

# Encouragement

Isaiah 50.4-9, Hebrews 3.12-15 & 10.23-25

Tony was my youth group leader in Hastings when I was thirteen years old. He was a young man, a surfer, newly married - and to me he was about the coolest dude alive. On Saturday evenings, with his wife, he would have us around to their little one-bedroom flat, or we'd be down on the beach with his surf-board, or cooking up a barbeque.

It was Tony who taught me to cook baked beans on the beach by putting a small hole in the top of the can then throwing it into the fire! Sunday by Sunday Tony would be there to greet us at Bible Class. He would have a lesson prepared and open the Scriptures to us. We had him for all our third form year and he was right on our wave-length. He didn't continue being a youth leader though, and the next year we had someone else – I don't remember who – it's Tony that I remember because he was *The Man*.

It wasn't until many years later, after I'd grown up and left Hawkes Bay, that I was talking to Tony again while I was back in Hastings visiting my parents.

"Why ever did you give up working with youth Tony?" I asked him.

"Oh, I just felt like I was never getting through," he replied.

Getting through?? He was getting through all right! He was the only youth leader who did really get through. We thought he was just great. It was only then that the reality struck home. It was a horrifying thought. We never told him! We were just a bunch of teenagers who were having a great time and we never thought to say, "Hey Tony, you're doing a great job." We never told him, "We really love all the stuff you do with us. You're getting through." And the result was after my very best year in the Youth Group Tony, my leader, resigned because he was discouraged – and he thought that he wasn't getting through.

The big theme of the New Testament is grace. Grace was John Wesley's big theme too – God's favour toward us that we *do not* and *can not* deserve. And we *must* both:

receive God's grace

and be being dispensers of God's grace

An important way that we dispense God's grace is by encouraging one another. And 'encouragement' is the theme of my message today. This is the last of my series of messages preparing for our move to Local Shared Ministry. We've talked about: Change, The Church, Gifts and Ministries, Mission and Outreach, and Coping with Conflict – but this is the most important thing, and how we respond will largely determine the success or otherwise of our transition. I believe that this message is so important because encouraging one another is easy for all of us to do, and it has such a powerful impact.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews sets out to convince his readers (the Jews) that Jesus is uniquely God's Son and that he is supreme. "Christ is the Son, in charge of God's people." (Hebrews 3.6) This being the case, the writer argues, Jesus deserves our allegiance. But some people have become discouraged, and doubtful and have turned from God's ways. So, in our first reading from the New Testament today, we are told that this is what we must do as God's people: "Encourage one another each day." (Hebrews 3.13) Then, we skipped a few chapters and picked up the reading at Hebrews chapter 10. There the thought is repeated in verse 24, "We should keep on encouraging each other" and *again* in v25 "let us encourage one another."

Words of praise and appreciation keep us going, they keep us on our feet. In the First Testament book of Isaiah there is a series of passages that we call Servant Songs. Our reading this morning

came from these songs. Christians see in these passages a prophecy of the person of Christ. We are particularly mindful of these this Lenten season. So we read in Isaiah 50.6 "They beat... my back, insulted me and spat in my face." And in that passage written 500 years before his birth we recognise the person of Christ. Look how the Servant acts toward others, "The Lord God gives me the right words to encourage the weary." (Isaiah 50.4) The right words to encourage the weary. This is where we, as the church, can have such a big impact. Because the world is full of discouragers. It is so easy to pour cold water on the ideas of others. But we, God's people, are called to be encouragers. Encouragement is what was modelled by Christ. He had the right words to encourage the weary. And encouragement is how the work of God's kingdom is accomplished.

It was the 19<sup>th</sup> Century evangelist DL Moody who famously said, "God cannot use a discouraged person." In recognition of the same principle the British Royal Navy has a regulation which states, "No officer shall speak discouragingly to another officer in the discharge of his duties."

However, my message here though is not just, 'Don't criticise' - because sometimes keeping quiet can be really discouraging. If a new preacher gets up to preach, nervous about a message that they've spent a week working on, and nobody says anything to them about their message afterwards, they'd be shattered. You see the challenge is for us to repeatedly use our words positively – Be encouragers!

A recent issue of *Marriage Partnership* magazine<sup>1</sup> reports studies conducted by Dr. John Cacioppo of the University of Chicago that have shown what he calls "the negativity bias" of the brain. Our brain needs a higher number of positive entries to counterbalance this built-in negativity bias. And several small, frequent, positive acts pack more punch than one giant-size positive. The size of the positive doesn't count; quantity does. It's strictly a numbers game. How many positives are needed to offset one negative? At least two-to-one, experts say. Dr. John Gottman at the University of Washington says the formula should be five-to-one. People need five doses of encouragement to counter one dose of criticism. And we are called to **be encouragers!**

Calvin Coolidge was US President from 1923-29 and was rather helped by the fact that he was the only President to be born on 4 July. He was known for not talking much. In fact, it's hard to believe these days of a President, but he had a reputation for being quiet, and even reclusive. Once, at a Presidential gathering, a woman bet her friend that she could get Coolidge to speak to her. She went up to him and said, "Hello, Mr. President, I bet my friend that I could get you to say three words to me." Coolidge turned to her and dryly replied, "You lose," and walked away.

