

'Food For Thought' Article: "It's Only Words...."

Introduction:

The Bee Gees pop group used to sing a song which had a line in it that said, 'It's only words, and words are all I have, to take your heart away.' Does God say the same thing, I wonder?

I suppose all of us would agree that words are important and are capable of bringing life and blessing or death and cursing. They can build up or break down, encourage or discourage. They can be distorted, devalued, misunderstood, used seductively, and used to control. They can be weaponised (as incendiary as any rocket shell or bomb), or even used to camouflage truth. Do you think today is a bad time for words? Are they just 'Blah, blah, blah'? Do we live in a linguistically cynical world and what about truth? Are we suffering from 'truth decay' with a lot of 'alternative facts', 'fake news' and even 'deep fake' on offer?



I am reminded, every time I sign off a letter or an e-mail with the words 'Yours sincerely', where the word 'sincerely' comes from. It means 'without wax' – ('sine' = 'without', 'cera' = 'wax') - and was used, for example, by sellers of white marble statues in the Roman Empire. The unscrupulous vendors used to fill in all the cracks and imperfections of their inferior products with white wax. They looked good until you got them home but when the sun came out, all the wax ran out and you saw the reality of what you had purchased! On the other hand, the genuine article was 'sine cera' ~ 'without wax'.

So can we place any confidence in the words we proclaim as Christians based on the Bible? It is an important question to ask because people today are generally suspicious and sceptical towards, and doubtful about, those who offer us 'the truth'. The same ears that listen to us proclaiming Christ are also listening to the words of the politicians, the advertisers, the online influencers etc. and they wonder whose words, if any, can be trusted?

We may feel that at the bottom of the list of those whose words can be trusted are politicians. Perhaps this isn't surprising when, in order to become a Member of Parliament and as John Bercow points out in his autobiography - some would say aptly named 'Unspeakable' - "No professional qualifications are needed; there is no formal job description and no explicit contract with the voters."

This means then, that all you have to do to get elected is to persuade a relatively small minority of people who have never heard of you and don't know you, to put a cross next to your name on a piece of paper! If elected, you are then free to make of the role as much, or as little, as you please. Hence there are some very good M.P.'s and some very poor ones.

Haggadah or Halachah?

In this article, I would like to begin by looking at the different genres of literature in the Bible. This helps us to 'tune in' to what God is saying. Then we will consider, briefly, why the Bible was written, before looking specifically at some of Jesus' words and how they bring life, transformation, challenge, as well as carrying authority.

If we are to understand the words that God has 'breathed out' in the Bible, then we need to know a bit about each of the genres contained in God's library of 66 books. What kind of literature are they?

Because all of the books were written by Jewish people (except Luke's Gospel and Acts) we need to begin by understanding two basic types of Jewish literature – Haggadah and Halachah. Haggadic teaching uses stories, dramatic actions, pictorial representations and parables. Halachic teaching, on the other hand, is through direct legal injunctions – do this, don't do that – and non-pictorial concepts or facts.

The emphasis in the Bible is on Haggadic literature, so in our preaching and teaching it seems right to also have that emphasis. However, it is important to realise that although Haggadic teaching is very pictorial and dramatic, the stories it is telling may actually be true historical events.

For example, Genesis chapters 1 & 2 are Haggadic literature. Genesis chapter 1 is written from **God's** perspective; He is central as He creates the heavens and the earth. Chapter 2 is written from **man's** perspective on the earth. [Forget about the chapter division, it's in the wrong place!]

This Haggadic literature is full of dramatic words and actions as the story of creation is told. But what we shouldn't do is to dismiss it all as fictitious myth. This account of creation must be located in time, though it doesn't tell us when creation happened, and chapter 2 is located in a place, a geographical location. Rivers, trees, the Garden of Eden, the naming of the animals, the creation of male and female etc. are all real, even though they are often described in dramatic and pictorial forms.

Another example of Jewish Haggadic literature is the Passover (Ex.12) and the Passover Seder meal commemorated every year. Everything is symbolic of some aspect of the very real deliverance of the Israelites from bondage in Egypt (the parsley, horseradish, charoset, hardboiled egg, candles, wineglasses, saltwater, the matzah, the lamb shank-bone etc.).

