Using my tongue to build others up (Romans 15:14-19)

The World Health Organization defines health as ‘a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.’ When it comes to mental and social wellbeing, words have the capacity to bring healing or to inflict harm. What is said to us and how it is said, and what it said about us, can have a profound effect on how we perceive ourselves, either for better or for worse, and because we are holistic beings, this can in turn have consequences for our physical health. That is why church should be a place where we use our tongue to build up other people, and every conversation provides an opportunity to do this. How good do you think we are at building one another up? Empty words are insincere. What should our words convey to other people, and what do they need to hear from us to be built up?

Proverbs 27:6 says, ‘Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy.’ What do you think this means? Paul talks about being able to ‘instruct’ each other in Romans 15:14, but the word he uses carries connotations of admonishment (‘admonish the idle,’ 1 Thessalonians 5:14). To admonish can mean to advise someone to do something, but it can also mean to tell them that they have done something wrong (Cambridge.org). That’s never easy to do. In what circumstances can it be right to admonish someone and how can we set about doing this in a good and right way? What are the pitfalls to avoid? How can admonishing someone else be compatible with using our tongue to build others up? Robert Jewett talks about correcting the mind, putting right what is wrong, and improving spiritual attitudes, and these are good aims.

Paul expresses confidence that the Christians in Rome are competent to instruct and admonish each other. What is the basis for his conviction that this is the case? Why do you think that goodness and knowledge are important qualities when it comes to admonishing each other? How might a deficit of goodness and knowledge have an adverse effect on sensitive conversations with other people? How can we prepare effectively for having such conversations?

Though Paul has confidence that the congregations in Rome are able to keep each other in line, he nevertheless says that he has stuck his neck out to remind them of certain important things in his letter. His basis for doing so is the grace God has given him to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles (15:15-16). What was it he wanted to remind them about in this long and fairly densely argued letter? The second part of 15:16 gives us a clue. Paul himself as engaged in a priestly service to God, bringing the Gentiles as an offering sanctified by the Holy Spirit. That then may well be the point he wants to make to his Jewish readers: that Gentile believers are not beyond the pale because they do not keep the law. As Robert Jewett puts it, ‘The set-apartness and purity of God’s chosen people, separated from the degenerate Gentile world, comprising an island of vitality and decency, are now extended to the Gentiles.’ In essence, those who have the Holy Spirit are members of God’s holy people. Paul’s use of cultic language here echoes Romans 12:1-2. How might these verses inform our approach if we feel someone needs admonishing in some way?

In Romans 15:18-19, Paul talks about Christ working through his words and deeds, by signs and wonders, and the power of the Holy Spirit, to bring the Gentiles to obedience. Although we are put right with God by faith, faith goes hand in hand with obedience (Romans 1:5; 6:15-19). For Paul, obedience comes from the heart. If one of the goals of building each other up is to encourage one another to obey God from our hearts, how does that affect how we talk to each other and keep each other in line? Looking at Romans 15:18-19, some people detect an ABBA pattern in Paul’s words here, so that he talks of Christ working (A) through his words and (B) through his deeds, (B) by signs and wonders, and (A) by the power of the Holy Spirit. What do you think? If our words are empowered by the Holy Spirit, what difference does that make, and how do we get such empowering?

What do you think Paul means when he talks about ‘fully proclaiming the gospel of Christ’? Can we say that we do that at Brighton Road? Why – or why not?

‘Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.’ Amen. (Psalm 19:14)