

Date: 19th Jan 2020
Talk: SB & Tewantin
Passage Proverbs 15: 1-9
Title: A soft answer

**Passage: A gentle answer turns away wrath,
but a harsh word stirs up anger.**

So, this is our fourth week in the series Wisdom for the New Year

And so far we've had big picture things to think about

Gary talked about what wisdom actually is

and explained that both the start and the central aspect of wisdom
is fear of the Lord

Peter talked to us about Christ as the wisdom of God

And that true wisdom is all about following Jesus

Then last week we heard from Gavin who spoke about God's law

which is sweeter than honey and more valuable than Gold

and that true wisdom comes when we delight in the law of the Lord
as it was brought to us through Jesus.

So some big picture things about the Wisdom that matters.

But today we're going to get much more specific

We're going to look at just one aspect of being wise.

One that I'm sure we've all been challenged by at some time or another.

Now I hope I'm not going to offend anyone this morning

By saying that I think God has a great sense of humour.

You see when we were sorting out the roster for January

Working out who could preach when and where

It was really more about availability than topic.

As a result, and of course because God always has a plan for these things,

I find myself this morning

Preaching on a topic on which I've been challenged all my life.

Because, and I'm sure this doesn't come as a surprise to some of you,

I have a tendency to a quick and sharp tongue.

As a result, I've received many words of wisdom on this topic over the years

Just bite your tongue Ruth

Think before you speak

And my favourite

because it was said so often by my Mum

Keep it in your mouth Ruth.

So yes, it's very ironic that I'm preaching on this topic this morning

"A gentle answer turns away wrath,

but a harsh word stirs up anger."

Words matter, don't they?

The words we choose to use can have such an impact.

They can be used to impart kindness and love.

Or they can be used to cause incredible hurt and upset.

That old childhood saying

"sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me"

It's not true is it.

I still remember the pain of some of the names I was called as a kid.

And who amongst us doesn't shake

at the thought of the next twitter from the White House.

But words can be used for greatness as well.

Even though I wasn't born at the time

I still get goosebumps when I hear these famous words

"We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender."

What an impact those words had on a whole country.

Words have incredible power.

In fact, as we know, they have the ultimate power.

Our whole existence, the whole of creation, was spoken into being by God's Word

And the greatest moment in all of history

was when that Word became flesh.

Yes, words have incredible power.

But so too does the way we speak.

Because it's not just about the words we use, is it?

How many times has an email caused hurt or anger or the wrong result,

Simply because you don't hear the tone or the inflexion,

or you can't read the body-language.

The way we speak to one another can have just as much impact as the words we use.

Think about the times you've spoken nonsense to a crying baby or an upset child –

And soothed them just by the tone of your voice.

Or the times when an argument has escalated out of control

Not just because of the words used,

But because voices got louder

and the tone became more and more bitter and angry.

Very early on in my career I saw this in action many times a day.

You see I worked for an organisation called the East Midlands Electricity Board

Running the Credit Control department.

Now one of the responsibilities we had

was to make decisions about whose power to disconnect for non-payment of bills.

So, of course, we then had to take some incredibly irate phone calls

Calls from people who had just had their power disconnected.

I can't possibly go into detail about how those calls often started,

I'm sure you can use your imagination.

But you'll understand that much of the time it wasn't very pleasant.

So we had a guideline to try and minimise what the team had to put up with.

If they took a call from someone who was persistently abusive or threatening

they could warn them twice and then hang up.

It was fascinating to see the different skills in the team

And it was the same one or two every day who would follow a predictable path:

If you carry on like that Mr Jones I'm going to have to hang up on you

Then with a louder voice and higher pitch

Mr Jones you can't speak to me like that

And then

Mr Jones I'm hanging up now

Followed by "BANG" as the receiver went down

(much more satisfying than today's "end call" button on your mobile!)

But I'm pleased to say that the majority of the team rarely got into this position.

Because they had taken on board the training

Listen

Allow the customer to vent

Speak slowly and calmly

keep your voice low in pitch.

