

Sermon Notes from CMJ
14th Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

RCL Readings – Song of Solomon 2:8-13; Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10; James 1:17-29; Mark 7:1-23

ACNA Readings – Deuteronomy 4:1-9; Psalm 15; Ephesians 6:10-20; Mark 7:1-23

Introduction. Under normal circumstances, most of us have two ears and one mouth. And if truth be told, we don't always use them in those proportions. Words are incredibly powerful. Proverbs 18:21 says that 'the tongue has the power of life and death'. Words and speeches have the power to change the course of nations and history. However, words do not develop on their own; the tongue is guided by the heart. As Jesus says, 'Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks'.

Common Theme. Our readings today touch on different connections between the voice – whether the voice of God or our own speech – the heart, and our actions. A person's words reflect their character as much as their actions do.

Song of Solomon 2:8-13. There was a long rabbinical debate as to whether the Song of Solomon should be included in the Hebrew canon of Scripture due to the erotic nature of the text. In the second century, Rabbi Akiva defended its canonicity and said that of all the holy books in the Bible, the Song of Songs is the holy of holies (*Mishnah Yadayim* 3:5). Interestingly, the Song of Solomon is the only *megillah* (scroll) to be read primarily as an allegory in the Jewish tradition. Otherwise, you would have to ask, 'What is an erotic poem doing in my Bible?' The characters in the poem are the unnamed king, traditionally Solomon, and the unnamed woman who is called the Shulammitte in 6:13. These characters and their relationship of love are seen allegorically as God and Israel.

According to Scripture, Solomon has a plethora of wives and concubines, but in the Song of Songs, the woman does not mention them at all. She thinks only of Solomon, and Solomon thinks only of her. The Lord has two billion people who profess his Name, yet he has an intensely intimate and personal relationship with each of us. That relationship involves recognizing the voice of the Lord; as Jesus says, 'My sheep hear my voice and I know them and they follow me' (John 10:27). In the Song of Solomon, the king is recognized by his voice which alerts the woman to his presence and calls her to himself. Verse 9 says that the king 'stands behind the wall'. The word for 'wall' here is *kotel*, and it is the only time this word is used in the Hebrew Bible. This is the word used in modern Hebrew to describe the Western Wall in Jerusalem. The Jewish tradition is that when a worshipper prays at the Kotel, God, the King of the Universe, stands both behind the wall and before the worshipper with his very real presence.

Psalm 45:1-2, 7-10. The superscription of this psalm from the sons of Korah indicates that it was apparently prepared for the occasion of a royal marriage. The psalm was probably used more than once for royal weddings of the House of David and subsequently found its way into the collection of Jewish prayers and the book of Psalms. Originally intended for ceremonial occasions, the psalm took on messianic themes during the Second Temple Period. The exhortations to the king within the psalm became applied to the Messiah, culminating in verses 6 and 7 with the promised Messiah, son of David,

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sitting on the throne forever. The writer of Hebrews quotes this psalm in Hebrews 1:9, applying this same exegetical thinking to Jesus. Verse 1 shows the connection between the heart and the tongue. The desire to praise the Lord begins in the heart and overflows from the tongue, reflecting the truth that the tongue is, first and foremost, guided by the heart.

James 1:17-29. The epistle of James is addressed to the ‘twelve tribes living in diaspora’, signifying that the primary recipients were Jewish followers of Jesus throughout the Roman Empire. James has long been misunderstood and often been characterized as an epistle that ‘leans towards works righteousness’. Martin Luther argued that it should be out of the canon of Scripture, calling it the ‘epistle of straw’. However, verse 17 stands against this thinking as in it James states that both the perfect gifts and the generous acts of giving – that is, good works – come from God. It is not that people are doing good things to ‘earn salvation’ but rather God provides the generous activity that needs to be done and the perfect gifts in which to do them.

James has a lot to tell us regarding the ‘control of the tongue’, particularly in chapter 3. Throughout his epistle, James links hearing and doing together with speaking. In this week’s passage, we are encouraged to be ‘Quick to listen and slow to speak’ (v 19). It is possible that James may have been familiar with the apocryphal book of Sirach, which expresses exactly the same idea: ‘Be swift to listen and slow to answer’ (Sirach 5:11). Our first priority should be to hear the voice of God and to listen to Jesus. From our hearing of the teaching of Jesus, we internalize it into our hearts and from there develop the appropriate responses, leading us to good works and good speech. James will encourage us all to be ‘doers of the Word’. James will warn us that ‘unbridled tongues’ reflect a ‘deceptive heart’. In this sense, the tongue is incredibly important. James continues to say that worship without a controlled tongue or proper concern for the poor, the widows, and orphans is worthless. Worship and true religion stem from the heart and are lived out in practical expressions, active love, and good speech. These are themes seen clearly in the Prophets, such as Isaiah 1:17 and Jeremiah 22:3. They are not new thoughts, just too often forgotten.

Mark 7:1-23. The Gospel passage begins with another official delegation arriving from Jerusalem to evaluate the teaching and ministry of the Jesus movement. Instead of disagreements over Scripture or theology, there is a debate over hand washing. Why would the Pharisees be so concerned about the ceremonial handwashing practices of lowly Galilean disciples? Note that the Pharisees do not accuse Jesus of having unwashed hands, only his students. Part of the pharisaical tradition included the belief that the ceremonial rules and commandments that were prescribed for the Temple service and the priestly elites applied also to the common people. The concept of the ‘priesthood of all believers’ for the Pharisees meant that the rules for priests in the Torah were applicable to everyone. Jesus responds to their challenge with a teaching linking the heart and the tongue. He quotes the prophet Isaiah, who condemns worship that does not flow from the heart but is mere lip-service and an empty keeping of

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human traditions (Isa 29:13). Traditions are not bad and can even be important, but what is of prime importance is the heart, for it guides the others.

