A sermon for Choral Evensong at Wells Cathedral, preached on Sunday 25 October by the Reverend Edward Day, Cathedral Curate.

Fruitful Beyond Eloquence

Isaiah 55. 1-11; Luke 4. 14-30

You might be relieved to know that I have been given a word count. There is an end, and the aim for at least a modicum of brevity. I used to think word counts were scarily big numbers to reach, wondering how I would ever write a 10,000-word essay at university. I soon discovered otherwise when I had a 15,000-word essay that needed to become ten.

Sometimes I wonder whether we use rather more words than are strictly necessary. We might read St Mark's Gospel and think his briskness a little rude, preferring a little extra on the sides. Why use a simple word when a fancy one will do? Why say something in ten words when you could say it in a hundred? We can produce an enormous quantity of words without necessarily saying very much. And I say that as somebody currently standing in a pulpit, adding another thousand words to the world, and delivering my third sermon of the day.

Words are everywhere. On our televisions, phones, newspapers, and in our conversations. Words of encouragement, criticism, affection, and anger. Words which enlighten us, words which deceive us, and words which, frankly, would have been better left unsaid.

But how many of those words actually accomplish anything?

In our first reading, the Prophet Isaiah offers us a beautiful image of the power of God's word. Just as rain and snow descend from heaven and water the earth, making it fruitful, so God's word shall not return empty but shall accomplish that for which it was sent.

God's word does not simply make a noise. It does something. It nourishes, restores, transforms, and makes possible that which previously seemed impossible. God's word is not simply an exercise in eloquence; it is an act of creation.

In our second reading from the Gospel according to St Luke, we encounter that same Word, not merely spoken, but made flesh. Our Lord Jesus Christ stands in the synagogue at Nazareth, opens the scroll of Isaiah, and announces that He has been anointed to bring good news to the poor, freedom to captives, sight to the blind, and liberty to the oppressed.

The Word of God has become flesh, and the promises of God are finding expression in a human life. This is surely one of the most extraordinary claims of Christianity. God does not remain distant, offering beautiful observations about the human condition. God enters that condition. God does not simply declare His love for humanity; He becomes human.

The Word made flesh calls us beyond eloquence into love. And perhaps that is a rather uncomfortable challenge for those of us who profess to follow Him. We are very good at talking about love. We speak about compassion, generosity, justice, dignity, and peace. We pray for the hungry, the homeless, the refugee, and the oppressed. We issue statements, make declarations, and offer assurances.

These words are important. Indeed, words can change lives. But words can also destroy them. We can describe the poor as lazy, the refugee as dangerous, the stranger as unwelcome, and the vulnerable as a burden. We can reduce somebody, made in the image and likeness of God, into a label, a stereotype, or a statistic. Once we have found the language to make somebody appear less deserving of our compassion, it becomes considerably easier to withhold it.

Words can liberate, but they can also imprison. They can build bridges, but they can also build walls. Perhaps that is why the reaction to Christ's sermon at Nazareth is so revealing. Initially, everybody admires His gracious words. But when Jesus reminds them that God's mercy extended to the widow of Zarephath and Naaman the Syrian, both outsiders, their admiration turns to fury.

They were happy to hear about God's generosity, until they discovered that it might extend beyond themselves. They liked the words; however, they disliked what the words meant. It is easy to speak of loving our neighbour when our neighbour resembles ourselves. It is rather more difficult when our neighbour is somebody we fear, misunderstand, disagree with, or would prefer not to encounter.

Yet God's love refuses to be confined by the boundaries of our sympathies. This demands something more than the correct language. It demands something of our lives. Because we can speak beautifully about feeding the hungry without ever offering somebody a meal. We can pray fervently for the lonely without ever visiting them. We can condemn the mistreatment of strangers while making little effort to welcome one. We can become so accomplished at describing compassion that we mistake our eloquence for compassion itself.

There is another danger. Namely, the words we refuse to say. The silence when somebody is humiliated. The silence when prejudice goes unchallenged. The silence when we recognise an injustice but fear the inconvenience of speaking up. Silence can, of course, be holy. Sometimes listening is the greatest act of love we can offer, particularly when others have been denied the opportunity to speak for themselves. But silence can also be cowardice disguised as politeness. Christian love sometimes requires us to speak when we would rather remain quiet. At other times, it requires us to be quiet when we would rather speak. And always, it requires us to see the human being before us.

For this is what Christ does. He does not simply speak about the poor, the captive, and the oppressed as abstract categories deserving of our sympathy. He enters their world. He encounters people in their suffering, restores their dignity, and invites them into the fullness of life. His words and his actions belong together.

That is surely our calling too. Not that every word must achieve something extraordinary. Not that every conversation must change the world. Sometimes love is expressed through the smallest words and the simplest gestures. A word of reassurance to somebody who is frightened. A word of welcome to somebody who feels excluded. A word of courage spoken on behalf of somebody who has been silenced. And perhaps, most importantly, the willingness to make those words believable through what we do.

Isaiah promises that God's word shall not return empty. It shall bear fruit. Maybe we should ask ourselves whether our words bear fruit too. Whether they leave people more hopeful, more dignified, more loved. Whether the world is made even slightly kinder because we have spoken.

For the Christian calling is not simply to proclaim the love of God, but to participate in it. The Word did not become flesh so that we might have something more impressive to say about God. The Word became flesh so that the love of God might become visible in the world. And now, through our words, our actions, our courage, and our compassion, we are called to make that love visible too. Beyond eloquence, into love.

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