Our Gentile Communion/Eucharist Service is also Haggadic liturgy, based as it is on the Passover Seder which took place on the night that Jesus was betrayed. The cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks is a participation in the blood of Christ, and the bread we break is a participation in the body of Christ. For whenever we eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (1 Cor. 10:16; 1 Cor. 11:26). Unfortunately our Gentile Communion Services are often a pale reflection of the joyous, family-and-friends celebration which characterise Jewish Seder meals! It's hardly a feast when all you are offered to eat and drink is a thin wafer dipped in some wine!

Laws.

By way of contrast, there is also a lot of Halachic instruction in the Pentateuch, the first 5 books of the Bible ~ 613 laws to be precise.

The purpose of laws in the Bible is that they display something of the character of God, they convict of sin, they restrain evil, they are given for our protection and they show us how God wants us to live. Unfortunately, they can also have the effect of provoking or resurrecting sin! When the apostle Paul tried in his own strength to keep God's laws, he found that 'sin sprang to life'. (Rms. 7:9)

But now, under the new covenant in Christ, we are justified by faith in him and not by observing the law which we are incapable of keeping perfectly. Whereas the 10 commandments were written externally on tablets of stone, God now writes his laws on our hearts and minds internally by His Holy Spirit. This is good news indeed as the New Testament contains more commands and injunctions (1,050) than the Pentateuch, something it is easy to lose sight of!

Poetry.

Another genre of literature in the Bible is poetry. Here in the UK, the 6th October was National Poetry Day. Interest in poetry has mushroomed since the pandemic and in a recent survey, 66% of young people said they had been helped by writing and/or reading poetry during lockdown.

Some people love poetry as these 3 quotes show: the poet, R.S. Thomas, wrote, 'Poetry is that which arrives at the intellect by way of the heart', the Irish poet, Michael Longley, said, 'If prose is a river, poetry is a fountain', and the American poet, Wallace Stevens, said, 'People ought to like poetry the way children like snow. It's thrilling, it has a slightly 'icy' presence, but it helps us re-imagine the landscape, the world, and you can see your own breath.'

Other people hate poetry and can't seem to get into it at all. Some even have a fear of poetry ~ it's called metro-phobia.

Reading poetry does tend to take more effort than prose and requires 'creative reading'. I confess, the older I get, the more I love poetry and am thankful for those books of the Bible which are, or contain, poetry e.g. Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon etc.

With regard to Biblical Hebrew poetry, it is important to remember that it is based on real events. For example, Judges chapter 5 tells, in poetic form, the events of chapter 4 which is straight prose/narrative. Chapter 5 contains lots of dramatic, picture language, 'The mountains quaked', 'From the heavens the stars fought, from their courses they fought against Sisera', 'Then thundered the horses' hoofs - galloping, galloping go his mighty steeds'.

2 Samuel chapter 22 is another dramatic poem in which David is celebrating his deliverance from the hand of all his enemies including Saul. When he penned that poem, early in his life and career, he had a high view of his own moral integrity which was later sullied in many ways, so that his poem in Psalm 51, written later on in his life, more accurately reflects his 'being a sinner from birth'.

One reason why many people love the book of psalms is because of the open honesty expressed by the authors. In today's church, there is sometimes good exposition of Biblical 'truth' without the corresponding reality of people's lived experience in their lives. Writing poetry ourselves can enable us to express things the way they really are and reading other people's poetry can challenge our own character, attitudes and desires which are at the heart of our being.

In George Herbert's (1593-1633) poem 'The Agonie', he wonders why the great thinkers and scientists of the world have failed to reflect on 'two vast spacious things', Sinne and Love, which are the two unignorable forces that either build relationships or destroy them. He says that in order to understand Sinne and Love we have to travel first to the Mount of Olives where Christ is in agony. Then we must move to Golgotha where He is executed. We must then taste God's love, through the blood of Christ, which we now experience as wine.

'The Agonie' by George Herbert.

