

The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

James 3:1-12

Once again, it seems as if James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, writes about one thing, and then what he writes ends up being about something quite different; which, upon closer examination, turns out not to be quite that different after all, though.

My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, he writes, since we know that we shall receive a stricter judgement. And that is the last we hear about not being too eager to be become a teacher, that is: a Pastor, for in Holy Scripture, that is what a teacher is. From then on in, James goes on to write about the sins of the tongue, that is: how much and how severely we all sin in our speech, by the things we say.

Well, he does write that *if anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man, able also to bridle the whole body.* But with that, he is not implying that such perfect people exist, who do not sin. On the contrary, he is emphasising the point he also makes: that *we all stumble in many things.* Of course he is. Every Christian knows that there is no one among us who does not sin, and that anyone who claims that he or she does not is not a Christian. Or at least every Christian *should* know this, as clear as Holy Scripture is about it. *If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, as the holy Apostle John writes it, and the Truth is not in us, that is: then we are not of the faith!*

James does not leave it only implied, though, but specifically writes that *every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and creature of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no man can tame the tongue.*

He describes how much damage we do by the things we say, and compares it to how horses and ships are steered by small things like bridles and rudders, and how a small kindle can ignite a disastrous fire. We should be able to relate to that around here; these days, all we have to do is go outside and take a deep breath to get for free what cigarette smokers otherwise would have had to pay for.

And the tongue is a such small fire, he writes, *a world of iniquity. The tongue is so set among our members that it defiles the whole body, and sets on fire the course of nature; and it is itself set on fire by Hell.*

When it is said that *sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me,* I think most of us will know from experience that that is just not true.

I am also sure that it holds true for most of us that some will know this from their experience with *us*. And that is not right. And it is even less right, if we do not care. We need to repent and repair all damage we know we have done to others in that regard. Says our Lord Jesus: *if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there, before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Hasten to come to terms with your adversary lest your adversary deliver you to the Judge.* A Christian cannot go about hurting others while going on with his or her Christian life as if nothing had happened; as if he or she were still a Christian, even though he or she does not care at all about others, nor about God or His love or His Law.

The problem is not the tongue itself, though. As we hear it today, the tongue *is itself set on fire by Hell*, that is: by that inferno of evil and ungodliness which is *sin*, which we cannot control, sinners as we are, because sin is all we have in us, according to our nature.

Therefore is it that *no man can tame the tongue*, as we hear it today that James writes it; *it is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison*; because our hearts and minds are an unruly evil, full of deadly poison, set on fire by Hell. And then he goes on to describe more specifically *why* the sins of the tongue are so evil: *With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the image of God. Out of the same mouth proceed blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be so.*

Of course they ought not. The gift of language was given to us as a means for us to relate to God in love, to hear His Word of love, and speak His love back to Him, and speak His love to others. *Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved*, writes the Holy Apostle Paul, and: *the Gospel*, that is: the Word of God of His salvation, *is the power of God unto salvation for all who believe*. The gift of language was given to us as the means of the greatest good of all; how tragic it is, then, when we turn it into an instrument of evil by harsh and hateful speech, by lies and gossip. *My brethren, these things ought not to be so.*

But how can they not be? *Does a spring send forth fresh water and bitter from the same opening? Can a fig tree, my brethren, bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Thus, no spring yields both salt water and fresh.*

Our evil speech reveals what is really in our hearts and minds, although we claim to be Christian, and sing praises to God when that is what is on our agenda.

It reveals the depth of ungodliness and evil in us that with the same tongue we *bless our God and Father and curse men, who have been made in the image of God*, and express our hatred towards those whom He loves with the greatest love of all, and cause hurt and harm to those whom He has made for sharing in His joy, and whom He would have us call into His joy, instead, with His Word of love. And this we do, even though we ourselves have been called by His Word of love to live under His love, in the Word and worship of His love and what His love has done for us, by which Word He Himself comes to us, with His love, and gives His love to us; this we do, even though we have come to know His love, and have been made new ourselves, free from all sin and guilt before Him, right with Him and righteous before His judgement, freely and for nothing, out of His love, and for no other reason, as His gift of love, by means of His word of His love and what His love has done for us, that the Son of God suffered for us sinners such severe sufferings as we have never known or could ever begin to comprehend or even imagine, for love of us, for our salvation.

Once again, though, there is so much more to what we hear from Holy Scripture than what immediately meets the eye; or the ear, as it were. Once again, James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, writes of one thing, and really means to teach something quite different, which, upon closer examination, turns out not to be quite that different after all.

For again, all that we hear today that James, servant of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, writes about the damage done by the tongue, it all expands upon that which we heard at first that he writes: *My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, since we know that we shall receive a stricter judgement. Yes, for those who preach and teach can do greater damage than most when they stumble in words in their preaching and teaching.*

False preachers and teachers fail to speak the Word of salvation and to lead those who follow them to Christ; instead they will make them to look to their own efforts at goodness and godliness for salvation; or they will make them to seek worldly wealth and health and happiness rather than the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, given to sinners in Christ, by what He has done for us; they will teach people not to seek all things good from God in prayer and submit to His will and wisdom, but rather to *claim* what they want, and to think that when they use that phrase, God has to obey them, which is really the opposite of *faith*.

But even upon faithful Christian preachers and teachers, the duties of the ministry place a heavy burden. *Obey your leaders, and submit to them, Holy Scripture commands Christians, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.* Christians are to obey their Pastors; for a Pastor, this observation comes with a frightening implication: that he has to speak in a such manner that it will be good and right for his people to obey him, and no one will come to harm by doing so. The salvation of souls is at stake. And the Pastor will have to give an account for the souls of those entrusted to his care. So important is it that he make sure not to *stumble in word* in his preaching and teaching, whether in public or in private conversation.

Not many should become teachers. We know that we shall receive a stricter judgement. Nor should anyone set himself up as a teacher, or herself. *How are they to preach, unless they are sent?*, the holy Apostle Paul asks; for so often in Holy Scripture, God pronounces severe judgement upon all who claim to speak in His name although He neither called nor sent them. No one should become a teacher because he or she wants to, but only because he has been called by God, through His Church, in accordance with His Word and will!

But then, a faithful Pastor can serve with confidence, knowing that when he speaks as Holy Scripture speaks, he speaks the Truth of God; now, this does not mean merely to use bits of the Bible, as false teachers also do, but to teach the full counsel of God, the heart of which is His love, that is: His salvation in Christ.

And faithful Pastors also know, as do all faithful Christians, because it is the promise of God, that when we live under the love of God, in the Word and worship of His salvation, all our sins and shortcomings also in this regard are dealt with and done away with with the sufferings and death of Christ.

And they know that when they speak the Word of God, it will not return to Him empty. God Himself will work, with His Word, what is His will, for those entrusted to their care, as well as for themselves, and even for those who will not hear, and must face their rightful judgement for such severe ungodliness.

Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine, as the holy Apostle Paul writes it to his apprentice. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.

Now, to Him, whose power works in us and can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, be glory, in the Church and in Christ Jesus, throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.