So, day in day out I saw examples of gentle answers turning away wrath.

Both the words mattered and the way in which they were used mattered.

And yes, training was a key aspect of this

We can train ourselves

To think before we speak

To moderate our voices

To soften our answers

In fact James would have been great to have had at one of our training courses

because he is very direct in telling us how we should respond to one another.

In the first chapter of his book he writes

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, because human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires

But one of the challenges of verses like this and indeed much of Proverbs

is that while we **know** this to be true;

We know that a gentle answer turns away wrath

And we know that a harsh word can stir up anger,

Living up to it is a different matter.

As Gary helped us see in the first week of this series

Knowledge and wisdom are not the same thing.

We may know these things,

And yet still fail to put them into action when it matters.

So we need to dig deeper don't we.

James is again helpful in pointing out what he sees as the problem

He lays the blame in one very specific place

our tongues

In fact, he's pretty harsh about tongues.

He says

The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

Those are certainly some very hard words.

But we can relate to them can't we

Because many of the phrases we use today relate to our tongues:

Hold your tongue

Bite your tongue

Keep a civil tongue in your head

And Proverbs has a lot to say about the negative use of our tongues.

It condemns the evil way in which we speak to others.

As well as *"a harsh word stirs up anger."*

what about Proverbs 15:4

"... a deceitful tongue crushes the spirit."

Or Proverbs 12:18

"Reckless words pierce like a sword..."

Proverbs 26:28

A lying tongue hates those it hurts..."

Proverbs condemns such unwholesome use of the tongue

Because of its evil ability to stir up anger,

To crush people's spirits,

To pierce a person to the heart

and because of the hatred that is often lying behind those attacks.

But what's also impressive in Proverbs 15

Is the emphasis on how we can use our tongues to do good rather than evil.

Just in the passage we heard this morning

(vs 1) "A gentle answer turns away wrath..."

(vs 2) "The tongue of the wise adorns knowledge..."

(vs 4) “The soothing tongue is a tree of life...”

(vs 7) “The lips of the wise spread knowledge...”

(vs 8) “...the prayer of the upright pleases Him”

These are all **good** things.

These are all **wholesome** things.

These are the types of things that God wants us to use our tongues for.

So, if our tongue can be used for such good things,

Why don't we do this all the time?

What's our problem?

Well Jesus is very clear that in fact the problem is not with the tongue.

In Matthew 12 he tells us

“For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of. A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and an evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him.”

If we're ashamed of something hurtful we may have said,

Or the sharp responses we've given in a recent argument,

how much more should we be ashamed of what this says about the state of our hearts?

Have you ever thought about how embarrassing it would be

if there were a direct open line between your thoughts and your mouth,

Instead of the polite, “How nice to see you again,” out comes, “Oh no, not you again”

Or after listening to someone with whom you disagree,

instead of, “Well, that's an interesting thought,” you blurt out, “what a load of complete rubbish you talk”

Now I'm not suggesting that we should abandon politeness.

But the reality is that even if we can tame our tongue,

Choose our words more carefully,

Moderate our voices

we may still have a heart problem.

So if we truly want to give gentle answers

We need to start with what's going on in our hearts.

As it says in Proverbs chapter 4

"Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it"

Very wise counsel indeed.

But what does this look like in practice

Well of course where else can we turn but to look at Jesus as our example

Remember the gentleness with which he responded to the woman of adultery

Or his patience and kindness in teaching the woman of Samaria about the living water

And in his Sermon on the Mount we hear wonderful words of gentleness,

"Blessed are the poor in spirit... blessed are the meek... blessed are the peacemakers...

blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness...

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me."

Jesus calls us not to retaliate, not to use words as weapons.

Rather, God wants our words to bring about unity.

Our job, as Christians is to love our neighbours as we love ourselves.

When our hearts are right about this

Our words will show the kindness and compassion that Jesus commands.

Yet, in practice we know there are many times

where it's really hard to respond like this.

