

## **Speak. But act accordingly**

### **Day of Pentecost**

*Jeremiah 22:1–9; Acts 2:1–21*

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What is the real value of the spoken word? It's a tough question to answer; and that's especially off-putting if you're entrusted with writing and preaching a sermon, I can assure you.

The Bible itself is somewhat ambiguous on the issue. On the one hand, words are seen as incredibly powerful, and a force either for good or for evil. As John tells us at the start of his Gospel, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

Immediately after, he recounts how John the Baptist was sent ahead of Jesus to preach as a witness to this Word of God. There is no doubting the value and power of God's Word.

Yet elsewhere in scripture, what is "said" is held almost in contempt. For fairly obvious reasons, the fine words of Israel's leaders, both kings and religious authorities, are dismissed by both prophets and Jesus Himself, because what they say does not match their unjust actions. Words are meaningless in the context of hypocrisy.

But there's a subtle nuance here. In the passage we heard from Jeremiah today, the prophet condemns the injustice of Jehoiakim, who ruled as king of Judah from 609 to 597 BC. Unlike his father Josiah, Jehoiakim took the kingship of Judah as a chance to get rich quick at the expense of his people, many of whom were basically coerced into slave labour. Yet while Jeremiah condemns such practices, his advice to Jehoiakim is not so much to stop building up the kingship of Judah, but to act positively to build it on something better.

Through Jeremiah, God tells Jehoiakim, "this is what the Lord says about the palace of the king of Judah: "... you are like Gilead to me, like the summit of Lebanon." At the same time, God's instructions are very clear: "Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place."

What God is effectively saying is that the concept of Jehoiakim's kingship is not the problem. Gilead and the summit of Lebanon were seen as the pinnacle of beauty and majesty by many. However, their worth is nothing if they are not underpinned by actions that make a difference. It is not a question of having one or the other. It is a question of making them work by taking seriously what God has told His people.

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That is the real value of what was seen and heard at Pentecost. The disciples were meeting quietly, keeping a low profile as Jesus had instructed them, until the Holy Spirit came upon them. All of a sudden, a powerful wind came into the house where they were gathered and

what looked like tongues of fire touched each of them. They were empowered to go outside and preach Jesus' message in a variety of languages.

These words touched Jews who were in Jerusalem for the festival of First Fruits, which took place at the beginning of the wheat harvest, some fifty days after Passover. By giving them these linguistic abilities, the Holy Spirit had enabled the disciples to reach to a vast crowd of potential believers from all over what was then the Roman Empire.

But the words themselves were not going to achieve a great deal. Many of those who heard them were amazed; but they started to ask each other, "What does this mean?" Others even laughed it off, dismissing the disciples are no more than drunk.

Peter responded immediately. He spoke up and declared Jesus' message straightaway, starting by explaining how this was God's prophecy come true. And this was not just in terms of what was said but in quite powerful terms: the gift of the Spirit, blood, fire and billows of smoke, the sun turned to darkness and the moon to blood. The text goes on beyond this to set out how it was not just wonders around them which people would see, but a real transformation in what they would be able to do.

Speaking in multiple tongues would have been a nice trick. The disciples were preaching the word of Jesus, which was hardly unimportant. Yet none of this would have had a great deal of significance if there had never been any intent to *do* something, to make a change.

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There is probably nobody who hasn't been to church more than a few times who hasn't heard something about the dangers of hypocrisy. The Church of Scotland, with its staunch, Presbyterian traditions, has long been highly allergic to the concept of "High Church", seeing things such as fine art, stained-glass windows, theological robes, fine music (and many more) as distractions from the word of God. Certainly, in its history, the church has seen quite a few, less than fortunate instances, where the finery of religion has become a distraction from the discovery of faith. Even worse, we have seen a powerful church become a goal in and of itself, even failing to speak up for the victims of injustice, as Jeremiah calls for Judah's rulers to do.

But does that mean that whatever defines our religion is somehow wrong? When others see our buildings, admire our stained-glass windows, or hear our music, are they seeing nothing but emptiness in what we are communicating?

The answer is yes, if our message as Christians is to ensure that we say and project the supposedly right thing for its own sake. But the answer is no, when that message is based on action, impact, results.

Worshipping God is next to worthless if it is done by rote and affects nobody. But when it draws people in, when they approach, encounter and respond to God, then they are gaining what Jesus died to give us. It matters incredibly.

So, what is our purpose? When we pray, when we worship, when we do something as the church, do we ask ourselves what impact we expect to have? Do we try to do "Christian" things – give to a beggar, say a kind word – because we feel that we need to be seen to do so or because we are aiming to make a change? We don't have to be saving the world. But if we

show sympathy because we're trying to make a small difference to someone, if we tell people about our faith because we want them to reflect genuinely themselves, then what we communicate has a real and crucial value.

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Here's a question. I think we've all walked down a street and heard someone trying to preach or sell a supposedly religious message enough times. Isn't the typical reaction of most simply to shrug it off and hope to get away before getting cornered by this slightly deranged character, especially if they're smelling of drink?

If so, what made the disciples so different that their words became the basis of the Christian church, in which we are still worshipping today?

This is because the church of God has a purpose – to help make God's kingdom come, God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. We are not here to promote ourselves or to turn away from the world, as an alternative to it. We are here to engage that world and, as Jeremiah called for, to have it based on God's mercy and justice, not on greed and injustice. The disciples called for change and for action which would make the necessary difference. That gave their words real meaning, which so many other words lack completely.

God's church has to communicate effectively. Often, it struggles to do so. Whatever the challenge, we have to start with the question: How do we have an impact on the world around us? How do we help transform a world full of problems into God's world? Not, certainly, by ignoring the rest of that world, while we preach God's word in splendid isolation.

We will make an impact when we know what effect spreading God's word can have and want it to have that effect.