



Heart and Soul

Week 1

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Introduction	2
Proverbs 26: 19-28.....	2
Psalms 41.....	3
James 3: 1-12	3
John 1: 1-10.....	3
Sermon ideas	4
Time with Children.....	6
Prayers	7
Musical suggestions.....	11
Additional Resources	12



Introduction

Words are a big part of our lives. If we are not speaking then we could be writing or listening, allowing ourselves to grow and be shaped by the experiences and colours that words create. As Christian people our lives are to be shaped by the “Word of Life”.

Of course individual experience of the “Word of Life” has us apply all kinds of words to fill out what God means for us in differing situations. Sometimes that might even mean encountering words that have negative connotations and reframing them to give us new insight into the Divine presence.

“Rumour” is one of the 52 words that will be found within “Prayer Now” this year, and carries both positive and negative meaning. Much of our experience of modern day media is fuelled by rumour and gossip. Young people get caught in the challenge to their identity created by others on social media. As a church community we live with the rumour of our demise as a denomination. Within Biblical tradition the scurrilous practices of the tongue are regularly condemned.

Is it possible to see “rumour” as a positive practice? How might rumour enhance our experience of faith? Are there rumours we should be telling?

In the weeks before the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and before the annual Heart and Soul event in Princes Street Gardens in Edinburgh perhaps there is a need for us to use rumour in a positive sense. At the heart of sharing the experience of faith with others are the conversations that share the positive experiences of following Jesus Christ and being part of a faith community. We should encourage ourselves, and those around us, as we participate in spreading the rumour of heaven.

Proverbs 26: 19-28

This text is a series of proverbs that suggest the kind of hurt words cause when used foolishly. They give a sense of the pain felt, but also the lack of nourishment that the body and soul experience.



Psalm 41

This is a psalm that speaks of the support of God at times of ill health and spiritual abandonment. There is a real sense of reaching towards the divine for the assurance and hope of God in all of life, and the contrast of those who scurry around telling tales and half-truths. The psalmist is clearly unwell, although we are not told whether it is physical or spiritual. The words of others add to the burden of feeling cast aside from the community. When we feel outside of community, we can feel that everyone is talking about us and we struggle to fit back in. The reliance on God through the psalm reminds us that we should see ourselves in God's eyes and take confidence in that vision.

James 3: 1-12

This is perhaps the best-known passage on the need for concentrated control on the way in which we speak to or about others. It opens with the caveat that we are all able to fail in the ways in which we behave as those who are trying to live as followers of "the Way". The passage suggests that very often it is our tongues that let us down the most.

Through the use of three metaphors the writer explores different aspects of how lives can be controlled by the tongue. The image of the horse with the bridle suggests that when a tongue is held in check it offers a control over all activity of the body. The tongue viewed as the rudder of a ship reminds the listener of the outside influences that can affect the behaviour of the tongue. Those who are able to master a rudder, or a tongue, will be able to negotiate themselves through high seas and choppy waters. The final image of the igniting flame is a reminder of the flaring nature of some responses to situations, and the danger of being burned by words.

All three images suggest that there is a possibility to be in control. It takes practice and self-control, but when achieved allows the potential to demonstrate God working within and enabling the task of caring for creation.

John 1: 1-10

It strikes me that if we want to talk about words and the spreading of information by word then the place to start is the Gospel of John's prologue. The imagery of the passage takes us back to



Genesis, and weaves Christ's presence into the process of creation. Like the Spirit sweeping over the chaotic waters, the Word of God/Life sweeps into the chaos of human life to demonstrate how light and dark might be used to create a world that speaks of God in every activity.

The imagery of the incarnation as a "Word" makes a clear statement that the earthly presence of the Eternal is all-consuming. "Word" is every part of life; is in every part of life; and shapes every part of life. It indicates one of the many ways in which people will encounter Jesus. From the beginning we know that there is a story to be heard and to be lived. It is met in the words Jesus says and in the words that are spoken of Jesus.

In a book called "Gossiping Jesus: The Oral Processing of Jesus in John's Gospel", John W Daniels explores how Jesus is embodied through word within John's Gospel. He suggests that the Gospel demonstrates its placing within the ancient Mediterranean oral culture, where words are used to shape the story and identity of people and places. Moving from his introduction to look more closely at the personality and life style of the incarnation in the presence of Jesus, he demonstrates how the Gospel gives voice to who Jesus is through the conversations (the gossip) of others. Sometimes it is the disciples talking, other times it is the Pharisees and Sadducees, but it is also done in the words of those who come to Jesus for healing and help.