Philosophers have measur'd mountains
 Fathom'd the depths of seas, of states, and kings,
 Walk'd with a staffe to heav'n, and traced fountains:
 But there are two, vast, spacious things,
 The which to measure it doth more behove:
 Yet few there are that sound them; Sinne and Love.

Who would know Sinne, let him repair
 Unto mount Olivet; there shall he see
 A man so wrung with pains, that all his hair,
 His skinne, his garments bloudie be.
 Sinne is that presse and vice, which forceth pain
 To hunt his cruell food through ev'ry vein.

Who knows not Love, let him assay
 And taste that juice, which on the crosse a pike
 Did set again abroach; then let him say
 If ever he did taste the like.
 Love is that liquor sweet and most divine,
 Which my God feels as bloud; but I, as wine.

[Note: In verse 2 lines 5&6, Mount Olivet/Gethsemane was the place where olives and grapes were pressed and Jesus experienced there the intense pressure of contemplating what it would mean for him to bear our sin as his sweat turned to drops of blood. In verse 3 lines 2 & 3, the picture is of Christ's side being pierced on the cross and 'abroach' is the act of pushing a hole into a wine cask for pouring. The poem thus celebrates the magnitude and endless outpouring of God's love].

Genealogy.

Another important genre in the Bible is Genealogy. This doesn't go down too well in our Western culture where the emphasis is on our individual identity and all we are left with as we read certain parts of the Bible are interminable lists of unpronounceable names!

But in Middle Eastern and Far Eastern cultures, genealogies are important. They give a sense of identity, authenticity, corporate togetherness and continuity.

Sometimes the genealogy appears as a census - Numbers 26 - sometimes as a list of people who performed extraordinary feats - 2 Sam. 23:24-39. The genealogy of David is traced in Ruth 4: 13-21.

Matthew's gospel begins by tracing Jesus' royal heritage and goes all the way back to Abraham; Luke's gospel traces Jesus' human heritage all the way back to Adam.

Jesus didn't just appear out of nowhere! His family line confirms his identity and his authenticity. Show those genealogies to people of non-Western cultures and they are likely to say, 'This has the ring of truth about it'.

Prophecy.

Prophecy can be a forthtelling of God's words for the present and/or a foretelling of events in the future. Although prophecy can warn of judgement to come, prophets are essentially about restoration not condemnation. They are not there to stand up, sound off, and clear off! They are there to dispel illusion without leaving people disillusioned.

Letters.

It is generally acknowledged there are 21 letters in the New Testament. They usually begin by identifying the sender(s), who the recipients are, and then a greeting.

There is often a prayer of thanksgiving and then an exposition of Christian teaching related to the specific issues the recipients are dealing with. Most of them were intended to be read out loud at one sitting and some were circulated around several churches.

Some contain liturgical hymns, and creedal statements used in public worship e.g. Philippians 2:6-11; 1 Tim. 3:16. The letters end with final greetings and farewell.

History.

The books Genesis to Esther are considered to be history. Usually God is mentioned but not always. But even when He isn't mentioned, He continues to be Sovereign, working out His plan and purpose both through those who acknowledge Him and those who don't.

The Gospels and Acts contain much historical detail. Archaeological evidence consistently validates the Biblical account.

Apocalyptic.

In apocalyptic literature, someone is taken up into the spiritual realm and given an angelic tour e.g. Ezekiel, Daniel, John. This kind of literature is characterised by broad, dramatic, vivid brushstrokes, with lots of symbolic, figurative language whose meaning is often explained.



Tuning in

So when we read the Bible, it is necessary for us to have 'ears to hear' what kind of literature we are hearing/reading. However, it is also important to realise that the individual books of the Bible may contain a variety of different genres ~ rarely are they homogeneous. The prophetic books, for example, can contain history, poetry, apocalyptic literature as well as prophecy. The book of Revelation contains letters, poetry, prophecy, as well as apocalyptic literature.

Why was the Bible written? What is the Purpose of God's Word?

