

Views from the Pews – Words, Words, Words

Although there were no recording devices around in Jesus' time, not even shorthand, a careful reading of the Gospels shows a remarkable consistency in Jesus' quoted sayings, all the more remarkable given the remaining doubts about exactly who wrote what, and when. So we can be pretty sure that what is recorded is a good approximation of what was actually said. And we notice straight away that Jesus' language is always precise, unambiguous, and clearly targeted. He cared about words and their meaning, which is why we see his preaching as so compelling and relevant both then and now.

Contrast that with so much language today. Words are often used as weapons; they are ascribed hidden meanings outside their dictionary ones, and are often used to demean and to discriminate.

Take the word 'Woke' for instance. Most researchers have it arising among and between black Americans; apparently, it denoted a state of awakening, awakening to issues facing racial minorities in the USA. It then began to denote majority populations, particularly white Americans who were 'awake' to issues of discrimination and inequality in their country. So far so good; we are generally in the second half of the 20th Century, and in a specific country.

Somehow the word travelled overseas, and moved to the first quarter of the 21st Century. It took on negative connotations, and is now used to belittle, to divide, and to convey feelings of superiority. It seems to have usurped our old friend 'Political Correctness'.

The word has been hijacked by politicians who use it without thought for its origins, or for its current meaning. True meaning seems to have been overtaken by intentions, particularly intentions of ill-will.

If we as Christians wish to distinguish ourselves as people of God, we need to think very carefully about the way we use words. Are we being precise? Or is there a hidden meaning? And if so, does that hidden meaning have the capacity to belittle or divide? What are our real intentions behind our language? The Bible uses frequent metaphors as a warning; the most powerful that springs immediately to mind is "unclean lips". In the Bible, unclean lips usually denote unclean hearts.

We can contribute to a mature political discourse by using words that have a clear meaning – Jesus demonstrated that they are just so much more effective.

Richard Swarbrick