

Bible Notes – James 3

At first sight, it might seem surprising that James turn his attention so swiftly from the great matter of wealth and poverty to what might seem the more trivial matter of watching one's language. However, I write these notes on the morning after one of the most bad-tempered debates in recent UK Parliamentary history, where the incendiary nature of unguarded speech has been very evident: 'how great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire ... a restless evil, full of deadly poison.' What we have seen in Parliament, from some on both side of the great Brexit debate, is speech full of poison – dehumanising the opponent and stoking the potential for actual violence. James' advice would be that the Christian stance in all this (and Christians, of course, are as divided over Brexit as everyone else) is that however strong our political convictions, it must always be possible (and is always our responsibility) to express them with 'the gentleness born of wisdom'.

Why does wisdom give birth to gentleness? We need to remember that wisdom, according to the Bible, is not the same thing as intelligence, sophistication or social polish. Not everything trumpeted by the world as 'wise' is such: James warns of a wisdom 'which does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual and devilish', usually permeated by a spirit of envy and ambition. You can usually tell this kind of wisdom by how the barely concealed contempt for others it carries within it, its self-assured sense of intellectual and moral superiority. The Old Testament understanding of wisdom, into which James is definitely here tapping, has quite a different spirit. As the Book of Proverbs, one of the great wisdom texts of Scripture, puts it: 'the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom' (Proverbs 9:10). That is, the truly wise person starts from the knowledge that he or she is indeed a *creature* – not in charge of the universe, not possessed of supreme knowledge or power, limited, mortal and fallible. As such, humility is the prime characteristic of the wise person.

As the tradition develops, this basic affirmation is filled out: the wise person comes to know more intimately their limitations and temptations, and becomes sceptical about the grand claims the ego is tempted to make for itself – whether her own, or that of others. Precisely because of this scepticism, the wise person hesitates to demonise her opponents or lionise her champions: she knows that common human flaws run in all. As James 1:19 puts it, this

means she will be 'quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger' – not for the wise person the tendency to shoot down ideas because of whose they are, or the tricks of shouting down or misrepresenting the other. So the wise Brexiteer might make it a discipline to shut up and listen to Anna Soubry, to discern where she might be onto something. The wise Remainer might surrender the enjoyable feeling of hurling moral rocks at the Prime Minister, and undertake the harder work of discerning where he too might be onto something. To refuse this hard work, to characterise the opponent as the enemy who must be crushed – that's, I think, what James would call 'the wisdom which does not come down from above.' And it is that wisdom which parades itself on all sides at the moment.

Minding your language then means a lot more than not using 'bad words'. Some of the politest people on earth have the most poisonous tongues, and God is way more concerned with the poison than with whatever any particular society designates unacceptable words at a given time. As ever though, to say that God is 'more concerned' with one thing than another does not mean that the second is of no moral weight whatsoever. Maybe God *does* actually care about 'bad' language - not because He is like some old easily shocked maiden aunt, but because of what it reveals about the heart of the speaker. If our response to the frustration of our will – whether that be by our political opponents or by the slow driver up ahead – is to give vent to emotions of contempt and violence, it suggests that our hearts at some barely concealed level are a cauldron of such things. Swearing may in some contexts be utterly innocuous (the 'F' word has been called by some 'the Glasgow comma' – apologies to all offended Glaswegians) but for most of us most of the time, bad language is charged with bad spirit. We need to examine carefully where that charge comes from – and drain it, rather than vent it.