

Words of Spirit and Life ...

... to whom can we go?

A sermon given on the Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, 25th August 2024, by the Vicar, the Revd Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

John 6:56-69

Jesus says, "*The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life*" - and that sounds as though Jesus understands the power of words. Perhaps that's not surprising, coming from the one whom John's gospel says is the 'Word of God made flesh.' But many of us no longer trust words very much. In part, that may be just because there are too many of them - we live in the age of information technology, which means we're bombarded with words all day, too many to take in. Like Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* -

We've had enough - words, words, words, she sings. I'm so sick of words. I hear words all day through, first from him, now from you. Is that all you blighters can do?

Sometimes the more words wash over us, the harder it is to see how they connect with reality. Maybe that's the real problem with our words, that they can be used to hide the truth just as much as reveal it. It's no accident that in opinion polls, people say that the professions they most distrust are those requiring the greatest facility with words - that is to say, journalists, lawyers, and politicians. Only last week at the National Convention of the Democratic Party in the United States, President Trump's former press secretary revealed that Trump used to tell her, "It doesn't matter what you say. Say it enough and people will believe you."

So in an age when we are losing confidence in the possibility of knowing what is true, so we are losing confidence in the power of words. And as a result, when it comes to spiritual matters, you'll find more and more people saying they don't find words all that useful. Instead, the way to God is through silence or through mystical experience; or through music; or through visual beauty; anything, it seems, except words. But Jesus says, "*The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life.*" If you think about it, words are in fact the perfect medium for talking about God. Because words are sacraments: words always point beyond themselves. For example, when I say the word 'hand', in one sense, the word is nothing more than a sound my voice makes; in another sense, the word hand is nothing more than a piece of text, a shape of letters on a page - but we all know that when we hear or see the word 'hand', it signifies a limb, a lump of flesh and bone with four fingers and a thumb. The word points beyond itself to something more real - the word is a symbol. The word 'hand' in one sense is very inadequate because it doesn't tell you very much about what a hand looks like or what it feels like or what it does. But nevertheless, there is a close and very true connection between the word 'hand' and the reality that it's pointing to... all of which is a very laboured way of saying that words are a brilliant vehicle for pointing towards or evoking something bigger, something that isn't fully described but is nevertheless real.

When we say that words are an inadequate way of talking about God, that statement isn't as profound as it sounds, because words are an inadequate way of talking about anything. Words never capture the full reality of the things they refer to. They're only ever a very rough approximation of what we are trying to describe, so it's no wonder we so easily misunderstand each other. But it also means that words are a really good way of conveying the reality of God,

because words never pretend to tell you the whole truth, they only ever give you a tiny glimpse of what they mean: the word 'dog' could mean anything from a tiny chihuahua in a lady's handbag to an enormous shaggy wolfhound chasing deer and thousands of possibilities in between.

How much more open is the word God? But what is so exciting is that every word carries within it, like an umbilical cord, some connection with a bigger truth. Jesus says, *"The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. But among you, there are some who do not believe."* That is to say, there are some who only see the text, some who only hear the sounds and never see the bigger reality; there are some who only see the carpenter's son from Nazareth, never the Son of God; there are some who only see earthly bread and never discern the spiritual food that gives true life. So when Jesus says that he is the bread that came down from heaven; and that this bread is his flesh; and that those who believe in him will share in his death and resurrection; and so will receive eternal life - this teaching is too difficult for some. The reality these words are pointing to is too big - the surface meaning taken literally doesn't make sense and sadly, John tells us that many started to turn back and no longer went about with Jesus.

But if you allow yourself to sense that bigger reality to which Jesus's words are pointing; if you are open to a meaning and a truth that can't be completely contained and spelt out and understood and defined in every detail - then maybe you are on a pathway that will lead you to eternal life; life in all its fullness, if you will only let it take you to the reality indicated by that single word, that name, 'Jesus'. What a powerful word that is. Jesus himself leaves the choice open. He turns to the twelve, and he turns to you and me, and he asks them, *"Do you also wish to go away?"* Peter answers for the twelve, *"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life."*

When I was a young Christian, I found those words of Peter utterly compelling, and I still do - Where else do you look for a truth that is convincing and reliable? Where else do you look for words that you can trust and upon which you can ground your life? Where else can you find the Word made Flesh, a word that points to something bigger, something enriching and enlarging, full of grace and truth? Where else do you hear a word that points through death to resurrection and steers us towards a world where we can be fully alive, more truly ourselves, and channels of life to others.

Jesus says, *"The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life."*

Perhaps with Peter we feel able to respond this morning, *"Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and trust that you are the Holy one of God."*

Reading Text

John 6:56-69

⁵⁶ Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. ⁵⁷ Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. ⁵⁸ This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.' ⁵⁹ He said these things while he was teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum. ⁶⁰ When many of his disciples heard it, they said, 'This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?' ⁶¹ But Jesus, being aware that his disciples were complaining about it, said to them, 'Does this offend you? ⁶² Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? ⁶³ It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless. The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life. ⁶⁴ But among you there are some who do not believe.' For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him. ⁶⁵ And he said, 'For this reason I have told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father.' ⁶⁶ Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. ⁶⁷ So Jesus asked the twelve, 'Do you also wish to go away?' ⁶⁸ Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. ⁶⁹ We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.'