The Bible itself tells us why it was written. It was written for these reasons: -

~ For attaining wisdom, discipline, understanding and to know what is right and just. It was written to guide us and give discernment. (Prov. 1:1-6)

~ That we may go on believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by going on believing we may go on having eternal life. (Jn. 20:31)

~ To warn us against error and those who teach it. (1 Jn. 2:26)

~ For teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness. (2 Tim. 3:16)

~ To help us avoid sin. (1 Jn. 2:1)

~ To help us to know that we have the assurance of eternal life (1 Jn. 5:13)

The Words of Jesus.

Having looked at the main genres of literature in the Bible (not an exhaustive list, we could also have mentioned Praise, Lament, Wisdom, for example) and the reasons why the Bible was written, I would like to turn finally to the words of Jesus. He drew attention to the importance of his own words when he said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away." (Mt. 24:35) So Jesus' words are of eternal significance.



When Jesus came teaching and preaching, he used parables, metaphor, simile, hyperbole, irony, paradox, fabrication (the so-called prodigal son never existed, there was no rich man or Lazarus etc.), invective ('Woe to you scribes and Pharisees), subversion (the dramatic words and action of overturning the tables in the Temple) etc.

I would like to specifically mention 4 things about the words of Jesus. It seems to me that his words bring life, bring transformation, they bring challenge and they carry authority.

1. Jesus' Words Bring Life

Many people today are asking if there is more to **life** than what they have. John's gospel reminds us that Jesus, the Word made flesh, the body language of God, contains **life** and that his **life** is to be our light. Jesus himself said he came to bring us **life** in all its fullness and the reason John wrote the words of his gospel is that we may 'go on believing and go on having **life** in his [Jesus'] name. (See Jn. 1:4; Jn. 10:10; Jn. 20:31).

Indeed, John's testimony is very strong in affirming the **life** we have in Christ. He says, 'this Word of **life**' we have heard, seen and touched, and having heard, seen and touched this **life** we proclaim it to you so that you also may have fellowship with us (1 Jn. 1:1-4).

It's safe to say that if God's words are not producing life in us and in our churches, there is something seriously wrong.

When I was a boy growing up in Carlisle, we had school trips from time to time to a small natural history museum. I confess that these trips were, for me, the low point of the academic year! The museum was full of stuffed animals of one kind or another ~ seagulls, squirrels, foxes, rabbits, hares, the occasional grass snake or an adder with its zigzag markings. Though I have no desire to decry the taxidermist's art, this museum spoke to me of only one thing ~ death.

Worst of all was to see row after row of once beautiful butterflies now pinned down and laid out carefully in their wooden trays/coffins.

Yet I fear this is what we often do with God's words: pin them down, skewer them, so they lose their life, vitality and beauty. We kill the words and sometimes those who proclaim them e.g. John the Baptist, Jesus, Stephen, Thomas, William Tyndale etc.

2. Jesus' Words Bring Transformation

Much of our education today is about transmitting information rather than transformation. Technology is designed to provide information at the touch of a button. Stored information is then classed as knowledge which some regard as 'power' ~ having knowledge is akin to having power.

T.S. Eliot once asked: 'Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge and where is the knowledge we have lost in information?'



In the Bible, understanding, information and knowledge are regarded as incomplete and inadequate in and of themselves. They have to be accompanied by wisdom, and the beginning of wisdom is the ‘fear/respect’ of the Lord.

Wisdom is received as a gift and in our relationship with Jesus who is our wisdom. ‘All the hidden treasures of wisdom and knowledge are found in him [Christ]’ (Col. 2:3). Through wisdom we will ‘understand what is right and just and fair – every good path. For wisdom will enter your heart, and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul’ (Prov. 2:9&10). Moral transformation has to be at the heart of education. The words of the Bible are intended primarily to be transformative, not just informative.

And so Paul reminds us, ‘Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.’ (Rms. 12:2). In this sense, all Christians are called to be non-conformists.

3. Jesus’ Words Bring Challenge

Jesus’ words should interrupt our snoring! ‘Understanding the present time means the hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber...’ (Rms. 13:11)



I remember speaking at a church and after the service an elderly lady said to me, ‘I usually have a sleep during the sermon, but I didn’t this morning!’

