**James 3:1-12**

“Sticks & stones can break my bones, but words can never hurt me!” Have you heard that little rhyme before? My mother taught it to me when I was hurt by the things some girls at school had said about me. I remember teaching it to my own kids when they came home from school at various times, deeply wounded by things that had been said to them. I’m not sure it ever helped….

The very fact that my children were wounded at all shows the fallacy of this little rhyme. Word most definitely CAN hurt, and often far more than sticks or stones ever could!

In our technological age, words seem to have gained even more power. We read of cyber bullying; of children harming themselves and even taking their own lives because of the power of words that have reached out to grasp them through their computers and phones. It’s horrifying!

The enormous power of words lies in what they MEAN to the person who hears them. They can trigger memories, thoughts and feelings from a person’s subconscious mind, and they can trigger corresponding emotional responses toward the person saying them.

Say someone has been ribbed throughout their school days for being overweight, and as a result they’ve always struggled to keep their weight down. For that person, it would not be surprising if their sense of worth was tied up with how they thought they looked. All it would take would be a thoughtless comment from, say, someone in their workplace, to totally demolish that person. For instance, someone could simply make the comment “that’s a big sandwich!” and cause the person concerned to feel really bad about themselves. The words in themselves might be quite innocuous – but because they can tap into a person’s baggage, they can be extremely destructive.

On the positive side, words can also trigger ideas and concepts and creative genius - hence the value of people brainstorming together to find ways forward in a company or organisation. Words of encouragement can transform a person’s day; words of praise and acceptance can even transform a person’s life!

(video about the power of positive words)

One of the techniques taught in teachers’ colleges in recent times is the value of positive reinforcement. The theory is that it is far more effective to praise a child for good behaviour than to chastise a child for bad behaviour. I’m not sure that you should never chastise a child for bad behaviour – I think there are limits - but certainly to praise and encourage a child does wonders.

When I was teaching Scripture in my last parish, I’d watch the teacher as she got the children ready for the lesson. As they were bouncing around finding their seats, she’d single out a child and say, “Oh Tony – you’re sitting *so* beautifully” And immediately the child next to Tony would sit up beautifully as well….

Words can build up and words can destroy. I wonder if we realise the arsenal that each and every one carries around with us in the power of our words – both for good and for evil - or as James puts it, in the power of the tongue.

James was very, very aware of how damaging the tongue could be, and in this chapter, we find him passionately warning his readers about its destructive force.

James gives us three illustrations that show us just how powerful the tongue can be:

* First, he refers to the bit in the mouth of a horse. Although very small, it is very significant. By using the bit, the horse will obey us and will turn whatever direction we wish.
* Then, he gives us the example of the rudder of a ship. It too is very small in comparison to the size of a large ship. But it also has great significance. By using the rudder, a ship can be turned and controlled.
* Finally, he talks about the small fire. A very small fire or even a tiny spark can ignite a huge forest. What incredible power these three small things can wield!

So it is with the tongue, says James. It is very small but extremely powerful.

I wonder if we’ve ever had the experience of saying something to someone we love in anger, and thoroughly regretting it afterwards. The trouble is, no matter how sorry we might be, no matter how sincerely we might apologise, a cutting comment, made in anger, does great damage. And we can’t *unsay* it, can we? It’s out there and we can’t take it back. The most we can hope for is to repair the damage we’ve done. And that’s not always easy to do. Far better to control our tongue, and prevent the damage being done in the first place!

However, the tongue is very difficult to tame. In fact, James says it is humanly impossible to tame the tongue. In v7-8, we read, “All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man,

but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.” This is a pretty strong attack on the evils of the tongue. It is not only evil, says James, it is an *unruly or restless* evil. It is the kind of evil which is not merely passive but is actively on the attack. And it is not simply a poison, it is a *deadly* poison. Do we think that’s a bit extreme perhaps?

Then think about the recent riots in Sydney regarding the offence to Mohammed. What has caused them? Texts on a phone. Words. Words so powerful that they have been able to able to incite racism and hatred and violence. “A restless evil, full of deadly poison.” How true.

Having thoroughly warned his readers about the destructive potential and evil nature of the tongue, James then challenges them about their Christian living. He has observed some incongruous behaviour amongst the believers, and he says that it is just not on!

“With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?”

As Christians, we should not allow the evil nature of the tongue to prevail. It is incongruous, says James, to praise God one minute, and run someone down the next.

We all have to watch this, don’t we? It’s so easy to join in a conversation and agree with someone who is criticising or being negative about another person. I caught myself doing it this week and needed to ask God’s forgiveness! As Christians, says James, “this should not be.”

We always have a choice. If we find ourselves part of a conversation where someone is being talked about in a way that is not helpful – we can decide not to be part of it. And we can *especially* not initiate it!

But hasn’t James just said it’s impossible to control the tongue? Aren’t we fighting a losing battle? Maybe we shouldn’t even bother to try….

As James says in v 2, “If we could tame our tongue, we would be perfect”. And nobody is perfect. And when we couple that comment with James’s later statement that no-one can tame the tongue it seems like a hopeless enterprise, doesn’t it? But we need to look at this situation from the perspective of James’s letter as a whole – not just from the standpoint of this passage about the hopelessness of taming the tongue..

James teaches us at the beginning of his letter that God is the source of all good and that he is available to help us in every situation (Jas\_1:17-18). He reminds us that if we need wisdom, we need only to ask for it (Jas\_1:5).

When it comes to controlling our tongues, we need to remember that God is perfect, and as his perfection resides in us in the person of Jesus, the perfection we need to control our tongues is always at hand. We need to be so possessed by Jesus that we are empowered by the Holy Spirit to control our tongues and therefore our total being.

We always have a choice when it comes to the power of the tongue. As with any temptation, we have a choice. We can give in to the temptation to use our tongues for evil, or we can turn to Jesus and call on the power of the Spirit to resist that temptation and instead, use our tongues for good.

And there is so much good that we can do. Time and again in the Scriptures, we are told to be *en*couraging. Paul, in 1Th\_5:11 says, “Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing” In Heb\_3:13 we read, “But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness”.

At the beginning I asked how aware we were of the arsenal we had at our disposal through the power of our words. Let us decide today to commit that arsenal – which is our tongue, our words – to God, and ask him afresh to empower us to use our words to encourage and build one another up.

Let’s pray.