

## **'Speaking loudly for God: both actions and words'**

**Sermon by Mark Pilgrim on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> September 2018**

'Actions speak louder than words.' This is said to remind people that what they **do** can speak more loudly than what they **say**: action is sometimes more important and better than talk. It's all very well to 'talk the talk' – even better is 'to walk the talk': it's better for us to put our words into action than just talk and do nothing.

The thing is that words can be pretty loud – sometimes making it difficult to see the actions surrounding them. Take the words 'Liar' and 'Thief' that were shouted by Serena Williams in the direction of the umpire in the final of the US Tennis Open Championship last weekend.

Debate has raged about the fairness of the umpire docking a whole game from Serena's score as the scale of her upset at a decision the umpire had made grew. It all centres on how furious the actions of a tennis player is allowed to get when calls are made against them. Is the action of throwing a tennis racket around allowed or not allowed – tolerated or not tolerated – when a tennis player is upset? And – and this was Serena Williams point – should women be expected to be calmer than men – and docked points for crossing the bar of acceptable behaviour at a lower level than is set for men. The criticism is that it's socially acceptable for men to express anger - but it's not for women. All too often, women expressing anger are censured for being over-emotional – but men are treated much more leniently. 'It's all very well for equality between women and men in tennis to be claimed' Serena Williams might say 'but is the talk actually translated into action?' If it isn't, then we can all expect to hear some more loud words from leading female tennis players!

Words, of course, can have a profound effect in relation to some actions. The MeToo campaign is all about women speaking about and calling to account men who have done unspeakable things to them over the past decades. Without these words – and without the courage to say these words – such actions would not stop. But the words and the action of speaking out have begun, hopefully, to make a profound difference. All we need to ensure is a good balance between romantic and non-romantic exchanges between men and women...otherwise the human race might die out shortly in some parts of the world!

All these ruminations come to my mind when considering our two readings this morning. All too frequently, when it comes to the conversation between Jesus and Peter and Jesus' call for would-be-disciples to pick up their cross and follow him – and it comes up in the readings every year – I think to myself 'Now what can I say new about sacrifice this year?' But this year we have the letter of James to read side by side with Mark's Gospel.

Mark's gospel focuses first on the words which Peter and Jesus say – including Jesus calling Peter 'Satan'. It then homes in on Jesus' exhorting people to action: 'if you would be my followers, take up your cross and follow me' etc.

The letter of James in today's reading focuses on the tongue: that the actions of this part of our body are very important. Controlling its action is difficult – in fact, impossible. But the task of the Christian believer, says James, is to tame them and try to ensure that they act only for good. James' controversial conclusions, not accepted by all churches and denominations, are, as we read in the verses just before these ones: 'a person is justified by works and not by faith alone' and 'faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead'. What James is saying, in a nutshell, is: 'if you only talk Christianity and never walk it, you can't be reckoned a Christian'.

Such a verdict is too harsh for those who recognise that not everyone is in a position to act on their faith: in the extreme case, how can a paraplegic Christian put their faith into action? Just as important is the response that James makes Christianity too much of a tick box exercise: where is the room, critics ask, for God's grace? Surely it's up to God and not Christians judging other people to say who is truly doing God's will?

So I suggest, in the good old Anglican way, a middle ground needs to be struck. It's not a question of 'either/or' words and action but of 'both/and'. All of us have opportunities to use both our mouths and our hands to follow Christ and express and implement Christian faith. But, while everyone has this opportunity, some will naturally veer more to one than the other: that's how God has made us – different! Thankfully different!

And it's exactly to recognise some of these differences that we here at St Peter's are sketching various ways people might express their Christian faith and develop it further. It's a course of **action** inspired by **words** I heard at a Whole Life Discipleship session at Redland Parish Church some of us attended in January. The trainer encouraged us to recognise the differences in personality among people in our congregations – and the value of feeding the faith of people in different ways. 'Remember' he said 'One size of Christianity does not fit all. Build differentiation into what your church offers in worship, teaching and Christian nurture'. This advice struck me forcibly. We have, at St Peter's I hope, always tried to encourage different people and different personalities in different ways: but now is a time to up our game and put familiar words into new and more action!

So we are beginning to offer a variety of different activities and events under the title 'Fuelling the Fires of Faith'. A display about it is now on offer at the back of church. In brief, there are five themes: Faith in action; faith in silence; faith in culture; faith in community and faith seeking understanding.

'Faith seeking understanding' has been running since October last year – and is popular with those who like to explore ideas and discuss knotty theological issues with people who may think very differently from them. But this isn't everyone's cup of tea!

Some people really like to explore and express their faith in very practical ways – and 'faith in action' is probably good for them. Those who are getting involved in Henleaze Hospitality or who donated mugs to the Wild Goose Café are probably in this group. But this isn't everyone's cup of tea!

Some people find it best to explore and express their faith through art and craft or through discussing books and films and making music: in which case 'faith in culture' is ready and waiting for you to get involved and develop it.

Then there's 'faith in community' – a strand of Fuelling the Fires of Faith that's all about engaging with our local area and the wider world in mission and outreach: this perhaps particularly suits the gregarious and entrepreneurial amongst us. It also includes raising funds for good causes like Miriam Knowles, the Occupational Therapist we help sponsor in Tanzania through CMS and for our partners in Uganda. So it's a good mix of social activity with a purpose – like the forthcoming Wine Tasting Evening and October's Ale and Arty Charity Festival.

Finally, 'Faith in silence' is for those who want to explore faith and encounter God more in the quiet of a silent retreat than in the hurly burly of discussion and activity. A start on this was made with our Quiet Day at Llangasty in mid-Wales at the end of August: more such days and longer stays will be offered over the next year.

A vital point to make is that these distinctions between personalities and ways to encounter God and explore faith are not hard and fast: not at all! I, for instance, am an activist who knows that the root of my spirituality is silence. To express one aspect of faith effectively I need to feed and be fed from a contrasting source. Without times of prayer – in silence and with others – very little kingdom building work, I reckon, would be evident in me! So, I invite you all to wonder. What fuels your faith currently? And what, among the different activities and events St Peter's is beginning to offer now, might feed, fuel and develop your faith in the future? Have a look at the display at the back of church: reflect and pray about it from now on.

And the next time you encounter the phrase 'Actions speak louder than words', I challenge you to ask: 'What about me? Which say more about me – which are 'louder': my actions or my words?' It's probable that people notice and pick up on our faith in Jesus more from what we do than what we say: it certainly helps when words are positively backed up by action. Saying things and then not following them through with action makes it difficult for people to trust and have confidence in what we say. Backing our words up with action is far more effective in building trust and confidence – whatever field of life is involved, but none more so than when it comes to matters of belief and, in our case, Christian faith.

Let's go back to where we started. Both Serena Williams' words and actions stirred much comment last weekend. When people hear our words and see our actions, what comment does it stir in those around us?

Recognising that words are best backed up by appropriate action, let's pray that both our words and our actions may communicate our faith in Christ to others, commending Christ to others in such a way that they feel moved to explore and develop Christian faith as we do. To help with this, I urge you to explore some of the Fuelling the Fires of Faith activities and events over the coming months.

I close with this prayer:

**Loving God,  
whose Word is active  
in the power of the Spirit today,  
act within us today, we pray,  
that our actions and words may speak positively  
to make your presence and purpose  
known to those who see and hear us,  
for the building up of your kingdom:  
this we ask through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**