

## Watch your mouth (James 3:1-18)

Just do it! (Simon Rea)

Sunday Morning 10:45am 4 November 2007

It's so good to be here this morning, to be here with and his his family. There is so much to celebrate and thank God for at a service like this: the safe birth of Olivia the love and care of her family and friends. And of course there were those prayers for Olivia as he grows up: prayers for God's help and protection both for her and for Amanda and Sean as they bring her up. As Olivia gets older, of course he's going change and start to look different but it's funny, no matter how much he'll change, I'm sure there will still be features that will remain distinctive, features that help others to recognise who he is.

Now I've got a few retouched photographs here today just to prove that, too: [\(Haribos\)](#)

Blair  
Rooney  
Rowan Williams  
Simon Rea

Each one had some distinctive differences, some familiar features that marked them out as Tony Blair, Wayne Rooney, Rowan Williams - or even Simon Rea.

The book of James which we've been studying at this service for the past few weeks helps us to focus on what makes Christians distinctive. James writes about the differences Christians should show, about the family features which should help others recognise them. [They should have the look and feel to use a phrase from software engineering of the one they're named after: Jesus Christ.](#) But what does that mean? What does it mean to be like Jesus Christ? This short, practical letter, tucked away at the end of the NT helps us understand how Christians should stand out in the world. James tells us what a Christian life should look like. To use some words we heard earlier in the service, he shows us some of what it means to walk in the way of faith and follow Christ - remember those promises from the first part of baptism? But James wasn't just writing for the parents and godparents who made

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those promises earlier who need to listen. No, he's writing to anyone who wants to walk the talk of a Christian life.

So what distinctive features has James already talked about? Last week we heard how important our hands are because faith without deeds is dead. The distinctive features James focuses on in our passage this week are our mouths and our minds. Bemigho is going to come and read the passage to us now.

### **JAMES 3: 1-18**

Mouths and minds. If anyone wants to be a Christian, to be a follower of Jesus, they need to watch both and in our reading James shows us what that means by highlighting the importance of mouth hygiene and brain gym in our lives.

You might want to keep your pew Bibles open at page 1214 as we go through them.

Mouth. James starts by talking about teachers, so will I. Before the days of interactive whiteboards, powerpoint or even blackboards James was a teacher, so

he's writing this warning for himself, too and for me and for anyone else whose work involves them in Christian teaching: We need to watch what we say, how we say it and make sure that our lives don't call our words into question. The early Christians were called the followers of the way. They followed the life and teachings of Jesus Christ who said of himself that he was, that he is the way and the truth and the life. Christians are still called to follow his life and and example in what they say and what they do. All Christians are called to walk his talk and walk his walk - but James is telling us, that's especially so for anyone who is involved in teaching about the Christian faith.

When I was teaching at an inner London comprehensive school, the kids discovered a new game. They used to play it in the breaks outside my classroom. Basically what happened was that 2 - generally 15 or 16 year old boys would stand opposite each other - with a posse of friends behind them and then they'd bad mouth each other's mother until one ran out of things to say. The one who ran out of bad mouthings would then stand still until

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everyone in both posses had punched him in the chest. The game was finally banned after one of the losers had to be taken to hospital with a suspected heart attack...

I suppose you could say that an experience like that shows us just how wrong the old saying: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt you" really is. I think the truth is more like: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can deeply hurt you". I wonder how many people here today have Or has anyone suffered from the effects of the Simon Cowell syndrome? Cowell is notorious for his unsparingly blunt and often controversial criticisms, insults, and wisecracks about contestants and their singing abilities, or lack thereof. I wonder how many people her today have been hurt by calculated, critical or careless words at home or at work? I wonder how many people here today have understood in their hearts the truth behind those WW2 slogans about careless talk costing lives or loose lips sinking ships because of what someone had said to you or about you? And if these things hurt in the world, then how much more do

they hurt people in the church which is supposed to demonstrate a different kind of community?

In our reading James employs powerful word pictures to make a point we all know instinctively is true: Our tongues can be deadly weapons! They are as powerful as a bit in a horses mouth or a ship's rudder - or we might want to say the steering wheel of our cars or the joystick of a jumbo jet. Through them our words can control where we go ourselves and where we take others. Our words can take ourselves and others to places of praise and encouragement or they can quite literally make people's lives hell, for example by spreading false gossip - even with the best intentions. [It becomes dirty talk, mud slinging, the opposite of mouth hygiene.](#)

In v5 James writes: "the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts" And then he continues "Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life

on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell." So what can we do about it? We could try to follow the approach, made famous in the immortal words of Peter Behn - he's the voice behind the young Thumper in Disney's classic Bambi cartoon [OHT] - is this: "If you can't say nuthin' good, don't say nuthin' at all!" [OHT] Now there's nothing wrong with that advice but we all know that that approach doesn't always work: Things just slip out when we're angry or annoyed with someone for example. So I think James is being realistic when he writes

V7 All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no [man] one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison."