Sermon ideas

Hopefully if you have read this far you will have grasped that the over-riding theme is "Rumour", and for a faith community there will be a variety of ways in which to approach the subject. For those who already have bought their copy of Pray Now, the meditation there focuses "rumour" on the undermining experience of being a young person. Of course being the subject of rumours is not just for young people, and at any age there are those who find themselves the subject of rumour and gossip. These experiences can be diminishing of a sense of identity, and it is poetry like Psalm 41 that opens up the possibility of acknowledging that the only opinion of who we are that matters is the opinion of the One who makes and shapes us. But beyond personal experiences of rumour there are other opportunities to explore how the undercurrent of the Gospel story is distilled into living.



As we draw closer to the General Assembly and to Heart and Soul, the theme of “Rumour” could offer an opportunity to explore either Steve Aisthorpe’s book “The Invisible Church” or the Chalmers’ Lectures offered by Doug Gay. Both tackle the hidden facts of the Church of Scotland, or perhaps the gossip of decline, and invite us to look for a new vision of what it means to be the Church of Scotland (or the Church in Scotland).

For wider themes beyond a Church of Scotland identity, there is plenty scope within British and worldwide politics to explore rumour and gossip. How do Christian people dismantle the half-truths and alternative facts on which people are promoted and ideals are displayed?

As I said in my introduction, much of Biblical literature suggests that rumour and gossip are to be avoided. In tackling the passages where these warnings are given it is very clear that the threat lies in the dehumanising of others through the lack of care shown in words. In John W Daniel’s book on “Gossiping Jesus”, there is an awareness of the devaluing nature of gossip and yet he is also able to draw on the potential of story told in idle chit-chat and suggests that much of the constructing of Jesus’s identity and the sharing of the story is told through rumour and gossip. His premise is that this kind of experience of Jesus was part and parcel of Mediterranean culture. To be the subject of gossip offered identity, upheld the status quo, ascribed reputation and constructed potential new realities. If Jesus is alive in our communities today, what gossip should we be sharing that offers a picture of his identity in our midst; that makes a statement about who and why we are; that speaks of how that presence is lived; and finally that demonstrates the possibilities that exist if we trust in the story we have heard?

Quotations that might offer some preaching ideas:

These are the few ways we practice humility:

To speak as little as possible of one’s self.

To mind one’s own business.

Not to want to manage other people’s affairs.

To avoid curiosity.

To accept contradictions and correction cheerfully.

To pass over the mistakes of others.

To accept insults and injuries.



To accept being slighted, forgotten and disliked.

To be kind and gentle even under provocation.

Never to stand on one's dignity.

To choose the hardest.

Mother Teresa "The Joy of Living, A Guide to Daily Living"

People always did like to talk, didn't they? That's why I call myself a witch now: the Wicked Witch of the West, if you want the full glory of it. As long as people are going to call you a lunatic anyway, why not get the benefit of it. It liberates you from convention.

Gregory Maguire "Wicked: the Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West"

If you haven't got anything nice to say about anybody come sit next to me.

Alice Roosevelt Longworth

Great minds discuss ideas;

average minds discuss events;

small minds discuss people.

Eleanor Roosevelt

Time with Children

For a very quick demonstration of how spreading rumours can give people the wrong idea play a game of Chinese Whispers. Start with simple observations statements i.e. "the minister is wearing a smart suit, with a bright shirts and beautiful tie." It's easy to relate one fact, so without getting to complicated give the person who starts enough that as it is passed round others will have to think about the information to be included. After two or three shots at non-religious statements, find out how good the group are at sharing what they know of God by whispers. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind. And love your neighbour as yourself." or "what does God require of you? To act justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God"



Fairly quickly these will change as people get lost in the words and thoughts. While there is fun in this task of sharing, the serious point is that when stories matter we shouldn't be afraid to tell them loudly so everyone can hear and so everyone might know the truth.

Prayers

Call to Worship

There is a rumour
of a different world.
A place where love and justice reign,
and compassion greets the weary and worn-down.
We come to find the heart of God,
away from the prattle of distrust and anger.
Here may the rumour
remind us of the path to walk
and the story to tell
that Creation's Gossip shared
moves heaven into life.

Collect

Rumour of heaven,
who whispers justice and mercy when earth resorts to darkness,
inspire us to live out Your words of hope
that the light of heaven may pour into the people and places
who find themselves on the margins
and bring them comfort and full expression of their worth;
in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.
Amen.



