‘Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.”’

In nomine…

One of the biases I share with my colleague the Precentor is a tendency, when preaching, to focus on words – words and their meaning, their etymology, their warp and weft. John, as a classicist and musician, has a particular fascination with words, but it’s a fascination that I suspect many of us here share, lovers that we are of the language of the Book of Common Prayer: language that we value for its fluency, clarity, and perhaps above all its lack of redundancy.

Language comes in many forms, and not all of them employ words – we talk of body language, computer languages – but verbal communication, spoken and written, is rightly considered one of the glories of the human race. There’s a debased popular understanding of language that it’s easy to default to unthinkingly: words as labels for things, discrete bytes of meaning that we might deploy rather as the items on a shopping list correspond to the things that end up in our trolley.

Well some language use isn’t far from that. The tweets of the current leader of the free world come to mind: ugly, utilitarian and with little capacity for nuance, humour or irony. But words used deftly are a glorious thing. Consider this passage from Alan Garner’s extraordinary novel, Boneland, which seeks to render in words the experiences of our prehistoric, pre-verbal, forebears in the Stone Age. In a passage cited by Rowan Williams in his Gifford Lectures, Garner seeks to describe the creation of a flint blade, inviting us as hearers ‘to guess and feel our way through this unfamiliar process imagined in unfamiliar words’:

He turned the last piece. It was no bigger than two hands. The brown ran through all the weight that he had brought; but ended here. In this one fist there was no flaw. He took the white and black, and tapped. The bone answered, and it was another song, deep where he could not see. He took the yellow and grey. He tapped. He took the white and black again and worked down into the bone… Something lay within. It was close, though he could not see. He came upon it as he would a hare (The Edge of Words, pp.142-3, citing Boneland, p.66).

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And then there are those wonderful words that name for us something that we have sensed, but not previously articulated. The literary critic and landscape writer, Robert Macfarlane, uses Twitter to precisely the opposite intent from the President of the United States. Each day he tweets a new word that extends our ability to perceive and respond to the physical world around us. Last week we had these three: ruderal, plastiglomerate and krog:

Ruderal: able to survive on disturbed or broken ground or among waste (from the Latin rudus, rubble). Used esp. of plant species


Krog – a Shetlandic verb: to crouch or hide under something high or overhanging, taking shelter from the weather.

This is language as a medium almost of redemption, clarifying our modes of perception, purifying the dialect of the tribe.

These linguistic ruminations are prompted by the long passage from the twenty-seventh chapter of the Acts of the Apostles that was this morning’s NT reading. It is a passage abundant with the technical terminology of ships and sailing. Luke, the author of Acts of the Apostles, is generally taken to have been a doctor – and so he may have been. But there is, if anything, a stronger case for seeing him as a mariner (Pelikan, Acts). Throughout the book of Acts he deploys specialised sailors’ idioms. Many of them get lost in translation, but the NRSV makes a valiant effort: ‘weighing anchor’; ‘a violent wind, called the northeaster’; ‘running under the lee of a small island’ – this being one word in the Greek; ‘lowering the sea anchor’; ‘throwing the ship’s tackle overboard’. All of these, in the Greek, are words from drawn from a specialist maritime idiom.

But specialist though they are, they sit very much in continuity with the OT scriptures that preceded them and with the vocabulary of the Church Fathers that came after them. Already in the Hebrew prophets ships and sailing were symbolic of the universal sway of Israel’s God:
Think then of the Galilean fishermen tending and casting their nets. Or the letter to the Hebrews with its nautical metaphor: ‘**We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul**’ (Heb. 6:19). The nautical imagery continues in the writings of the Fathers. Clement of Alexandria admonished believers to ‘look to the Lord with steady eye, as those who look for the nod of a good helmsman, what he wishes, what he orders, what he indicates, what signals he gives his mariners and whence he directs the ship’s course’. And John Chrysostom, speaking in the maritime city of Constantinople, commenting on the very passage we heard this morning, says this: ‘Paul is sailing even now with us, only not bound as he was then… Let us therefore abide where he bids us – in faith, in the safe haven: let us hearken unto him rather than to the pilot that is within us, that is, our own reason’.

‘Preach the gospel at all times; use words if you must’. I like that, even if the attribution to Saint Francis is uncertain. But that famous dictum shouldn’t be heard as diminishing the importance of words: it needs to be heard in the context of Christ, the Word of God.

The Word of God – God’s self-revelation in history, we might say – comes to us in three forms: **uttered, written and incarnate**; the spoken word of God; the scriptural word of God; the living Word of God in human form, Christ our Lord. Chronologically, the spoken word precedes the written word, which in turn precedes the incarnate word. First, God’s creative speech narrated in Genesis; then the written tablets given to Moses that are foundation of the scriptures; and finally the Word made flesh that pitches its tent, *anchors itself*; among us. But eternally the Word of God, ‘eternally begotten of the Father’, ‘begotten not made, through whom all things were made’ comes first. And because of this the term Word of God, used of God the Son, is not, theologically speaking, a metaphor. Jesus Christ, the Word of God, comes first: theologically Christ is the primary, the literal sense of the Word of God: the word of God in spoken and written form depend upon him: they are the figurative, metaphorical sense of the term.

As Christians, then, we are right to love words, to take care over the language we use in our speech to one another and to God. The words we use are gifts from God and we are right to resist those debased, utilitarian modes of speech and communication that threaten to hem us in: *preach the gospel at all times, using words wisely, attentively, lovingly*. But we do not use words for their own sake, we use them because they depend on a more fundamental means of communication given to us in Christ: the Son of God, whose incarnation has re-opened to us the primary channel of communication. God speaks to us in the person of Jesus, a human being, the human being, whose whole being is a Word: communicative of the life that is God’s. *Preach the gospel at all times, using the full spectrum humanity that is Christ’s*. In his birth, growth, teaching, healing, suffering, dying, rising, and breathing of the, Jesus is the Word that frees the blocked channels of our communication with each other and with God.

Freeing the blocked channels… One last nautical metaphor, if I may. For the last couple of years dredgers have been working around the clock to remove over three million cubic metres of clay, sand and gravel from the approaches to Portsmouth harbour. This work will allow access for HMS Queen Elizabeth and HMS Prince of Wales, the two vast aircraft carriers that will become the flagships of the Royal Navy’s surface fleet. The dredging is a herculean undertaking, making straight the way for these two gigantic vessels. But the word of God is not like a lumbering 65,000 ton aircraft carrier. It is nimble, fleet, always there before us. It doesn’t require dredging to reach us, but simply the grace of open and responsive lives, attuned to the needs not of the self, but to the language that links us to God and to one another in our common humanity: *Paul said to the centurion and the soldiers, “Unless these men stay in the ship, you cannot be saved.”* Salvation is corporate and in Christ, the Word of God.