

The Gospel of Luke | Luke 4.31-41 | April 7, 2019

Speech and Power

- **Story:** Being about five with a group of friends including a little girl who spoke with power/authority. You got the sense that *what she says, goes*.
 - Speech and power very often go together. We don't have to look far to see how this is true in things like politics or public life. People who get to speak regularly end up being the people in power, and those who don't have a voice tend lack influence. We've seen recently, for example, the relationship between speech and power through things like the *Truth and Reconciliation* movement in Canada, and the importance of listening to our shared history as Canadians by not ignoring the voices of our indigenous people. And there are still a great many silences that need to be broken in that story; a lot more listening that can be done. We could also think of the slow but necessary change coming through things like the #MeToo movement, where women are speaking up about harassment, sexual abuse and systemic sexism, and we're hearing the growing power in that dialogue. Over all in public life there is a general sense that when someone says something, on whichever subject, some measure of power is always involved. The more power someone has, the more helpful or harmful their words can be.
 - And generally, in personal life, we all know to some extent the feeling of *powerlessness* and how that is so often connected to whether or not we feel that we can speak, or feel that we are being listened to or heard. So when we choose to speak or invite one another to speak, we are always exorcizing some degree of authority no matter how powerful we may or may not feel. Some philosophers tell us that our words are not just for describing or explaining but speech itself is about naming and making. In
-

other words, our language itself creates. We have the power to say something and make change, and thus the world is shaped by our words, by what we say.

- Of course, we can see this reality throughout Scripture. The author of Genesis, for example, tells the story of “the beginning” by showing us a God who creates by *speaking*. And throughout the Old Testament God relates to humanity by speaking through history. And at the pinnacle of the biblical story St John, a marvellous poet himself, describes Christ in “speech” language – “the Word of God has become flesh and blood.” (John 1) We are then invited to listen to what God says through Jesus’ life.
- So if speech and power are so closely related, you and I never just saying words, we’re always wheedling some measure of influence. That’s what we hear in the wise and dramatic imagery found in the book of James. Our tongue (or speech), says James, is like the small rudder of a great ship, directing its course; or it’s like a tiny spark with the potential to start a devastating fire. And that’s why we should always be mindful about our words to and about one another. (And while we’re on the subject - It’s also why listening is such a wonderful gift of service. When we listen to one another it’s a way of saying “I’m not all-powerful” or “I’m not going to pretend to be all-powerful”. And that’s a very good starting point, especially for a Christian, not only when it comes to how we might relate to one another, but how we relate to God. As has been said by many about prayer, *in prayer we never have the first word.*)
- So, in the story of our faith, in the world we observe daily, speech/ language matters deeply.

Broadcasting

- That's what we're hearing in Luke chapter 4. In St Luke's gospel there's a great deal of *talk about talk*, and how this speech relates to power or authority. We hear powerful talk about Jesus at his baptism. We hear Jesus overcoming evil and temptation in the wilderness through his speech, words drawn from Hebrew scripture. We hear Jesus in his hometown of Nazareth standing up with a public *broadcast* about God's freedom and light growing out into the world through Jesus' very life. You could say Jesus begins his public *life by saying things*. And now as we've just read, Jesus arrives in Capernaum, a village not far from his hometown of Nazareth up in Galilee, and he's wheeling power through speech. St Luke points out that Jesus' words have a new authority that people are surprised by.
- When Jesus stands up to teach in Capernaum's synagogue people are amazed that he "spoke with authority" that they hadn't heard before (4.32). He silences evil and destructive spirits telling them to "be quiet" and to leave the people they've been tormenting alone (4.35,41) and again the villagers are in awe of the force of Jesus' words (4.36). In St Luke's language Jesus "rebukes" illness and Peter's mother-in-law is healed (4.39). And as the sun sets in Capernaum the village floods with all kinds of people who turn up and are healed, and as evil spirits try to speak about Jesus, perhaps an attempt to gain some power back over him, Jesus shuts them up with ease (4.40-41).
- To be clear, it's not that the people are impressed with his eloquence or that Jesus is forcing people to listen (unlike that little girl who tried to force me to marry her). Instead something obviously new is happening through Jesus. His words seem to create and enliven, they're inviting deep change, and people are beginning to listen.

