

**Using our words for good**  
12 September 2021  
High Street Uniting Church Frankston  
David Fotheringham

**Read: James 3:1-12 (preferably in THE MESSAGE translation and one other translation)**

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.***

Some of you may have been unlucky enough to have received an unsolicited text message from the Federal politician, Craig Kelly. He provides a link to a website which is misleading, and which misrepresents data on about people who have died, suggesting a connection to vaccinations which is not supported in that data. Pre-pandemic, tens of thousands of people went to Emergency Departments around Australia every day. Now, with tens of thousands of people receiving vaccinations each day, some people have a coincident but unrelated health events. That, which that data reports, doesn't alone tell you anything. What counts is whether the health events are directly linked. I won't bore you with the statistics that I was nerdy enough to research, but after 21,000,000 vaccination shots in Australia so far, the level of safety of the vaccinations and their value for reducing the seriousness of infections is unequivocally clear. But that doesn't stop people from posting misleading material. And in the case of a Federal politician, it seems that the laws are designed in such a way that misleading material in the name of a political party can't be stopped, even though wrongly placed words can have real-world consequences such as around vaccine hesitancy, especially in vulnerable communities.

This is the reality of which James speaks.

James was written in a time when not so many people were literate, so when James writes about speaking now he might include text-messaging and social media-posting. So in the three marks of true religion that James identifies in chapter 1 verses 26 and 27, we could read:

1. Take care how you speak (or text, or post)
2. Give care to those in distress (doing good works)
3. Be careful about what you let into your lives.

James had also said in the first chapter "be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to anger". In social media terms, slow to speak could mean "slow to post". James is not suggesting that we should NOT speak, or NOT post, but he is saying that part of our faith, and part of our witness, is being careful with our words knowing what damage they can do.

I've used the case of Craig Kelly as an easy example; there are countless other examples we could imagine. Like others, Craig Kelly may well be sincere in his mistrust of vaccinations, even if he is misguided. But whatever our convictions the way we speak (and the way we represent statistics) matters.

Part of the point of James' writing is that *we all* fall into traps of using words badly.

In this week's newssheet I included an image of a person with a whole lot of snakes coming out of their mouth instead of a tongue. It's suggestive of lots of different ways in which we can use words badly. We can use words to misrepresent ourselves, to make us look good. We can use words to exaggerate, to try to win arguments, or to minimise other people's experiences. We can use words to hide the truth, as much as to reveal it. Words can manipulate. Words can bully. It's only in the last few years that I've learnt the word "gas-lighting", for when words are used to lead someone to doubt themselves.

Words do hurt people, intentionally or otherwise. The same mouth which can utter praise to God can also wound others. This should not be so! says James. How can the same tongue that blesses God also curse the very men and women made in God's image?

Within the whole of the letter of James, this passage is a part of the overall thrust of urging Christians to lives of integrity, in which faith is seen in actions of physical care and actions of care with our words. It's easy to speak badly, which makes it all the more important to be careful to speak responsibly, especially if you use words a lot.

Even when we don't intend to cause harm, James says, none of us is perfect. When we point the finger at Craig Kelly, let's also be careful about how we speak too. I notice that someone has published Craig Kelly's phone number so that people can spam him in return – while that's amusing, it also has real-world consequences, and can be no more condoned than anyone else publishing personal information.

Taking care how we speak includes taking care how we address one another. It includes being sensitive to using the right pronouns for people in accordance with their identified gender.

It doesn't hurt to remember that being careful how we speak goes right back to one of the ten commandments, in which we instructed to be careful about how we use the name of God, lest we think that we have captured something of God. When God gave God's name to Moses, it was "I am who I am"; or "I will be who I will be". Not easy to capture at all. This is a God who joins us in our journey, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, of Sarah, Rebekah and Rachel, the God and Father of Jesus Christ and God of this pilgrim people, the church, whose story we share, using words.

We need to take as much care with the people God have made, so that the same tongue that blesses God doesn't also curse people made in God's image, who are children of God.

As James says, even as children of God, none of us is perfect: we all have our own contradictions, we are all vulnerable to saying wrong things, and we can all be wrong at times. The good news is that we can use our words to admit our fallibility, acknowledge our wrongs, and ask for forgiveness. And as we forgive, God is gracious and forgiving of us too.

That we live in a world where words can do real-world damage is a given. We can't completely prevent that, and we can't avoid it. That doesn't mean that we should be silent, but we should use our words – which are powerful - for good, and with humility. By the grace of God, our words and our actions can then bring glory God and integrity and hope for the world.