

Making mistakes

Proverbs 1:20-33; James 3:1-12

There will be no one in Church today who has not made a mistake at some time or other. Big mistake, small mistake, easily got over mistake, life-altering mistake. Mistakes that you learn from, mistakes that you keep making over and over again. The etymology for the word 'mistake', probably a Norse word, means to 'take in error'. To make a mistake is to take the wrong understanding, or to take the wrong action.

If I were to ask you what the biggest mistakes were in your life, I wonder what comes to mind. Perhaps a relationship that you entered into that was wrong, hurtful, maybe even abusive. Perhaps a career decision that turned out to be costly – a job you agreed to do that turned out badly; a job you passed over but in retrospect would have been absolutely the right thing for you.

I wonder how many times mistakes are made with speech, with words?

In his spiky little letter, filled with challenge, James draws attention to this in our Bible reading this morning. People who speak, he mentions teachers but it applies to politicians, business people, journalists and everyone else, must watch what they say. "The tongue is a fire." It can be used to bless the Lord, and utter curses. If left unbridled, it can lead us into mistakes.

In World War Two there was a slogan, "Loose lips sink ships." It was a warning against saying things out loud that might in some way damage the war effort. But the methodology applies to how we speak at any time. Think of the damage that can be done by a few words. Call it tongue toxin. Speaking of the harm small things can do, there is nothing quite so devastating as a carefully placed interrogative. Here is how it works: after someone has praised another person in your presence, telling you how much that person's example has meant, you merely raise an eyebrow and say, "Oh?" That's all it takes. The one word mistake that causes devastation. Tongue toxin.

What we say and how we say things matters. Speech can lead to mistakes, and mismatches. Faithful speech must relate to faithful action. If our actions don't match what we do and how we behave, then that is a mistake.

The debate last week around the Archbishop of Canterbury raises other challenges about what to say, when to say it and how to say it. Is it a mistake to speak out? The Archbishop rightly, in my view, challenged large companies leeching on to society and not paying their dues. This was seized on by some who come up with the old nonsense about faith not speaking about politics. Of course Christians who have free speech should speak out on matters of the day. Jesus did. More difficult for the Archbishop was the news that one of the companies often accused of not paying their fair share, Amazon, is a company in which the Church of England holds significant shares. In his speech to the Trades Union Congress on Wednesday, the Archbishop said: "When vast companies like Amazon and other online traders, the new industries, can get away with paying almost nothing in tax, there is something wrong with the tax system. They don't pay a real living wage, so the taxpayer must support their workers with benefits. And having leeches off the taxpayer once they don't pay for our defence, for security, for stability, for justice, health, equality, education."

Was it a mistake to speak out? It was certainly a challenge. It was certainly awkward and some felt it was a mistake, even hypocrisy, on the Church of England's part. In hindsight it might have been handled differently, but the example shows the importance, and the peril, of watching what we say, and being confident that words match actions.

Whether we mean it or not we construct worlds with speech. Describing the world we see, we mistake it for the whole world. Making meaning of what we see, we conflate this with God's meaning. Then we behave according to the world we have constructed with our speech, even when that causes us to dismiss or harm those who construe the world differently.

Mistakes are our greatest teacher but only when one is honest enough to admit them, willing to learn from them and have the courage to change them! Oscar Wilde said wryly, "Experience is simply the name that we give our mistakes."

James says, "...we all make many mistakes..." God recognises that we make mistakes. It's not condoning them, but it is recognising them, and it is laying open the possibility before us to deal with them, to learn from them, and to transform them. We have to be big enough to admit to our mistakes, clever enough to profit from what we have learned, and strong enough to correct them.

Christian faith isn't much if it is not about giving the second chance. And the third chance. And the fourth chance. In the hope that we will learn and will get it right in the end. Perfection is rarely achieved at the first attempt. Christianity recognises that we will all make mistakes, and the cross of Jesus Christ reminds us, uncomfortably, that all will be forgiven.

Jesus in His ministry forgave people who made mistakes. He forgave those who were responsible for His death. He forgave His followers who, every single one of them, betrayed Him and abandoned Him, and welcomed them back into His family of faith.

We all make mistakes. Big mistakes, small mistakes, but we all make them, and our Christian faith does not amount to much if we do not acknowledge this, accept this, and learn from this. I told you a few weeks ago that during last year I visited three different secure establishments: Perth and Dumfries – which are prisons, and Broadmoor, which is a hospital. A very secure hospital. I mentioned a few weeks ago what that was like. In each of the establishments, talking to the men there, the brokenness of their lives was overwhelming.

In one prison after being shown around, I was taken to the kitchens, where three young men were being given basic kitchen skills and they were making my lunch. Knives, prisoners, enclosed space, it was quite a moment. But as they worked they found it easier to talk to me, and I think we were all surprised at the easiness of the conversation. We sat down to lunch with the prison chaplain and the conversation continued. The young men talked about the mistakes they had made in their lives. One had been stupid and lost his temper and got in a fight that ended badly. One had got into bad company and been taken advantage of, and paid the price. But the one that sticks in my memory is the young man who had been in and out of prison several times since he was eighteen. He started arguments, tongue toxins, and that led to

fighters. Ten years in and out of prison. A father three times, to different mothers. He told me he'd had enough. It was time to get his act together. It was time to put his mistakes right, and to make a commitment to helping his three children. "I've seen what it's like inside", he said, "and I don't want them to make the same mistakes I made. I'm getting help to get things right in my head and in my life." I learned he was working hard with the chaplaincy team, with prison workers and other professionals, and he was making good progress. "I've had second, third and fourth chances. I've wasted them. I'm too old now to get it wrong again." He was twenty-eight. "I want to grow up with my children. I can't do it on my own. I've made so many mistakes. I know I need help. I've learned that about myself." Then he cried.

The Bible tells us that we all make mistakes. The Bible tells us that we are given strength to learn from mistakes, and help to move on. The Bible tells us that as we try, forgiveness comes. The Bible tells us that there will be people around us who will be with us to help us and to understand us.

The Bible is not simply about telling; it is about doing. It is not simply about pointing the path; it is about walking along the road beside someone. It is not simply about making clear what mistakes are; it is about learning from them and resolving with God's help to do better next time. Remedy for the embarrassment of mistakes; remedy for the shame of mistakes. Practical faith, lived out love, bringing us hope, calling us to be disciples still even when we get it wrong. Believe this, live this, share this.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen