



SERMON FOR EDUCATION SUNDAY 12 SEPTEMBER 2021. JAN THOMPSON

THEME: A WORD IN SEASON. ISAIAH 50.4-9; JAMES 3.1-12

May these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word. Amen

Words. I wonder how often we stop to think about their importance and power? Perhaps when our baby utters her first word, even if she then embarrasses us by calling lots of people 'Dadda' for some time afterwards. Perhaps when we have to learn a list of words for a spelling test, or a list of foreign words for a vocabulary test. Perhaps when we remember a line of poetry or a verse from the Bible. Or perhaps when our memory is failing and we struggle to find the right word that is just on the tip of our tongue.

Words are the human ability to express our inner intelligence, feelings and intuitions. Words enable us to formulate thoughts, and these thoughts can then be expressed in the written or spoken word and communicated to others. People who never learn to read or write have to rely on spoken and remembered words only, and their lives are limited because of this. This is one reason why literacy is so important, since words are fundamental to human progress.

It's interesting that the opening of John's Gospel identifies Jesus as the 'Word of God':

*'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us.'*

(John 1.1,14)

It's telling us that Jesus was the expression and manifestation of God. God chose to communicate with us through the person of Jesus, the Living Word. The Bible is often referred to as the Word of God, because God can speak to us through its pages. But Jesus is the human face of God, making it easier for us to enter into a personal relationship with him. We discover that the God revealed in the Bible and in Jesus is a God of love, calling us to show love to others.

If we are to show this love day by day, we must be especially careful with our own words. It is so easy for words to slip out thoughtlessly. Words can be sent off quickly in texts and emails, without reading them through before pressing the Send button; and words can be spoken off the top of our heads on the phone. James 3 verses 1-12 warns us of the dangers of words. He paints for us a picture of a huge forest set ablaze by a tiny spark, and compares this with the damage that can be done by the tongue, small as it is. He says: 'No one can tame the tongue – a restless evil, full of deadly poison.' (James 3.8) There is an old saying that we used to chant as children: 'Sticks and

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stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me.' How wrong we were! Cuts and bruises will heal with time, but we will take some words with us to the grave. We may never be able to erase the memory of spiteful words; and even words spoken in jest can have a lingering and harmful effect on us. Social media has multiplied this problem, for it seems that we cannot escape its reach; and people get carried away with the anonymity, saying hurtful things online that they would never dream of saying to someone's face.

James opens his tirade against the tongue in Chapter 3 by saying: 'Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.' A sobering thought indeed, for words are a teacher's tools of his or her trade. But words can do good as well as harm. The theme for Education Sunday this year comes from Isaiah chapter 50 verse 4:

'The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.'

We are all weary of this pandemic that has controlled our lives for the past 18 months. What are the words that can sustain the weary? And what inspiration can we get from Jesus, the Word of Life?

A word of thanks

We can all express our thanks to the teachers who have gone the extra mile during lockdown. They have supported home-learning online, while continuing to keep schools open, initially for our vulnerable children and children of key workers, and then for students in bubbles that were free from Covid. They have had to work harder and been on call for longer, while returning to schools before their turn had come to be vaccinated. Teachers do all this for their students, not expecting any gratitude. But they too are weary, and a word of thanks and understanding can go a long way.

Jesus understood the importance of gratitude. We read that when Jesus healed ten lepers, only one turned back to thank him, and Jesus asked: 'Were not ten made clean? And the other nine, where are they?' (Luke 17.17)

(A teacher from your congregation could explain how hard it has been, as many people outside the world of education don't realise the extent of the demands that have been made on teachers at this time. Finish with a show of thanks.)

A word of encouragement

This is probably the teacher's greatest tool. When students are struggling, they need help and encouragement not to give up. When students are doing well, they need a pat on the back. A word of encouragement at the right time and from the right person can fire them up to persevere or to do even better. We frequently hear celebrities naming a teacher from their past

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who has inspired them to achieve. Teachers' encouragement was particularly important during lockdown when secondary students spent many hours alone in their rooms, with only online contact.

Jesus understood the importance of encouragement. We read that Jesus gave Simon a new name, saying 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church' (Matthew 16.18). The Greek word 'petros' means 'rock', so this name encouraged Simon Peter to be the strong leader that Jesus knew the church would need after his death.

(A secondary school or college student from the congregation could explain how hard home-schooling has been, and how their teachers have encouraged them at this time.)

A word of hope

The Christian Gospel is one of hope, based on the victory of Christ over death and symbolised by the empty cross, because Jesus has risen. Christians are Easter People who look for light in the darkness, freedom from lockdown, and new life beyond the death and desolation of the past eighteen months. University students especially need to hear this good news. It was heart-breaking to see their predicaments last year, locked up like prisoners in their rooms in halls of residence, reliant on food boxes to sustain them. It was particularly difficult for new students who had not had time to make friends and were starting out on new courses, many of them living away from home for the first time in their lives. What a start to university life, and what a let-down!

The title for Education Sunday this year comes from Isaiah chapter 50 verse 4, which occurs in the third of four 'Servant Songs'*. The early Church readily identified Jesus with the Suffering Servant of these poems, and it is likely that Jesus understood his mission in this way. The Servant trusts in God to help him, despite having to endure violent opposition; and through his redemptive suffering, he brings hope for a just future.

This gives us hope too, that God will bring us through this time of suffering to a better future. We hope now in the power of the vaccinations to counter new variants; and hope that politicians have learnt lessons from past experiences. But most of all, we put our faith in the God who raised Jesus from the dead: that he will bless us with new life as we look forward to this new academic year.

(A university student from the congregation can speak of difficulties last year and/or what they are looking forward to this year.)

And so: a word of thanks – a word of encouragement – a word of hope. Just three ways that words can be used positively, as we seek to repair the damage done in the world of education by this pandemic. Our Bible readings from the Books of Isaiah and James are directed at teachers, but we can all learn from them. We should all take heed how we use our words, for once spoken they can never be unsaid; and words of thanks, encouragement and hope can go a long way in many situations. Let us pray to Jesus for guidance in this, since he is the very Word of Life. Amen.

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Bible quotations from the New Revised Standard Version

**The Servant Songs are in: Isaiah 42.1-4; 49.1-6; 50.4-9; 52.13-53.12.*

The sermon has been written by Jan Thompson.

Jan had a career in Religious Education. As a secondary school teacher, she wrote numerous textbooks. She later became an adviser, first for a local authority and then for a diocese, extending her work into primary schools. On retirement, she trained as a C of E lay minister. In 2020, she was a finalist in Preach magazine's Sermon of the Year competition, and once again this year her entry was published in their top ten sermons.

