

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 16th September 2018
James 3: 1 - 12; Mark 8: 27 - 38

The capacity of our minds to imagine, to think, to dream, to process the information gathered from our senses and then to play it back to us in a meaningful way so that we can feel and experience the world around us, so greatly exceeds our ability to describe in words those thoughts, feelings, dreams and experiences that it is a wonder that we ever speak at all.

Simply, there are not enough words in our language, never mind our own personal vocabularies, to describe fully the weather, never mind the full extent of our feelings, or our thoughts - the breadth and depth of our conscious and subconscious minds and what that mean to us. There are not enough words; we have an insufficient vocabulary; our capacity to construct language is greatly inferior to our capacity to think. Words are never enough.

We should remember that whatever someone says to us, those words are only ever an approximation of their thoughts or their feelings or their experiences; they are never, ever an exact representation.

I've been listening to a series of programmes on Radio Four about the Inquiry in to the Grenfell Tower fire. At the Inquiry fire-fighter after fire-fighter has been asked to describe in words the blaze they witnessed that night. In each case words have failed them. No wonder, it was the worst fire many had ever attended.

If experienced fire-fighters are unable to describe a fire in a building what hope have you or I of ever describing, for example, the fire of love that can set our hearts ablaze, or the emptiness of loss that can desolate our spirits, or the chill of fear that freezes our souls.

If most people find it hard to describe in everyday words the work they do day-in, day-out or even the meaning of their job title (Director of Sound Design; Systems Analyst; Digital Prophet) to their spouses, who know them best, then what hope have you or I of describing to a spouse, never mind a friend or a passing acquaintance, our deepest hopes or dreams; regrets or fears?

In our Gospel reading this morning, Jesus asked,

"Who do people say that I am?"

Peter replied, "You are the Messiah."

Then Jesus gave them strict orders not to tell anyone about him; and he began to teach them...¹

¹ Mark 8: 27 - 31

No wonder he began to teach them, what on earth does the word Messiah mean? What does it mean to be the Messiah? For what is true of our imaginations, feelings, thoughts, experiences - that they cannot fully be represented by words - is true also of God. We encounter God in so many ways: academically in theology, perhaps; we might experience something in the world that speaks to us of God; we might feel something; we might be blinded by revelation; someone might say something about God that makes sense to us.

These encounters are so varied, so many, so different, that it is surely almost impossible, is it not, to talk about God using words that convey fully what it is that we mean by, or describes how we feel about, our beliefs, or our faith, or our religious commitment?

When Peter hit upon a word - a name - that more accurately described Jesus than any other name or word, Messiah, no wonder Jesus told his disciples not to talk about this to anyone. Who knew where the fire started by this word, Messiah, might end? Who knew what people might imagine this word, Messiah, to mean? Who knew what expectations might be lifted up on to Jesus' shoulders by this solitary word, Messiah? Who knew what others might do when they hear this word, Messiah?

With so much human potential in language for misunderstanding and confusion, Jesus tried to teach his disciples what this word, Messiah, when applied to him, meant to them,

'...the Son of Man,' he said, 'ha[s] to undergo great sufferings, and ... be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the doctors of the law; to be put to death, and to rise again three days afterwards.'²

For the disciples of Jesus - indeed for anyone familiar with the word Messiah - this was such an unexpected definition that Jesus had to lay it out plainly (so the text says³) to his disciples. But, even these plain, blunt words spoken to those who were closest to him, who knew him best, who had been with him the longest were not enough to convey Jesus' meaning. Peter, not understanding, immediately 'took Jesus by the arm and began to rebuke him.'⁴

Jesus responded, "...you think as men think, not as God thinks..."⁵ Precisely. Peter's mistake was to think that the words Jesus used, which were drawn from our limited human language, conveyed sufficiently the depth of purpose to be found in Jesus' life. They didn't, and they never could.

² Mark 8:31

³ Mark 8: 32

⁴ Mark 8:32

⁵ Mark 8: 33

So, instead of just explaining using words Jesus went on to show his followers what he meant, and to ask them to share that experience with him; then they would understand. There was no other way of conveying who he was and who he is.

"Anyone who wishes to be a follower of mine must leave self behind; he must take up his cross and follow me."⁶

In Jesus the Messiah - the leader of Israel, God's anointed, God's chosen - was to the world, but what was so difficult for Jesus to explain about love in words, but which was so much easier to feel or experience, is that love and suffering are so closely related that they are often almost indistinguishable from each other.

No words can fully describe the completeness of love, the wholeness of it, the sincerity of it, the life-giving fullness of it, the eternity of it. Similarly, no words can fully describe the pain of love lost. No words can fully convey the emptiness of love left bereft. Some have tried. Here is the poet Robert Hayden in his poem called *Winter Sundays* trying to put this intimate relationship between suffering and love in to words.

Sundays too my father got up early
and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,
then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

On the face of it the poem suggests that the father suffered because he loved, but it could also be read in a way that suggests that it was because he suffered that he was able to love. Which comes first, suffering or love, or do they always come together simultaneously?

We might ask, similarly, is it because God loves the world, that there is suffering in the world? Or is it because there is suffering that God is compelled to love the world? Either way, our calling as disciples of Jesus ourselves is to love and to bear the burden of suffering,

⁶ Mark 8: 34

"Anyone who wishes to be a follower of mine must leave self behind; he must take up his cross and follow me."⁷

We might ask of the father in the poem, was it worth it, this love that 'with cracked hands ached,' and for which, 'No one ever thanked him.' Were, 'Love's austere and lonely offices,' worth it? What would he say if we asked him, 'did you, in love and suffering, gain more than you lost?' I think we know what the answer would be.

Jesus knew the answer too, as he said, "Whoever cares for his own safety is lost; but if a man will let himself be lost for my sake and for the Gospel that man is safe."⁸

It is one thing to confess with our lips that Jesus, the man on the cross, rejected and put to death, is Lord, but it is our calling to take that cross up ourselves, and to live as if he is Lord in love and suffering.

⁷ Mark 8: 34

⁸ Mark 8:35