Sometimes it is not what we say, but the lack of saying something that puts people off. And this can certainly be true of the church.

When I was at Baptist Theological College training for ministry my speech teacher decided my voice was too nasal, so she booked me in with an Ear, Nose and Throat specialist for nose surgery. During the pre-op preparation the hospital staff helpfully told me that, though I'd be under a general anaesthetic, this was a "particularly painful operation." They then went into some detail about how the inside of my nose would be cut and packed... sometime during this graphic description I passed out! When I came to I was lying on the floor of the consulting room!

Another thing that my speech teacher booked me in for was the NZ Speech Board Vocational Speech Examinations. The examination involved delivering several short prepared speeches and one impromptu speech in front of a room full of guests. One of the surprising things was that the examiner interrupted me during one of the prepared speeches – just to see if this would throw me off my stride (from memory she asked about the size of the print on a supporting projection slide.)

Of course a speech exam was a very good thing for someone going into professional pastoral ministry – and I'm pleased to say that I got through the speech exam, and the nose surgery, with flying colours.

In a broader sense we all need speech exams. What I mean is that we all need to examine our speech from time to time and have a close look at what we say – as well as what we don't say. It is so easy to develop good, as well as bad habits. That's why we need to have a speech exam. Negative humour and put-downs (such as President Coolidge used) are so prevalent in our culture, that we often don't recognise that we are doing it. And it can be so harmful to people, especially children. On the other hand we can get into the habit of praising people. Seeing the positive in others, saying, "I appreciated your worship leading this morning" or sending thank you notes to recognise things that others have done. As you leave the service today, you will get a couple of blank thank you cards. These are for you *all* to use in the weeks to come, particularly to encourage congregational members who will be helping run the church. This is to set the pattern. Please don't take this lightly... and please don't stop doing it when you've used your two cards.

It is so easy to develop the habit of talking to new people, ringing them up, being friendly. Can I suggest that when you get home, you have a wee look through the church directory. Ask, "Are there folk now worshipping with us who weren't there when the directory was printed?" and "Are there folk in the directory that we haven't seen for some time?" Have I rung these people up? - or invited around? Some people are very good at this. Of such things is church fellowship made.

Our words, you see, build and shape other people. And if we are to respond the Scriptural imperative to "encourage one another" we must use our words constructively. It was Mark Twain who said, "I can live for two months on a good complement." We all need encouragement. It is essential to our well-being. Our view of who we are is largely built on what we think others are thinking about us. We get that feed-back from their words. Everyone needs encouragement, positive reinforcement, recognition and appreciation.

### **Conclusion**

Some people say, "words are cheap."

But they're not.

Words are valuable, they are precious.

They are the main currency of communication.

### Words work

When we speak them, they go out and do their work.

They can never be retrieved

We form them and control them until they reach our lips –  
then they have a life of their own, and can create or destroy.

### Words pierce

They can touch the inner-most parts of a person.

They can annoy, or gladden, or comfort.

They can convince and convict.

By them the Good News is spread – as Paul says, "How can people believe unless they hear?  
And how can they hear unless someone speaks?" (Romans 10.14)

### Words bring change

They do – they change people, they change situations and they change nations.

When *Martin Luther* said, "Here I stand I can do no other" he had no idea of the millions of others through centuries to follow that would take that stand with him (believing that we are made right with God not by what we *do*, but by God's grace when we trust in Christ.)

When *Martin Luther King* said, "I have a dream" his words awakened the ideal in millions,

that all people everywhere should be treated equally regardless of race.

#### Words win love

They win hearts.

The song-writer truly says, "It's only words, but words are all I have to take your heart away."

We need to constantly tell our wives and our husbands that we love them!

Parents tell your children that you love them –

grandparents tell your grandchildren -

aunts & uncles tell your nieces and nephews.

"I love you" These words are powerful.

They shape who we are and who we become.

#### Words cut

A flippant remark, a word that slips out in the heat of the moment...

These words are dangerous.

Criticism can scar, and maim, and literally make people sick.

#### But Words build

They can affirm, heal, encourage, soothe, appreciate, edify, forgive, recognise and reinforce.

They can be used to make people healthy.

#### Even untrue words have power

They can undermine the foundations of those that hear them.

They can create suspicion in those that speak them.

When we deceive others with our words we inadvertently destroy our own ability to trust.

#### Even silly talk

Can have enormous consequences.

We make an impression with our idle chatter, and can then be trapped by the reputation that we have created for ourselves.

James says (James 3.3&4) that our words are like:

A ship's rudder or

A bit in a horse's mouth

Our words steer our whole life.

If we say, "I'm no good, I couldn't do that." – the chances are we won't do it, and our words will be fulfilled.

If we say, "I think I can. I'd like to help." – the chances are we'll give it a go, and we'll make ourselves into helpful people, who are sought after by others and useful to God.

Words are to be taken seriously.

To be listened to.

To be spoken.

The Scriptures say to use our words to "Encourage one another."

Let us determine that we will be the people who do it.

Rev Andrew Gamman – East Coast Bays Parish Enabler

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<sup>i</sup> *Marriage Partnership* June 2008. Marriage partnership magazine is no longer published but you can read the article at [www.christianitytoday.com/mp/2008/spring/7.26.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/mp/2008/spring/7.26.html)