

**Sermon Notes from CMJ**  
16th Sunday after Pentecost – Year B

**RCL Readings** – Proverbs 1:20-33; Psalm 19; James 3:1-12; Mark 8:27-38

**ACNA Readings** – Isaiah 50:4-9; Psalm 116; James 2:1-18; Mark 9:14-29

**Introduction.** We live in an age of words. We find them everywhere in the constant barrage of tweets, blogs, Instagrams, and posts. These words that we write and that we read can bring happiness and joy, and just as likely, they can hurt and cause offence. Words have consequences. They are both powerful and personal. Words are so powerful that creation itself began through a spoken word and so personal that the Word became flesh and dwelt with us.

**Common Theme.** Last week’s readings had us look at the source of words, which was the heart. This week’s readings touch on the impact of those words. The words we use can speak truth, declare loyalty, encourage, and uplift. Or they can do the opposite. Either way, the words we use are ultimately our words, coming from our hearts, and we need to be responsible for what we say and how we say it.

**Proverbs 1:20-33.** The opening verses of Proverbs describe the purpose of the book – for attaining wisdom, leading to discipline and right behaviour. Verse 7 notes that only fools despise wisdom and instruction. Throughout the Proverbs, wisdom is personified as a woman and given a voice. Her instruction offers the world guidance and help. Wisdom calls aloud from public places, that is to say, wisdom is not hidden in secret areas, nor does it reside only in heaven. We all have access to wisdom, but we need to be listening. The non-wise are the mockers and scoffers who ignore the voice of the Lord. They speak also, but they use their words to insult, denigrate, and cause hatred and strife. Their mocking words have consequences – the Lord will ignore them when they seek to call upon him in the bad times. The unwise do not choose to fear the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom; the consequences of this poor choice cannot be avoided. The Proverbs conclude with the admonition to listen to wisdom coupled with the promise of living in safety and without fear. The New Testament refers to the Messiah as the ‘wisdom from God’ (1 Cor 1:30), who brings us the promise of everlasting life without fear and death.

**Psalm 19.** The opening line addresses this psalm of David to the ‘Director of music’ or the ‘Chief Musician’, depending on your translation of מְנַצֵּחַ (l’*menasach*). The identity of the ‘Musician’ is unknown. Asaph is called the ‘head of the musicians’ in 1 Chronicles 16:5, however the word there for “head” is רֹאשׁ (*rosh*), a very different word from the one in this psalm. Some traditions say that מְנַצֵּחַ, ‘the Chief Musician’, is God Almighty and that David is composing a song to God as the Lord of all Singers. In this psalm, it is creation itself that has the voice and speaks. The heavens declare the glory of God and reveal the Lord to all the world. The heavens mentioned here are not the spiritual heavens of the world to come but rather the physical elements of sky, sun, and moon. Scientifically, the universe holds evidence of intelligent design. Paul writes in Romans 1:20 that ‘since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen’. The power of the

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unspoken words of creation transcends all other spoken languages as the message has gone out to all the world. In response to this almighty yet silent voice, David ends the psalm with a humble supplication in verse 14. David combines the words of the tongue and the heart as an acceptable offering to God. The heavens speak of God, and in response, our words and heart should reflect this revealed truth. In many liturgies, verse 14 has become a common phrase to say before beginning a sermon.

**James 3:1-12.** James begins this section of his epistle stressing the responsibility of those who teach. Teachers play a vital role in the Church today and have throughout history. Paul provides some advice on choosing good leaders for our communities in his letters to Titus and Timothy. James is not critiquing the profession but rather giving a sober warning to those who would desire to teach the household of faith. Our words have consequences, and what we teach will bear fruit for good or for evil within the community. James says those that instruct the people of God should take that responsibility most seriously because they have a stricter accountability to God the judge. The majority of this passage illustrates the power of the tongue. Words may appear innocent and inconsequential at first, but like sparks that start forest fires and rudders that guide ships, their effects can have far-reaching repercussions. James concludes this passage (vv. 10-12) by echoing Jesus' teaching that we will be known by our fruits (Matt 7:15-20). Our words can both bless and curse, but they should not do both. A freshwater spring should only produce good, clear water, not brackish muck. Our true character is known through the fruit of our actions and in the words that we say.

**Mark 8:27-38.** The Gospels are finely crafted texts. They record not only what Jesus said but also the location where he said it. Location is important as geography is often connected to theology. Jesus intentionally goes to the villages around Caesarea Philippi. There were several prominent and active shrines in the area to the nature god Pan, vengeance goddess Nemesis, fertility goddess Nymph, and shrines dedicated to emperor worship. It was obviously a very pagan and Hellenistic place a short 40 miles from the Sea of Galilee. Caesarea Philippi was not a secret to anyone; it was the capital of Herod Philip the Tetrarch. Yet this is the area in which Jesus asks his disciples the fundamental question: 'Who do you say that I am?' This is a question we are all required to answer, and our answer will have consequences. In this cultic location, many tongues would confess that Caesar was lord or that nature was lord. We are surrounded by a secular culture that no longer recognizes truth for what it is. And in this secular society, we like Peter are required to confess that Jesus is the Messiah – not only a prophet, or a miracle worker, or a good teacher and generally all-around nice guy, but the Messiah and Lord! Jesus broadcasts his invitation to be his disciple to the villages around this pagan area. Even people who live in such spiritually dark places can choose to follow the Messiah. Contained within the call of discipleship is the paradoxical teaching of Jesus. The path of salvation involves self-sacrifice and not personal ambition and power. The Messiah himself will demonstrate this through his suffering and death and so bring redemption and life everlasting. To the world, it does seem foolish to say that life will come from death, yet for a follower of Jesus, a resurrection life can only proceed from a dying life. As we saw in Proverbs, the mocker and scoffers, those who ignore wisdom, are ignored by the Lord. In a similar

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pattern, if we are ashamed of the Lord, then the Son of Man will be ashamed of us. Our confession of who Jesus is will have eternal consequences. From the north of the Holy Land and with such an important question to us now asked, Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem to walk the way of the cross.

