

SO WHO'S 150?

A Girl and a Madman and the Trickiness of Language

St Philip's Collingwood

November 15 2015: Pentecost 26

Willie Mason at the age of 13 is a serial latecomer to school. He's just like that.

Only last Wednesday his teacher said to him on such an occasion, 'Willie, you should have been here at 9 o'clock'.

'Why, asked Willy, 'What happened?'

Same language, but how tricky it can be.

So who's 150 to think about today? A girl and a self-confessed madman, whose name you may know.

This is something which Mr Carroll wrote about him:

The Hatter opened his eyes very wide on hearing this; but all he *said* was, 'Why is a raven like a writing-desk?'

'Come, we shall have some fun now!' thought Alice. 'I'm glad they've begun asking riddles. — I believe I can guess that,' she added aloud.

'Do you mean that you think you can find out the answer to it?' said the March Hare.

'Exactly so,' said Alice.

'Then you should say what you mean,' the March Hare went on.

'I do,' Alice hastily replied; 'at least — at least I mean what I say — that's the same thing, you know.'

'Not the same thing a bit!' said the Hatter. 'You might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as "I eat what I see"!''

'You might just as well say,' added the March Hare, 'that "I like what I get" is the same thing as "I get what I like"!''

And on it goes.

The language we use is a bit like a contract– it requires someone using it and someone hearing it and also needs each to understand what is meant and accept that what we understand is what was intended.

In our first reading (1 Samuel 1: 4–20) we heard of a prime language mix–up. There was dear and gentle Hannah again and again went to the house of the Lord to pray for a son. On this occasion, she was deeply distressed and weeping and her words unintelligible. Eli overheard her and could not understand so concluded that the fault was hers not his– that she was drunk. ‘I don’t understand what you are saying or what you mean so there’s something wrong with you’.

Of course language can be used in a sinister way to mislead, to spread untruth, or to confuse (our political world is good at that). Jesus said as we heard earlier that ‘many will come in my name and will say ‘I am he’, and they will lead many astray’. (Mark 13:5). Those who use words for their own ends are not saying what they mean, or what they intend. It takes wariness to be awake to this, courage to disagree and determination to reject something others are saying.

Language is powerful and in the contract between speaker and listener often people hear what they want to hear. Often, too, there is not a common understanding of what words mean– think of Willie Mason.

Early in the recent stage of reform of the liturgy, a former Bishop of Ely, Stephen Sykes, took issue with those who felt that provided we change the language of worship people will understand and flock back in and said that we did and they didn’t!

It’s more than language, although admittedly our Prayer Book still uses words like ‘covenant people’, ‘you sent your Son to suffer upon the cross ‘ (the ‘you’ is the God of love of course), and at Christmas preachers speak of some of the most beautifully poetic images as if they were literally true, regardless of any astronomical possibility or common sense.

Yes, there are many aspects of life and death, of love, commitment, and of beauty for which no words are adequate.

The novelist E.M.Forster spoke of ‘poor, little talkative Christianity’– too much reliance of words, too much pretence that the inexplicable can be explained, too much arrogant justification, too little humility in admitting that what we are saying does not always convey what our intention and deep beliefs are, too much conforming with the need for something to be said. We even say in apologetic tones

at some critical time in another's life, "I don't know what to say'. There is an easy way around that, say nothing.

It is not a contradiction that in his recent book called The Edge of Words. God and the Habits of Language (2014), Rowan Williams spends a lot of time writing about silence. He says- 'Our safest eloquence is our silence'. (page 178)

In our journey of faith and in our trying to commend that faith to others (which is evangelism, 'good news-telling'), words do matter, but their origin and their means is not just in the saying but in being, our silence, our listening, as members of a re-forming church, our preparedness to reform.

How can we be part of this process? Through three questions, each of which is a step in a maturing mind and which should neither be discouraged nor cease to be part of our own thinking life, however at times they may be irritating in others.

They are three questions which teachers who don't want to be educators don't like, which clergy who have not thought about anything difficult for twenty years don't like, which people in politics, social theory and religions don't like because they threaten their own misguided belief in their power and control don't like.

The first is **why?** 'Come join our diversity'. Why? Don't do that, Sally?' Why? 'Because I say so'. Yippee for the day when the next why is 'Why should I do what you say?'

The next question is **why not?** There is the challenge to established authority but without it we would still be walking around on our knuckles?

The third question, the most creative of all, is **what if?** 'We've always done it like this, it is what we are like.' 'But what if we changed it around? What if turning your world upside down is really turning it right side up?'

It was a wonderful moment when last year I was at a school function to which prominent scientists are asked to speak. The time I am thinking of was when one of the two speakers was a Nobel Prize winning astro-physicist. At question time a Grade 6 boy put up his hand- he was lucky to be seen- and asked the speaker, 'But what if?', questioning one of the assertions made. The speaker paused, not in shock but to consider the question carefully before answering and justifying his statement because the question and questioner merited nothing less.

So, in this communication business, in the evangelism business, an important part of which is language, what do we say about the Hatter's distinction between meaning what we say and saying what we mean? Which matters? Both.

It may well be that meaning what we say and saying what we mean is a completeness and integrity of being who we are.