So what can we do? Part of the answer is of course that mouth hygiene I was talking about earlier. We need to keep our mouths clean and pure. James is implying something similar to this when he starts comparing our mouths to salt and fresh water springs in v9 onwards. If a spring is contaminated, if it is unclean for whatever reason, it becomes a

like a salt water spring, which means it is useless. You can't drink salt water and you can't water your animals or your crops with it. If anyone spends more time bad mouthing other people, that person is like a salt water spring. Contaminated. Unclean. Useless. A person like that can't be a follower of Jesus because a follower of Jesus is someone from whom streams of living water will flow - as Jesus himself said. (Jn 7:37-39). Life giving (Jn 4:13-14), fresh water springing up from a life which focuses on praising God - not bad mouthing other people. This gives us a couple of powerful suggestions for successful mouth hygiene, ways of drawing out potential for poisonous tongues: Keep on praising God for all the good things he's given us - and an occasion like today is a great reminder of that - and keep focussed on Jesus. Spending time regularly reading the Bible at home, discussing it at a house group and coming together for Sunday services all help us with our mouth hygiene.

From v13 onwards James moves from talking about talking to talking about what wisdom really is and the wisdom he

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means is the real source of the moth hygiene I was talking about earlier. This is where we come to his "brain gym" - now don't worry he's not going to get you all to do cross crawls and all the other kinesthetic learning activities that children at Christ Church School are lucky enough to learn about. No James brain gym is quite different because it's not only got to do with [head] intellectual learning. Jame's not saying anything about intellectual cleverness, about GCSEs, ONDs or degrees. Wisdom and understanding have nothing to do with knowing the answers to KS 2 science problems, pub quiz questions or difficult financial calculations. Wisdom and understanding are about knowing how to live good lives which show that we are really followers of Jesus, which is of course the main theme of the whole letter! Being a Christian is about loving [the Lord your] God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' (Mk 12:30). In this part of the letter, James is focussing on [head], [heart] and [hands]. If you are a Christian, God wants you to show it with your hands - as we were hearing last week - and with your

heart and with your head. Sometimes Christians are accused of being too heavenly minded to be any earthly good. That sounds really clever, doesn't it? It makes the Christian faith appear to be a waste of space for those who James is saying something very different: You must be heavenly minded if you want to be any earthly good!

The wisdom James is writing about here brings heart and head and hands together because it has got to do with actions and attitudes. Actions because James reminds us that it will involve deeds in v13 and attitudes because they are what direct our hearts and our minds, what we feel and what we think.

So James sets out two lists which describe thoughts, feelings or actions that are wise or unwise. [rest ad libbed using basic structure from here to end!]

Wise  
Actions  
*Good life*  
  
*Good deeds*

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*Humility*

*Attitudes*

*Pure*

sincere in obeying God, not  
having any twisted motives

*Peace loving*

produces peace in the church

*Considerate*

= 'gentle' (Phil. 4:5; 1 Tim. 3:3),  
which means that it is non-combative

*Submissive*

people are willing to learn, be  
corrected

*Impartial*

not showing favouritism as we heard a  
couple of weeks ago

*Sincere*

means that there is no falseness or  
play-acting in the person's actions

*Unwise*

Actions

*Bitter envy*

*Selfish ambition*

could also be translated 'party spirit',  
people who formed groups or parties  
rather than standing for the unity of the

whole church

*Denying the truth*

of the resurrection

*Disorder*

*Evil practices*

*Earthly*

Attitudes

*Unspiritual*

*Of the Devil*

2 lists. 2 sets of actions and attitudes.  
The first list show us what it really  
means to be heavenly minded. The actions  
and attitudes in the first list come  
'from above' and reflect the example of  
Christ. If anyone wants to be a follower  
of Christ - a Christian, then these are  
the actions and attitudes that will show  
it to the world.

[Returned to text around here!](#)

These two list show 2 possible choices. 2  
choices we all have to make at some time  
in our lives. Will our lives be  
characterised by the wise or the unwise  
list? James' words still challenge us

today. Will our lives be characterised by the wise or the unwise list?

Today we've been able to celebrate the baptism of

His / her parents have made choices for him her to live a wise life because baptism is the start of a journey towards a life characterised by that first list, by the actions and attitudes of a wise life. That's what they were doing when they promised to pray for *him*, draw *him* by their example into the community of faith and walk with *him* in the way of Christ so that he can one day take *his* place within the life and worship of Christ's Church.

To live a life like that takes strength and courage. And I'm sure we'll all be praying that

and his family have both. But strength and courage alone won't be enough: there's one more factor in the equation. In fact it's the most vital factor in the equation because without it, the equation can't be solved and a truly wise life can't be lived. What is that vital

factor? Well, it's in the words

and

used to respond to those questions at the start of the baptism. What is it? The help of God. Without the help of God through the empowering presence of his Holy Spirit, it's just not possible to live a truly wise life. Let us pray for

for his family and for ourselves that God will give us his help to live lives that show his wisdom. AMEN.