Jesus calls out the Pharisees as hypocrites, for while their outward practice and fine speech might seem appropriate, inwardly they are not hearing the voice of God in their hearts. Some commentators argue that in this passage Jesus is abandoning the dietary kosher rules of Judaism. However, in verse 19, the Greek Textus Receptus does not include the words ‘in saying this Jesus declared’. A literal reading of the Greek simply says, ‘cleansing all foods’. How is food cleansed? Through passing through the body. This reading is supported by the parallel account in Matthew 15:17-20. Jesus is concerned more about what comes out of our mouths rather than what we shove in it. What leaves our mouths reflects the desires and intentions of our hearts. We should learn to pay close attention to our own speech as well as our own prayers. What we pray reflects where our hearts are. Are we praying for God to bless others, or are we praying for a new car for ourselves?

ACNA Addendum

Deuteronomy 4:1-9. Deuteronomy is the single longest monologue in the entire Bible. It is given by Moses at the end of his life, which is not too bad for a guy who at the start of his career tells God to choose someone else, as he lacks the ability for fine speech. Having concluded the historical narrative opening of his monologue (chapters 1-3), Moses begins the commentary on the Torah. He starts by telling the assembly to ‘Hear’ (*Sh'ma*) – that is, to listen and obey – the laws he is about to teach. *Sh'ma* is the Hebrew word for both hearing and obeying. Torah is often translated as ‘Law’, which does not reflect the meaning of the word at all. Torah comes from the verb ‘to teach’ or ‘to instruct’ and thus is better rendered by the words ‘teaching’ or ‘instruction’. What Moses instructs is not called ‘Torah’ here in verse 1. He uses the words for ‘statues’ and ‘rulings’. It is these statues and rulings that are conditional to taking possession of the Land of Israel and to living! That raises a theological question: is it actually possible to live by these statutes and rulings? If not, then why say this at all? We should note that in Genesis 26:5 God says to Isaac that Abraham has been able to keep God’s ‘torahs’, in plural. Thus if Abraham can do it even before the Torah was given, then we should be able to as well. ‘If you love me, keep my commandments’, says Jesus. How is any of this actually possible? Moses constantly refers to the Torah and the Commandments of God as having their rightful place on our hearts. The New Covenant in Jeremiah 31 says that the Torah will be written on our hearts. It has always been a heart issue. As we have seen in the other readings for this week, the heart guides our behaviour and our tongues for blessings or for curses. So Moses warns the Israelites in verse 9 to guard their very souls so that their hearts do not depart from God. As believers in Jesus, the seal over our hearts is the gift of the Holy Spirit, but that in no way releases us from the obligation to guard our own hearts and to listen to the voice of Heaven.

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Psalm 15. In this psalm, King David meditates on the conditions of coming into the presence of the Lord. David had constructed a tent to house the Ark of the Covenant on the mountain of the Lord in Jerusalem. One simply could not and should not come before the Lord in an unworthy state. David delighted to often be in God's presence, and that constant experience led him to be intimately familiar with the correct attitude and behaviour when before the Lord. The psalm notes the connection between the heart of truth and walking righteously. The heart and behaviour are always connected. Who can come into God's presence? Those who 'fear the Lord' both in their hearts and displayed through their actions. David uses the term 'speaks truth in his heart' in verse 2. David understood that someone who has an upright life is known by the way they speak. David also understood that the heart of a person is known through their actions, as in verse 3: he 'does no evil to his neighbour'. What is interesting is the heart, tongue, and loving behaviour are the conditions for coming into God's presence, not sacrifices. David doesn't mention any of the ceremonial rituals of the Temple or Tabernacle as prerequisites for appearing before God. This is not to say ritual and tradition are bad or have no value. However, what God has always wanted was a place in our hearts and a desire to hear his voice.

Ephesians 6:10-20. This chapter in Ephesians is a popular passage for those who study the idea of spiritual warfare. If we look carefully, we notice that Paul does not invite the Ephesians to enter into the realm of spiritual warfare. Instead, he simply states the principle as fact. The Ephesians do not enter into spiritual warfare as they are already engaged against things 'not of flesh and blood'. For Paul, the real enemy was not something physical in nature but something that was metaphysical. The concept of Christians donning armour is not a call for temporal militarism, as the image of the armour of God is also metaphysical and spiritual. Interestingly, the metaphor of the armour of God is not unique to the New Testament. It also occurs in other Second Temple Jewish literature like the Wisdom of Solomon 5:17-20: 'The Lord will take his zeal as his whole armour and will arm all creation to repel his enemies; he will put on righteousness as a breastplate, and wear impartial justice as a helmet; he will take holiness as an invincible shield and sharpen stern wrath for a sword'. Wisdom of Solomon is building on the imagery of God's own armour in Isaiah (Isa 11:5, 49:2, 52:7, 59:17). It is likely Paul was familiar with this material and adapted it nicely for the Ephesian community.

About the author. The Rev. Aaron Eime is the deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master's program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.