

Numbers 11, James 5, Mark 9

Oratory and speechmaking have been much in the news this week. Last weekend, before the Labour party conference began, I read a newspaper leader which rejoiced in the rhetoric which was to come, and encouraged us all to expect lots of alliteration, plenty of contrastive statements, and copious use of the rule of three, all of which made me wonder whether the writer had been listening to what tends to come out of this pulpit. Speech is an activity fundamental to the Biblical tradition. The word of the Lord is nothing less than the creative power of God himself. The Lord said, “let there be light”, and there was light. The priestly writer at the beginning of Genesis does not, contrary to our presuppositions, describe creation. He reports that which God has said – for what God has said is what has come to pass, and nothing more is needed. “By the word of the Lord were the heavens made, and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth”. The word of the Lord is creative, it is that which brings something from nothing.

A prophet, in the world of the Old Testament, can be many different things. He or she is not someone whose primary role is to predict the future. Theological students often remind themselves of this with the little phrase not foretelling, but forth-telling, because the role of a

prophet is to speak for the Lord, the God of Israel, and hence to speak the truth. Thus when we say that some earlier word or action was subsequently proved to by events to be “prophetic”, we’re limiting our understanding of that word to something akin to soothsaying. In fact, the real test of whether something is “prophetic” in Biblical terms is simply whether or not it is true.

Speech and language are, of course, about communication, about involving and engaging more than one person with idea and with activity. That is one very simple reason why the fourth gospel describes the incarnation of the Son of God in terms of word: that which goes out from the divine. God is entirely self sufficient, has no need to create, no need to communicate beyond the eternal life of love which is his perfect communication. But his choosing that perfect love should overflow for us in creation and in redemption is his act of communicating, of setting up a new relationship by the initiative of his word, his speaking, his outpouring, which constitutes a new relationship with everything beyond. My speaking to you now is not a hundred individual acts of communication which are unrelated to one another. The fact that you have all heard what I have to say means that the relationship between you and me is now different, but also that the relationship between you and your neighbour who has also heard, and perhaps thought differently, is changed as well.

The prophet known as second Isaiah describes the word and hence the act of the Lord in these words: As the rain and the snow come down from above, and return not again but water the earth, Bringing forth life and giving growth, seed for sowing and bread to eat, 'So is my word that goes forth from my mouth; it will not return to me fruitless, 'But it will accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the task I gave it.'

The privilege of speaking this word to humanity, of being the vehicle for God's truth, is the gift of prophecy which is described as resulting from the Spirit, or the breath, of God. So it is in our reading from Numbers that the Lord shares his Spirit – which is not something quantitative or limited – not just with Moses but with seventy elders, and two of these elders who hadn't even gone with Moses to the Lord's dwelling place, find themselves prophesying in the midst of the camp, not at the tent of God's presence. This dislocation of the word of the Lord disconcerts Joshua but Moses wills it on – would that the Lord gave his Spirit to all, that all might become prophets.

A common theme of prophetic speech and action is the bizarre, the challenging, the uncomfortable. Prophetic actions are intended to jolt us into attention – elsewhere in the Book of Numbers it is Balaam's ass, not Balaam, who knows what's what. Signs, symbols and visions of what should or will be done are frequent: Ezekiel and his

valley of dry bones is a well known example, Jeremiah hiding his underpants in a rock is understandably less well known. But words can be as surprising as deeds, and it is really this tradition of the word which both smites and saves into which we should place much of the teaching of Jesus.

After all, an injunction to his hearers to maim themselves in order to achieve salvation is nothing if not shocking. Notice the rhetorical power which is at work. Not just one offensive image – hacking off a hand – but three: we are forced also to hear about chopping off a foot and, perhaps most revolting, plucking out an eye. Interpreted literally, and however disgusting, Jesus's words make perfect sense: it is, surely, better to live lacking something but in the kingdom than to be physically perfect but forced into darkness. But this literal shock value is only the first level of communication: allusion is being made to the passage we heard from Numbers – everyone who is not against us is for us, so we cannot forbid the miraculous action or the prophetic word – and the emphasis is on crisis, on us and them, on decision, urgency and the need to take sides. That emphasis, in turn, belongs at the heart of Mark's gospel with the need to understand and to embrace a suffering messiah, the cross of the Son of God, the burden of the Christian life.

Physical suffering, however repugnantly described, is not something which is a temporary inconvenience on the way to heaven; rather

suffering is the very stuff of Christian life, the contradiction which God himself embraces in order to transform our world and the lives of everyone within it. The prophetic word and action are nothing other than the word of God and hence, like those first words of Genesis, are by definition something creative, something which transforms the beyond into which they are spoken, something which brings life where there has been nothing. In creation the word of God is spoken, and that speaking brings life into being. In the incarnation the word of God is enacted, and that action brings life itself to the impossibility of defeat, suffering and death. Prophetic word and action find their final meaning only in that most powerful and most agonizing of all signs – the cross of the Son of God, the cross from which the true Word, the Word of love, is spoken.