- So what Jesus *broadcasted* earlier in Nazareth - about bringing good news to the poor, freedom for the captives and light to those in darkness - is all happening through his presence and his words within human life. And as we heard last week, Jesus is speaking for and to all, not just some.
- So just like at the beginning of the book of Genesis when we hear God say, "*Let there be light*" and there is light, it's as if Jesus is doing the same kind of thing. He's announcing that change has arrived and the change happens. He's saying to the world around him, "*let there be light*". Something new is happening, *what Jesus says, goes*.

Toward Holy Week

- Most of the global Church is currently observing the season of Lent – the forty-odd days prior to Easter which reflect Jesus' time in the wilderness – a time to tune in a little more closely to God's voice and tune out from other distractions. It's a season of reflection, designed so that we can hear again clearly the strange and loving news of Good Friday and Easter Sunday. That's why we've set apart the *Holy Week in Prayer*, to listen to God, to speak with God, to hear the renewing story of Jesus crisply again this Spring. Being now two weeks away from Good Friday and Easter Sunday (whether we're observing Lent or not) this would be a very good time to tune in to God, perhaps tuning out whatever else clamours for our attention. Now is a good time to listen to Jesus' reliable voice, his new words to us about God, ourselves and others. Of course, we don't have to listen, we can respond like those in Nazareth who plugged their ears, unwilling to hear the news, happy to stay in what's become comfortable, in what they know. But we can also respond like all those people in the swollen, noisy village of Capernaum, and recognize something in the life of Jesus that we don't see or hear anywhere else. We can listen, we can

accept, we can receive, even if it feels alien or disorienting at first; even if it means things are going to change, that we're going to change.

What does Jesus say to us?

- So what does Jesus say to us? What can we hear and receive over the next two weeks leading up to Easter? What can we hear today, for example, around the table Jesus sets for us through communion?
- The first thing we hear, especially through communion, are some of Jesus' central words in St. Matthew's gospel, words of welcome, words that sound very much like they could be spoken to those villagers in Capernaum and perhaps to us now : *"Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11.28).* And when we do arrive at the table of welcome and rest, offloading our heavy luggage onto Jesus, what else do we hear if we feel guilty or ashamed about the weight we've been carrying? We hear Jesus' words from St. John's gospel, *"I don't condemn you. Go and sin no more."* (John 8.11) and later Jesus' final words on the cross when we're tempted to hold on to what he tells us to let go of, *"It is finished."* (John 19.30) We hear, *"Welcome, come and eat for free. You don't have to justify or prove yourself. Just be welcomed and fed. Just receive and be loved."*
- And what do we hear, looking toward Easter, if we feel hopeless, facing things that we just can't get on top of, with more questions than answers, the kinds of things we just have to trust an eternal God about, things that in the end God will have to sort out and make new somehow? We hear Jesus' words in Revelation, *"Don't be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the living one. I died, but look – I am alive forever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave."* (Revelation 1.18) And in Revelation 21, *"Look! I am making everything new."*

- And perhaps, if we remember that Jesus was there at the beginning and will be there at the end (the first and the last) we can hear him say in the middle, to us today through communion, *"Let there be light."* We can listen and trust around this table, listen and trust that what *what Jesus* says, goes.

Amid the Din of Earthly Strife (Henry Warburton Hawkes)

*Amid the din of earthly strife,
 Amid the busy crowd,
 The whispers of eternal life
 Are lost in clamours loud;
 When lo! I find a healing balm,
 The world grows dim to me;
 My spirit rests in sudden calm
 With Him of Galilee.*

*I linger near Him in the throng,
 And listen to His voice;
 I feel my weary soul grow strong,
 My saddened heart rejoice.
 Amid the storms that darkly frown
 I hear His call to me,
 And lay my heavy burden down
 With Him of Galilee.*

Discussion Questions

- How have you noticed speech and power connected in daily life?
- Why should a Christian be concerned about language and speech?
- By reading the gospels we are invited to listen to what God has to say through the life of Jesus. What do we hear? What are you hearing as we get closer to Holy Week?
- What has Good Friday and Easter Sunday meant to you in past seasons?