Prayers of Approach and Confession

Rumour of heaven,
in creation's dawn You spoke
and day and night
brought colour and hue to spark imagination.
With whispered love,
You tenderly shaped the soil and the seas
to make a home for plant and animal
that all would dwell in harmony.
Just as crashing oceans, twittering birds,
whistling breezes, purring creatures
create music to accompany each day,
the voices of worship rise
to speak of the wonder and beauty experienced
in the highs and lows
of living.
We praise You
for the stories that are shared
that shape our experiences and inform our meetings.
We praise You
for the words that have brought comfort
when hurt and sorrow may have overwhelmed.
Refresh our understanding of Your story in our lives
so that in the hub-bub and noise,
the story of Christ might flow
in our thoughts and actions.
In idle chit-chat,
in tall tales,
with tittle tattle,
the words we use undermine others.



Picking out the flaws that have caused pain to us,
we have torn down others.

Words so often used as weapons
may not mark the skin,
but they scar the heart
and cause another to withdraw.

Forgive us for the pain we cause, Calming Presence.

In learning from our own experiences
of being undermined and devalued by the use of words,
may our phrases and sentences shape themselves
with the love of God,
and so inspire growth and hope in others.

Conversing Spirit,
when we grow frustrated with our inability to care for others,
You pull us back into the conversation,
allowing a space for hurt,
room for silence,
and an urge to begin anew.

In the new,
may Christ's voice be heard.

Amen.

Offertory Prayer

In the hushed chit-chat of searching through pockets
for the gifts of this day,

You are creating a litany of giving.

As we give in coins, time and talent,

may You,

Christ,

the gift of heaven,



be proclaimed,
always active,
even when we are silenced.
Amen.

Prayers of the People

In the hymn choices below I have indicated a hymn that I think could be used as a response through a prayer, and it would work with this. This could also be used as a multi-voice prayer, with a different voice for each verse, or even two voices splitting verses between them.

In the prattle of governments and community leaders,
may the stirring voice of the Creator be heard.

In words and silence,
let those who are called to serve nations, cities and towns
be given a vision of the communities and needs
so that decisions and choices reflect
the hopes and ambitions of more than the powerful.

In the tittle-tattle of shop and office workers,
of bus drivers and lollipop people,
may the stirring voice of the Creator be heard.

In the hub-bub and noise
let those who support the daily tasks of others
be encouraged in conversations
that remind all they meet that they matter.

In the gossip of a congregation and amongst Christ's people,
may the stirring voice of the Creator be heard.

In shared emotion and experience
let those who worship and live together
become more than strangers.

When knowledge could undermine,



may it instead offer unique moments of intimacy
that allow Christ's love to reign.

The Rumour of Heaven
has stirred in those we have known,
and the story has been told
that we might participate in the gossip of the Gospel.
Let us give thanks for those
for whom words were never enough,
and who have allowed us to meet the fullness of the Creator
in the bustle of Christ present in their lives.
Amen.

Musical suggestions

CH4 114	"O threefold God of tender unity" (If uncertain of the printed tune, it works to Highland Cathedral)
CH4 317	"Before the world began"
CH4 465	"Be thou my Vision"
CH4 593	"She sits like a bird"
CH4 605	"Thanks to God whose word was spoken"
CH4 606	"Lord you sometimes speak in wonders"
CH4 738	"Glorious things of thee are spoken"
CH4 780	"Listen to the word which God has spoken" (Could be used in a litany or as a response within a prayer)

For children:

"When People are Cruel" from "Something Fischy" (Fischy Music) – It goes to the familiar tune of Laredo so even though the words are unfamiliar it will be easily sung.



Additional Resources

Pray Now is designed to be a starting point for what you might look for in prayers. *Word of Life* will be launched at this year's [Heart and Soul](#) event and is available for pre-order from [St Andrew Press](#).



SPIRITUALITY OF CONFLICT

The [Spirituality of Conflict](#) website publishes reflections on the Sunday gospel readings in the 3-year lectionary cycle of the church. The reflections explore the themes of conflict within the gospels and offer questions and commentary for private reading, group discussions and public worship. Whilst most of the content will be connected to the Revised Common Lectionary, some will relate to occasions throughout the year – everything from St Patrick's Day to World AIDS Day. All of the content is free to download, use and share with others.

[Quick Guides](#) are designed to help people with the various elements of leading worship, gathering community and ordering space.

Quick Guide...

You may wish to email these three links to the people reading Scripture on Sunday to support them in their involvement in worship: [Managing your nerves](#); [Creative readings](#); [Worship at the Lectern](#)



[Resourcing Mission](#) is host to Starters for Sunday archive material and other key mission resources for download and purchase. Online booking is available for [Mission & Discipleship events](#).

The Mission and Discipleship Council would like to express its thanks to the Rev MaryAnn Rennie for providing us with this material.

Please note that the views expressed in these materials are those of the individual writer and not necessarily the official view of the Church of Scotland, which can be laid down only by the General Assembly.