**ACNA Addendum**

**Isaiah 50:4-9.** This passage is the third of four ‘Servant Songs’. The songs are four poems in Isaiah that talk about the עֶבֶד יְהוָה (*eved Adonai*), the servant of the Lord. The poem begins with the servant being given the ability to speak words of wisdom from the Lord. Prophetically this speaks of the wisdom that we learn from Jesus the Messiah. The servant, or the Messiah, is a scholar. He is well-trained in the word of the Lord. He has a word for all seasons. The song says the Messiah hears the word of the Lord. The question for us is do we hear the word of the Messiah? The song painfully reveals the rejection that the servant will suffer. Some graphic details, like the plucking out of his beard, are not recorded in the Gospels. It is from these Servant Songs that we see glimpses of the punishment endured by Jesus from the Romans.

**Psalms 116.** Psalm 116 is part of the collection known as the Egyptian Hallel Psalms (Psalms 113-118). They had become a part of the Passover liturgy and were highly likely to have been sung by Jesus and his disciples during the week of his passion (see Matt 26:30, Mark 14:26). The psalm begins with an expression of love for the Lord because of answered prayer. The psalmist prayed for deliverance and was saved from death. The exact scenario that afflicts the worshipper with danger is not explained, although David describes the crisis as his soul being close to Sheol, the realm of the dead. While deliverance is celebrated, verse 15 reminds us that death remains a reality for each of us. The appropriate response to mercy and salvation is not only grateful love but also more prayer. The psalmist asked the question, ‘How can I repay the Lord for all his goodness to me?’ The answer is that the worshipper will continue to ‘call on the name of the Lord’.

**James 2:1-18.** The faith that we have in the Messiah should never be associated with discrimination. Jesus was, and is, faithful and impartial to both Jews and Gentiles, to males and females, to the rich and to the poor. In alignment with the faithfulness of Jesus, the Epistle of James is committed to egalitarianism. Verse 2, in Greek, describes the meeting place of the community as a synagogue, indicating that James is writing to a community of predominantly Jewish followers of Jesus. It appears that James knows them personally, as he has intricate knowledge of the favouritism they show the wealthier members of the flock. James reminds us, as does much of Church history, that it is the poor who respond more readily to the Gospel. Wealth should not be a hindrance to the Good News, but many times it can be (Matt 19:16-30). James brings a verse from Leviticus 19:18, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’, to support his argument that Scripture also shows no partiality. James calls this the ‘royal law’. Paul, in Galatians 5:14, says that this law sums up the ‘entire Torah’. The poor are just as much our neighbour as the rich and need to be treated as equals and in equal fashion. What we say and profess to

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believe should be supported by our behaviour, and this is not limited to equal treatment of people. Our behaviour should support our words in all things. James brings the example that we cannot simply say to people, ‘be warm or be fed’ and expect them to be so. To fail a brother or sister in the most simple of good deeds, like giving food or shelter, reflects the heart of someone without a living faith. That is a serious statement! Faith alone saves, but that faith must be a living faith.

**Mark 9:14-29.** The healing of the demon-possessed boy occurs in all three of the Synoptic Gospels. Apparently, the failure of Jesus’ disciples to cast out the demon had resulted in an argument with scribes. Exactly what is the argument is not explained, but the commotion attracts the attention of Jesus. Incidentally, while the disciples are criticized for their inability to exorcise the evil spirit, the scribes seemed equally unable or unwilling to do so. The spirit in this instance is a mute spirit. The ancient world believed that to exorcise a demon you had to learn the name of the demon. Mute spirits were therefore particularly hard to cast out as the spirit could not divulge its name. When Jesus admonishes the crowd as a ‘faithless generation’, it is not easy to understand who exactly he is referring to. Is Jesus chastising his disciples, the crowd or the scribes? When we think of a ‘faithless generation’, it is not that people ‘had no faith’ and that they didn’t believe in God, because they did. They went to synagogue; they made pilgrimage to the Temple; they read the Torah and the Prophets and sang psalms. Faithless means something other than ‘no faith’. The distraught father sums up the tension for us when he appeals to Jesus, ‘Lord, I believe, help me in my unbelief’. Privately, the disciples ask Jesus about their failure with the evil spirit. Jesus says that this kind of demon only leaves with prayer (later manuscripts have the added ‘fasting’). This teaches us that the foundation of faith and belief is a prayerful relationship with the Lord. Studying God’s word is excellent; community worship is wonderful and healthy, and none of those should be ignored. However, prayer is essential to a living relationship with the living God.

**About the author.** The Rev. Aaron Eime is the deacon at Christ Church Jerusalem and teacher for CMJ Israel. Aaron studied in the master’s program at Hebrew University with a focus on early Jewish and Christian interpretation of the Bible. He also studied psychology and sociology at Queensland University in Australia. Aaron is a dedicated Bible teacher exploring the Hebraic roots of the Christian faith. He reads Aramaic and ancient Greek and is fluent in German and Hebrew. He has taught internationally, including in Europe, North America, Hong Kong, and China. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and three children.