Henry Montgomery Campbell (1887-1970) was once the Bishop of London and was well known for his *bon mots* and his wit which could be cutting at times. In his will it was discovered that he had left one of his poems to be read out to all of his clergy on his death. It simply said, 'Tell my priests when I am gone, o'er me to shed no tears; for I shall be no deader than they have been for years!'

There is never any change, it seems to me, without challenge. We often talk about change but I am reminded of some words from Simon & Garfunkel's song 'The Boxer': 'Nor is it strange after changes upon changes, we are more or less the same..... after changes we are more or less the same.'

Mark Oakley says that, [Christianity] 'is not a religion of therapy, self-help and feeling good. We are offered a cross not a massage..... we are not to be, please God, Facebook friends of Jesus, but apprentices, ready to follow even to the darkest, frightening, alone places that truth and fidelity will take us...'

Now is the time for those of us who have gardens to be cutting back and pruning. However, there is nothing worse than having blunt shears and secateurs. Similarly, if God's word is not sharpened it won't achieve what He intends.

'The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.' (Heb. 4:12)



4. Jesus' Words Carry Authority

This was something that all those who listened to Jesus, whether they believed in him or not, whether they agreed with him or not, recognised ~ He spoke with authority.

The searing and searching conclusion to his 'Sermon on the Mount', for example, drew gasps from the crowds who were 'amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers...' (Mt. 7:28&29)

At the end of this sermon Jesus said, 'There are two gates and you must choose which one to go through; there are two roads and you must choose which one to travel on; there are two trees and you will be one of them, bearing either good fruit or bad; there are two houses and you must build one of them.' (Mt. 7:13-27)

This kind of teaching with authority is an antidote to the warm shallows of those who speak in some of our churches today and who speak of God as though he were akin to yoga or basket-weaving, something you take up at a mid-week evening class for self-improvement. Those who preferred the warm shallows in Jesus' day wanted to know by what authority he did what he was doing and who gave him the authority (Mt. 21:23&24). Jesus never did tell them.

On the other hand, the Roman Centurion recognised that Jesus had authority because he was a man (like the Centurion himself) who was **under** authority. And Jesus told us he was under the Father's authority and only did and said what his Father commanded.

Wonderfully, Jesus' final words to us recorded in Matthew's gospel are these, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I will be with you always, to the very end of the age."

Notice we are called to make disciples, not converts. Converts need to be baptised and then they need to be taught 'to obey everything Jesus commanded' if they are to become disciples. Revivals that fail to teach new converts, fizzle out. Churches which focus on worship and neglect teaching, are vulnerable to error.

How we speak.

As we have already noticed, words are powerful so we have to be careful how we use them. It is not just about the content of our words but the way in which they are spoken. People were amazed not only by the authority with which Jesus spoke but also 'at the gracious words that came from his lips'. (Luke 4:22). Our words must be 'grace-laden'. And in our witness and evangelism, as we give reason for the hope that is within us, we are called to do so with 'gentleness and respect' (1 Peter 3:15&16).

When we speak.

There has never been a more urgent time to speak God's words than now. As wickedness increases, as nations and the earth shake, as financial systems crash, as institutions crumble, only the Christian 'Good News' of Jesus is going to offer any realistic hope for the future. And hope for the future must never obscure present reality.

As in Jesus' day, there is so much today that needs to be explored, explained, challenged, corrected, examined and subverted. Questions need to be asked and answers need to be questioned.

And there remains about a third of the world's population of 7.7 billion people who have yet to hear the 'Good News', so the task of world mission is as urgent and pressing as ever.

Words and Works.

This article has focused on the importance of words, but words must be accompanied by works/deeds. All the way through the Bible we see the twin emphasis on words and works. Moses was 'powerful in speech and action' (Acts 7:22); Jesus 'went around doing good' (Acts 10:38); Tabitha 'was always doing good and helping the poor' (Acts 9:36); Paul urges all of us to 'not become weary in doing good' and to 'do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers' (Gal. 6:9 &10); and James exhorts us 'not merely to listen to the word, and so deceive ourselves, but to do what it says' (James 1:22).

We are to be 'do-gooders' in the best sense of that phrase, as well as God's mouthpieces.

George Irving – October 2022.