Speaking a gentle word when we want to lash out in rage;

speaking a gentle word when we feel attacked.

Speaking a gentle word when we feel taken for granted.

Speaking a gentle word is not always the easy path.

But when we do speak gently it's like putting balm on a wound isn't it.

Gentleness spoken in the midst of harsh words can heal so much.

But this needs us to keep our tongues in check and our hearts motivated only by love.

This is truly the wisdom we need if we are to live this out.

Thankfully we know just where to turn to get this wisdom

In fact James spells this out for us. He says

"If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you."

So how can we call on this wisdom

Well, by calling on the Holy Spirit

God's Spirit

Isaiah prophesied *The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—*

the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,

the Spirit of counsel and of might,

the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—

This is the same spirit that Jesus promised

the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.

And this same Spirit came to us when we became Christians

And, of course, what about the fruits of the Spirit

love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control

These are all attributes that give birth to a soft answer aren't they.

In a practical way this is something that a very dear friend has helped me with over the years.

She talks about situations when she knows she's facing a difficult conversation

or meeting with someone who inevitably rubs her up the wrong way.

Either in advance or even right there on the spot

she prays for the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to guide her in her conversation.

We can pray for this wisdom in every situation,

We can ask the Holy Spirit both to help us govern our tongue and to use it well.

And when we do this, we invite the wisdom of God into our conversations.

But let's go back again to the example of Jesus

Because his speech was not always gentle, was it?

Think of how he often spoke of the Pharisees

Regularly calling them liars and hypocrites

And more than once a brood of vipers.

Those are words I'd describe as harsh, not gentle.

So, how can we reconcile **this** aspect of Jesus

with our proverb about giving a gentle answer?

Well it comes back to the heart again.

Jesus' heart was entirely focused on bringing people back into a right relationship with God

And he wasn't afraid to confront anyone who got in the way of this,

those whose path was folly and not wisdom.

He wasn't afraid to point out foolishness when it really mattered.

This is one of the challenges we face today in the Anglican church,

The soft answers being given by many are actually ones of folly.

Ones of compromise,

Ones aimed at never offending anyone,

Ones aimed at never saying anything that might be unpalatable to the world.

These may be soft answers in one respect

But they are not loving answers.

Because while they may deflect away some of society's antagonism towards the church,

They will not turn away the anger, the wrath that we know will one day come.

We are called to speak gently and graciously,

but we are also called to speak the truth.

And this is borne out in our passage this morning.

Because Proverbs is not merely concerned with the tone or the volume of our voice.

It does not **only** desire for us to speak gently.

Rather, it calls for wise discourse.

Foolishness, it claims, leads to folly

and folly certainly leads to destruction.

So, what is the wise discourse encouraged by Proverbs.

It's to commend and spread knowledge.

Verse 2 from this morning: *The tongue of the wise adorns knowledge*

Isn't that wonderful

The tongue of the wise doesn't just impart knowledge

It adorns it.

But this isn't about any knowledge

This is all about God's knowledge.

We're told this back in chapter 2 verse 6:

For the Lord gives wisdom;

from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.

The best knowledge is always going to come from God.

It's always going to be God's knowledge.

Because his knowledge gives us wisdom.

And this wisdom is given freely and generously if we seek it.

It's available every time we pick up his word, the bible.

And the most fundamental words are those about the truth of Jesus Christ

As Peter said

“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.

These are the words that truly matter.

Because these are the words that save.

And here, more than anywhere do we need to have a gentle answer

And a soft heart

Many of us can quote these words of Peter

Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

But how many of you know the words that finish this verse:

But do this with gentleness and respect,

We must never shy away from having an answer to share

But we do need God's wisdom and the help of the Holy Spirit

to ensure that our answer is gentle

So,

Words matter

The way we speak matters

The way we talk and what we say reflects the state of our hearts.

God has given us all we need to speak wisely

And we have Jesus as our great example

Jesus spoke the truth in love

May that be true of us as well.

Amen.