

Sermon: No False Witnesses (17-7-22)

Mark 14: 53-72

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be now and always acceptable to you O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen

That prayer uses words that come from Psalm 19. They were used every week in a church I used to attend many years ago when the preacher got up to speak.

Words – they are very important. As well as building people up and encouraging them, if wrongly used, our words can be highly destructive. The book of Proverbs is a rich source of words about words. Here are some examples:

- (Proverbs 10:18) Lying lips conceal hatred, and whoever utters slander is a fool.
- (11:13) A gossip goes about telling secrets, but one who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a confidence.
- (26:17) Like a maniac who shoots deadly firebrands and arrows, so is one who deceives a neighbour and says, “I am only joking!”.

And then in the New Testament James says “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.”

Slander, deceit, derision, gossip, quarrels: the Bible is honest about the damage words can do.

Let's face it, today's world is no different. We may have felt the pain of unjust words spoken against us. How many of us have engaged in gossip ourselves? In the realm of social media, attacking someone verbally or sharing false information about them is all too common. Rumours have a habit of spreading. Both in public and private life, we know what happens when people start to doubt the truth of a person's words: we simply don't trust them anymore.

It shouldn't be a surprise then that “You shall not give false testimony against your neighbour” features in the 10 commandments. It's sandwiched between “do not

steal” and “do not covet anything that belongs to your neighbour” – so a group of commandments designed to help us to form good relationships within a community. Further explanation is given in Exodus 23 “Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness. Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd and do not show favouritism to a poor man in his lawsuit.”

Legal justice only happens when everyone tells the truth. The whole point of a court case is to get to the truth so that a right judgment can be made. Key to this is having good witnesses.

When we hear the account of the trial of Jesus, we can see what a charade it was. It was unusual, if not irregular, for a trial to be heard in the middle of the night. It shows the desperation of the chief priests collaborating with the elders and the teachers of the law to get Jesus out of the way quickly. They can't find any evidence that would lead to a conviction, so they resort to calling upon false witnesses. Clearly if there had been any kind of proper trial there were many people who could have given evidence in defence of Jesus. Think of all those who had seen miracles or received healing at his hand. But these were not voices that the chief priests and elders wanted to hear. There was, of course, one person who was nearby that night who might have given testimony about Jesus – Peter followed along at a distance when Jesus was arrested and is trying to look inconspicuous in the courtyard of the high priest's house where the trial is taking place.

What might have motivated the chief priests and elders to resort to false testimony? Hatred because they thought Jesus was an imposter, leading people astray? Jealousy because Jesus was so popular? Maybe it was the need to get Jesus off the scene without actually killing him themselves (they would get the Roman soldiers to do that). Exactly who the false witnesses were, we don't know; perhaps they were persuaded or even paid by the religious authorities. But the plan nearly backfires because the witnesses are at odds with one another and the law only allowed for a conviction where 2 or more witnesses gave evidence that agreed. Some say one thing, some another. They misquote Jesus saying that he had claimed he would destroy the man-made temple and rebuild another, not made by man, in 3 days. It sounds like a garbled version of a conversation he had with his disciples when he

predicted that “this temple” meaning his own body would be destroyed and re-built, that is, raised to life, in 3 days. Jesus had never threatened to destroy the Temple building.

Jesus stands silently and doesn’t answer the High Priest when he questions Jesus himself. His very silence fulfils the prophecy of Isaiah about the servant of the Lord who “like a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth”. How then can things be resolved? The false testimony has failed, Jesus has so far said nothing.

In exasperation the High Priest asks Jesus directly “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?” “I am” said Jesus. “And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.” Here Jesus is not only acknowledging that he is the Messiah, but he links it with the vision of Daniel who sees one like a “son of man” approaching God’s throne in heaven and being given power and authority. Jesus is claiming this role for himself! “This is blasphemy” says the High Priest tearing his clothes as a sign of his outrage.

So here is the scene: the false witnesses arguing among themselves, Peter trying to evade the truth that he *is* indeed one of Jesus’ followers, the High Priest tearing his clothes – it’s a picture of utter confusion. But in the centre of it all is Jesus, the one who had described himself as “the way, the truth, and the life”. Here is the Truth shining in the darkness of that night amidst the lies, scheming, and malice of those around him. At this pivotal moment of that night, and of his life, Jesus finally proclaims the truth of his identity. He is the only one who has spoken the truth, and yet it is called blasphemy.

While the trial continues, Peter faces his own trial of sorts. He is challenged not once, not twice, but three times to admit that he knows Jesus, that he was one of his followers from Galilee, and he denies it each time. Jesus had predicted that before the cock crowed Peter would deny him 3 times and again, his words prove to be true. How ironic that it was Peter who had been the first to grasp who Jesus really was, and when he asked his disciples “Who do you say that I am?” he answered without hesitation “You are the Christ”. He even went on to say that he would never deny Jesus. When the cock crows, Peter weeps.

Who do you identify with? The false witnesses, who hardly know Jesus, but are ready to accuse him? Or Peter who knows exactly who Jesus is, but when the moment of challenge comes, fails to witness?

As the cock crows, the High Priest concludes that Jesus is guilty of blasphemy and he will soon be condemned to die - for Peter, as well as for all those involved in the trial, if only they had known it, and for all of us. Only in the power of the cross can all find forgiveness.

But of course this is not the end of the story for Peter. Jesus knows Peter's heart better than anyone. He knows what he will become, and after the resurrection he gives Peter the opportunity to replace those denials with expressions of love. Through grace, Peter is put back on his feet, forgiven, yes, but more than that, he is given the strength and assurance that, despite his weaknesses, he can go forward to serve his Lord and to be a great leader in the church.

And so if there is hope for Peter, there is hope for us. God requires of us that we speak the truth, and in doing so we reflect God's character. But despite our wrong speaking, the hurtful words we wish we could take back, the words we wish we had spoken but didn't, and our failure to witness as we should, God knows our heart and his grace is available to us. His unbounded love and forgiveness even though undeserved, can set us back on our feet to love and serve again.

And so I end where I started, by praying that the words of *our* mouths and the thoughts of *our* hearts may be acceptable to the Lord, who is our strength and our redeemer.