

# Along the track

## How We Speak

Words matter. How we speak, what we say and how we say it, how we describe things matters. How we address each other, how we speak to each other or about each other matters. Words are powerful – they can be invitations, they can welcome, encourage, amuse, express love and gratitude, hope and enthusiasm. They can inspire and touch people's hearts and they even invite dialogue. They can also divide, we can use them to bully and intimidate, they can be vehicles for hurt and division, for fear and loathing, they can encourage suspicion and even hatred and persecution.

And we decide what that will be. Our words and gestures can touch others' hearts and be a source of encouragement, they can build community and understanding, they can invite dialogue. Or they can do the opposite. Selecting words and actions with care, then, is important if we are to avoid labelling, misunderstandings, if we are intent on working to heal and to build community, peace and harmony.

Politicians and advertisers know the power of words. Perhaps never before have so many people been involved in examining the impact of words. Advertisers spend millions researching how particular words will sell a product, how they will resonate with us. Politicians employ people who advise them on what words to use, how to spin a story. With social media, words spread more quickly and widely, sadly with very tragic results at times.

We live in highly-polarised times, not only in society but even in our churches. Labelling and name calling, in some quarters, has almost become an art form. Sadly, some use division or fear of difference as a vehicle for their own agendas. For those in any form of public office bringing people together, building community would seem to be a growing responsibility and all the more urgent. In the words of Pope Francis:

*Our words and actions should be such as to help us all escape the vicious circles of condemnation and vengeance which continue to ensnare individuals and nations, encouraging expressions of hatred. The words of Christians ought to be a constant encouragement to communion and, even in those cases where they must firmly condemn evil, they should never try to rupture relationships and communication. Communication has the power to build bridges, to enable encounter and inclusion, and thus to enrich society. (World Communications Day 2016)*

So what can I do? Are my words as powerful as anyone else's? All of us are called to build bridges, to build community, to help others come to understand that they are loved and gifted by God. What we say and how we say it, our every word and gesture, carries a powerful message. Bullies in homes or schools or workplaces or in politics thrive because we let them, we don't challenge them or show them a better, more constructive way. Domestic violence has thrived for so long as it was hidden or even joked about or because we just turned the other way.

St Paul has a wonderful expression – *'let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt'* (Colossians 4:6). He urges us not to let any unwholesome talk come out of our mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up, what will be of benefit to others. (Ephesians 4:29). Can we honestly say that such is the case when we open our mouths to speak? Do we encourage others with our words? Do our words bring peace, happiness, encouragement? It is worth taking a moment to think about how words have affected us. Did someone ever call you ugly or stupid or incompetent or say that you could never do anything right? On the other hand, did someone tell you that you had talent, that you were a person of character and ability? How did you feel when someone said: "I love you" or "I'm proud of you?"

Today it is often difficult to try to resolve conflicts or acknowledge and respect difference because there is a tendency (particularly in the media) to demonise those who may be different, those we do not understand. That is the easy way. It doesn't ask anything of us, it just confirms our fears or prejudices. It is a small step then to engage in name-calling, character-assassination and disrespect for others who may hold different views, who may live their lives differently or live a different faith.

As Christians, as followers of Jesus, each of us has a responsibility. Our words matter, as do our actions. Love one another doesn't only mean those who we like, those who think or believe as we do. Prejudice, disrespect, demonising, name-calling are destructive. Such love comes to life in our respect and graciousness, our openness to genuine conversation, in our desire to reach mutual understanding.

Regards  
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