. But how does Jesus respond. He doesn't say, "Well done Peter. You've given the right answer, top of the class." No.

He goes on and gives this very challenging teaching. The teaching goes in a completely different direction. Jesus goes straight to talking about the implications of knowing him as messiah. He talks about the need to take up a cross and follow him. Being a follower of Jesus is more than saying the right words. It's a way of life. It's walking the way of the cross. Of all the New Testament writers, it's St. James in his little letter that gets this more than any others. He spells it out most clearly. He says this in chapter 2, the chapter before where our reading came from.

"What good is it," he says, "If you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, go in peace, keep warm and eat your fill, and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." Let me go back to the reading from St. James and take up his invitation to look at ships. I want to draw out the contrast as I close between two different kinds of ship. The first is a battleship.

I'm mindful that there are many people in the congregation today who've served on a battleship. You know better than others that if you go on a

battleship, everybody's got a job to do. Some are cooking in the kitchen. Some are looking after the missiles, some are working out the navigation, but everybody's busy. Contrast that with a cruise ship. Imagine if you get to the top of the plank, as you're looking forward to your cruise, your bag is packed, and someone greets you and says, "Hello. Welcome aboard. So pleased to have you with us. Your job is to clean the bathrooms on the lower level." That wouldn't go down very well.

You'd say, "Well hang on. I'm not here to work. I'm here to relax and eat too much. I want to be fussed over. I want the crew to do all the work." Now which of these ships is most like the church? I'm not going to give you too long to think about that because the answer is battleship. Should be a battleship, in case anybody's wondering. Our community life is not simply expressed in our coming together to say certain words or sing certain songs together. Our common life needs to be expressed by the community that we build amongst ourselves, by what we do as a community.

All of us have a role to play in that. We're not called to cruise together. We're called to serve together. On this Rally Sunday, we set out ... If you're wondering, that's what all the gazebos are doing outside. That's what you got our booklet which explains all the ministries and all the ministries will each be under a tent outside, and we invite you to come and have a look. See what the church is up to. See where there's a place where you might fit in, a role that you might find within all the works and ministries the church does, both within the congregation and beyond. Because we all have a role to play, as the St. James battleship moves forward.

So I'm going to invite us to be, just pause for a moment and then do turn in your service book to a prayer that I'm going to invite us all to say together. If we feel like we're a member of St. James and we're happy to pray this prayer. I'm going to give you a moment to look over the words and then we'll say together this prayer for Rally Sunday. Together we say ...

*My parish is composed of people like me. I help make it what it is. It will be friendly if I am. It will be holy if I am. Its pews will be filled if I help fill them. It will do great work if I will. It will be prayerful if I pray. It will make generous gifts to many causes if I am a generous giver. It will bring others into worship if I invite and bring them. It will be a parish of loyalty and love, of fearlessness and faith, of compassion and charity and mercy, if I who make it what it is, am filled with these same things. Therefore, with the help of God, I now dedicate myself to the task of being all things that I want my parish to be.*

Amen.