

Trinity XVIII: 11th October 2020

Philippians 4:1-9

I gather that at least one parishioner has found it a great relief to read, in last month's *Outlook* magazine, that even the Vicar is given to periodic fits of very bad temper and even, now and then, a bit of swearing. Apparently, until that point, she had thought that I was a paragon of virtue in all things. Sweet, reasonable, wise and gentle, full of the peace that passes understanding. Would that this were so. Lisa and the boys could certainly tell you otherwise; so too, I'm sorry to say, could at least one of the churchwardens.

At one level, of course, swearing is neither here nor there. Bad language isn't *really* bad: it really is just inappropriate. Best not to be used in certain situations – not least, you'll be glad to hear, when standing in pulpits. Relax, churchwardens, no swear-words coming in the very near future. But considered apart from context, just in itself, there's nothing really that wrong with swearing. In this instance, words are indeed just words. Even the kind of swearing people think there's a commandment against – using God's name in vain – if you look closely at what the Bible means, it is not really interested in whether you invoke the divine name when you hit your thumb with a hammer, or when you hear the latest piece of madness on the news. God, frankly, has bigger fish to fry. No, using his name in vain is more about when you use religion, use God, to cover for your own interests, to get your own way. Maybe you're running for election and want to present yourself as God's own candidate; maybe you're an abuser hiding under the robes of a priest, manipulating people, exploiting people and using people's belief in God to do it. That's taking the name of the Lord your God in vain. God cares about that very deeply indeed.

But a little bit of bad language? A 'F' word there, a 'B' word there? God doesn't care that much.

Which is not to say that He does not care at all. Not to say that if we do find ourselves using those words a lot, there's nothing to worry about.

Luke's Gospel puts it this way: it is out of the abundance of the heart, that the mouth speaks. It is out of the abundance of the heart, that the mouth speaks.

So if what your mouth speaks tends to be a bit out of control, a bit angry, a bit savage, a bit bitter and contemptuous towards the world in general and others in particular – well, that is a problem. It suggests that all that is what's abounding in your heart. The cursing and swearing are just the outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual chaos. Once again, though, it's not the words themselves, but the character they reveal. Some of us do a marginally better job of polishing character than others. Perhaps you watch your F and B words very carefully, perhaps you'd never dream of swearing. Well done, but think very carefully before deciding that this means you're free of the sneering, hostile, aggressive spirit.

Paul thinks you can be free though. You can be someone whose heart is not churning around with bitterness, with fear, with hostility. You can, instead, be brimming over with gentleness. Be someone who doesn't go into the world spreading edginess and jaggedness, but who speaks and breathes *peace*. Now, note that in some ways this is quite ironic, because judging from some of what Paul writes in his letters, he wasn't always a peace-breather. In his own way, he's a bit of a streetfighter, and the same edge of ferocity that first made him a persecutor of the church still comes across in the ministry of the apostle. Do remember though what he said in last week's reading: 'not that I've already obtained this or reached the goal. I do not consider I've made it my own, but I press on...' In other words, I know I'm not there yet, but I've caught a glimpse, I'm on my way.

So what is the way? How are you to get this heart filled with gentleness? Well, beloved, 'whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is anything excellent and worthy of praise, think of these things.' What you fill your mind with, your imagination with, this is what fills your heart. In the intellectual and spiritual and emotional sense, just as much as in the physical, you are you what you eat. If you binge on junk food: on wealth, on celebrity, on gossip, on glamour, your heart will be a shallow bilge.

But the real problem with gorging on those things is not just that they're worthless. It's also that next to the things that frighten us, they're very weak. These distractions have no power to stand against the things we fear are *really* true, the things we think in the final analysis *really* matter. I say 'we think' but the point is that generally we don't, generally we are too *scared* to think, and it's more that these things lurk around the edges of our hearts and minds. The fear that we are rubbish. The fear that we are not wanted. The fear that life is nothing but people hurting each other before we all die and vanish into nothing. We do not think it, but we fear it. It lurks, nameless and unacknowledged, ready to devour all our sense of life being good and beautiful and true.

Indeed, that black hole at the edge of things is strong enough and deep enough that it's not only junk food that can't fend it off. Neither in the end can real and solid things. Can fine music, wonderful art stave off the fear? Can duty? Can friendship, can family, can love, can a long walk in the countryside? Maybe, for most of us, most of the time. You draw your strength from these deep wells, and you may not be overcome easily. But sooner or later, even these things fall apart, sometimes in reality, sometimes in our minds, and then the darkness rushes in again, to suck us down into it. Whatever is deep and strong for us, the black hole seems deeper still, stronger still. We all know that. If we're lucky, we know it only at the edge of our minds. Many of us know it a good deal closer than that.

What we need is something deeper and stronger than the black hole. Something that it cannot suck down. Something that it breaks upon. Only that is stable enough, secure enough, unbreakable enough to be our peace, to be the peace that passes understanding. And that something is what Paul has seen in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. What is it, above all, that tells us and shows us that we are not rubbish? That we, and the whole world, were created out of love, and are being borne, through all that happens, through all the pain and madness of history, being borne towards beauty? What is that tells us and shows us that we are part of a story with a glorious, joyful ending? That beauty and friendship and intelligence are not just ways we deceive ourselves, that we distract ourselves from terror, but really are the truth? Or more accurately, that they are pointers towards the truth, pointers towards the supreme Joy that awaits us at the end of all things? The only thing that does all this, says St. Paul, is the Gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and risen.

If you want to know peace. If you want your heart to be filled with gentleness because the fear and the terror have been faced and dealt with, believe the Gospel. Believe in the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. And not just as facts you assent to, propositions in a book. No, make this your heart-knowledge, the very deepest bedrock conviction of your life. Drum it into your soul, day after day, week after week, pound it in to the foundation of your life, till it becomes your deepest and strongest centre. You will not get this peace by coming here for one hour a week. You will not get it by dabbling. You get it, or like St. Paul, you begin the journey towards it, by making it the centre. Making it – Bible, prayer, God – the overriding priority of your life. This relationship is what we were made for. It is the business of our lives. In this alone lies our peace.

St. Augustine knew all this, and put it brilliantly, in words which became the Collect for last week. I finish with that:

Almighty God,
you have made us for yourself,
and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you:
pour your love into our hearts and draw us to yourself,
and so bring us at last to your heavenly city
where we shall see you face to face;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.