

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

Get smart – words

Presented by Michael Jensen

I

It took a team of expert philologists aided by a bizarre crew of amateur crackpots sixty-eight years to compile the Oxford English Dictionary, from 1860 to 1928. It has over half a million entries, and needs the best part of a standard sized book case to contain its 22 or so volumes. The word "set" alone takes 37 pages to explain. And of course, it needs revising every generation or so, as new words, and new meanings for old words spring up out of everywhere. Smog. Text-message. Wicked. Bootylicious. And so on. What's a word worth? Well, quite a lot apparently.

An extraordinary amount of effort has gone into the attempt to classify and control human language; because while language is one of the most glorious gifts of humanity, it is also tricky, in exact and potentially dangerous. Words have more power than bombs. The old playground adage "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me" is patently false: labels can wound deeply, causing festering sores that never heal. With words you can shape the way whole peoples think about the world or about other people; with words tanks and planes and guns are commanded; with words contracts and treaties are made. Words like "collateral damage" are designed to minimize the negative impact on us of civilian casualties in war.

II

Words are essential to our capacity to relate to one another, as nation to nation or individual to individual; by speaking to one another we are capable of a profound intimacy with one another that even the dolphins never know. The Bible of course claims that because we are built for relationship with God our maker that we speak: we are of all creatures most like him. He creates specifically by talking the universe into being: he says, and it is so. And he allows Adam to name the animals.

But the corruption of the world began with words, words that were false. And so, with everything else, language became corrupted. Words became the bearers of destruction as well as of creation. There are now lies, broken promises, half-truths, pieces of gossip, nagging, whinges, boasts, taunts, libels and slanders, flatteries, demeaning and debasing talk, curses and cynical criticisms. And we have lost control of words, too. With speech, humanity is a bit like a gorilla with a loaded pistol: the explosive weapon is in the hands of someone who has an uncertain control of it. While on the one hand we know that our words have immense power to harm or to do good, we are not always masters of what we say.

But the testimony of the Bible is that God still speaks. He still communicates with us using words. He makes promises, and is true to them. He describes the world as it really is, without lies or tricks. He calls on us to turn to him; and then sends his Son, the one they call the word of God, in the flesh, to walk among us full of grace and truth. And by his death he made a declaration of righteousness available to those who believe the promises of God; and brought them together into a new group of people, whose task, instead of using words to tear down

or to serve personal ambition, is to speak God's words to each other and the world, out of true fear of him. As the God who is love, and the God who is true, he is honoured by words that are true and loving.

It is not surprising then that the book of Proverbs has a good deal to say about words. How to talk wisely features significantly in its advice on the life of wisdom, as you would expect. And its advice to us is, "if you really want to honour the Lord, watch your words carefully."

III

The Book of Proverbs says:

The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit. (18:21)

Words have immense power to be destructive. It is amazing how you can shatter the self-confidence of a person so easily with a put-down. You remember the damaging words of a tired and irritated parent forever. But the tongue can also deliver words that cause people to flourish. What does the second part of the proverb mean? The word "fruit" indicates what comes about from what is said; and "fruit" is usually in Proverbs a positive association. I think it thus points to the fact that if you regard the tongue well and speak wisely you will reap the rewards.

Unthinking words, on the other hand, can cause deep wounds:

Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing. (18:12)

You know it when a wise person speaks because of the healing effects. Relationships flourish, people blossom under encouragement, peace reigns. They are able to offer words of comfort and help. Conversely, foolish words cause pain and sorrow. Likewise:

He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin. (13:3)

This proverb is aimed at the effect of the words on the speaker rather than their effect on others. Protect your words, and you will be protecting your very self. Care for your words and you will make few unnecessary enemies. The unthinking talker brings trouble on herself. The person who talks to fill in the space, or who spreads gossip because they need something to talk about, in the end rains down ruin upon himself.

But the power of words – wise words – to do good is incomparable:

Pleasant words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones. (16:24)

In the time Proverbs was written there was nothing sweeter than honeycomb. Wouldn't you like to speak words that were like this – that people could say, these words are nourishing? I know how it feels to have words of encouragement, or genuine thanks from someone: it makes you feel ten-feet tall. I know how it feels when you are in trouble, or in a time of mourning or disappointment, how the right word from somebody has a healing effect. Can you look for opportunities to speak or write these kinds of words this week?

IV

Proverbs also turns to some specific vices of the tongue. It warns us that the sheer volume of our words increases the chance of our sinful use of words:

When words are many, sin is not absent, but the one who holds her tongue is wise. (10:19)

We are advised to take care with what we say, because the risk is great if we are habitual talkers. On the other hand, keeping quiet may work to your advantage:

Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent, and discerning if he holds his tongue. (17:28)

Deception is probably the greatest evil of the tongue. To speak lies is to poison speech itself. It breeds mistrust. Because we lie, human beings cannot rely on the gift of speech to do its job. We cannot take someone's word for it; and so we have made work for many lawyers.

The tongue that brings healing is a tree of life, but a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit. (15:4)

The warning for the liar is ominous:

A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who pours out lies will not go free. (19:5)

Telling lies is a destructive habit. If you catch yourself lying, even in subtle ways, stop yourself. Commit to speaking the truth. Actually, if you do this, it is extremely liberating for the rest of your life, because you are also committing to behaving always in such a way that you never need to lie to cover it up.

One subtle way in which we lie is by making false promises, that is, telling lies about our intentions and our future actions. "I'll pray for you" is a favourite. Or, "I'll see you on Sunday". Or, "I'd love to come". I find as a forgetful person, that the less you promise the less I make myself a liar. This is a particular trap for well-meaning people such as myself who hate to say no to anyone for fear they will be displeased. And yet "no" might be the most honest answer and the one that does the most good.

But there are other vices of speech, too. How about bragging?

Let another praise you and not your own mouth; someone else, and not your own lips. (27:2)

Australian culture has always had a kind of anti-brag thing going. However, as we become more success orientated, and as we put the famous and the high-achieving higher and higher up the pedestal, so we develop an acceptance of self-promotion and arrogance. It makes sense, however, that the praise of another we actually be more credible than your own broadcasting of your good points.

V

In our time people are pessimistic about the value of words. Words have been corrupted by the lies of politicians and journalists and scientists, by the betrayals of lovers and the falsity of parents, and most of all, by the incessant braying of advertising. People see that if there is no God to answer to, then you can lie with impunity. No-one underwrites words; you can't bank on them to mean what they appear to mean. We do not trust words because we do not trust the people who use them. Everything is spin. No promise is credible: which is partly why people have lost faith in marriage as an ideal. Too many promises have been broken.

And yet those who fear God know that he speaks truly. We know that he delivers on his promises and that he judges in righteousness and truth while yet retaining his character as a merciful and loving God. Those who fear God know that words are not just mere talk. Words matter to God; so our words matter. And we can show those who do not yet fear God that our words matter – with true promises, unstinting honesty, matching our lives to our words, by the sweet healing of our encouragements and comforts, our lack of bragging, our ability to turn aside the gossipy conversation without coming across as judgemental.

Will you make your words count? Will you seek to build rather than destroy? With the help of God's spirit in us, let us take up the challenge of wise speech.