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LAST WORDS CAN MAKE A LASTING IMPACT!

Today's Text: 2 Sam. 23: 1-7; Acts 1: 3-8

Extracts:

1. **“Now these be the *last words of David*, David the son of Jesse said, and the man who was raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel, said, *The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His word was in my tongue. The God of Israel said, the Rock of Israel spake by me, He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God*” [2 Sam. 23: 1-3]**
2. **“When they [the disciples] therefore were come together, they asked of Him [Jesus Christ] saying, Lord, wilt Thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel? And He said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in His own power. *But ye shall receive power, after the Holy Ghost is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. And when He had spoken these things, while they beheld, He was taken up; and a cloud received Him out of their sight*” [Acts 1: 6-8]**

In Africa, a marriage is not only the union of a man and a woman. It includes the union of both their families. So, before the wedding is sealed in the church or mosque or registry, there is an intricate series of negotiations between the extended family of the groom and that of the bride. I recall that during the final stage in my case, my father-in-law had had to go on a business trip to Kano, almost 1,000 kilometres north of my wife's hometown in the mid-western part of Nigeria. Unexpectedly, he returned on the night of our departure to Lagos. So, Regina took me to him to bid him goodbye. My father-in-law was a very principled man who had a reputation for speaking his mind. He died recently (2 August 2003)) at the age of almost 85 years. As I stood before him with Regina beside me that Easter night in April 1974, he said something which has stayed with me all these years. He told me, “Son, I don't want any material gifts from you. All I ask is that you make my daughter happy.” Today, 10 August 2003, is our 29th wedding anniversary. In the process of making Regina happy, I have found myself in a very happy marriage. My father-in-law's parting words have made a lasting impact on my life. I am dedicating this piece to his memory.

Can you remember your last words as your children left home to go to college, get married or move house? What were your last words over a raging controversy in your home or community, club or church, place of work or business? What were your parents' last words before they died? How much have such words influenced your life? That is our subject for today. We shall use the last words of David and Jesus to guide the discussion.

1. Why appropriate last words are necessary

Rowan Williams is the Archbishop of Canterbury, a position that makes him the spiritual head of the worldwide Anglican Communion. Way back in 1998, the Communion's bishops had voted that homosexual conduct contradicted scriptures [Lev.20: 13; Rom. 1: 24-32] and the teachings of the church. Therefore, it was wrong to elect openly gay people to the positions of priests and bishops in any of the member churches of the worldwide Anglican Communion. You would have expected that, like the Roman Catholic Pontiff, the Archbishop of Canterbury would be one of the people to speak bluntly against the ordination of openly gay bishops. However, late in 2002, Archbishop Williams told the BBC:¹

It seems to me rather sad, and rather revealing, that when it comes to sex we suddenly become much less intelligent about our reading of the Bible. If the Bible is very clear—as I think it is—that a heterosexual indulging in homosexual activity for sake of variety and gratification is not following the will of God, does that automatically say that that is the only sort of homosexual activity there could ever be? My own personal conclusion is that I can see a case for acknowledging faithful same-sex relationships.

In other words, this “man of God” is saying that there is nothing immoral about homosexuality as long as heterosexual people do not participate in it! Since the Archbishop's last words on the subject have endorsed the practice, controversy has moved rapidly. In July 2003, Williams averted a split in the Anglican Communion when Canon Jeffrey John, a self-described celibate homosexual, succumbed to pressure not to accept the post of Bishop of Reading. On Tuesday, 5 August 2003, the U.S. Episcopal Church approved the selection of a divorced and openly gay Rev. Gene Robinson to serve as bishop of the diocese of New Hampshire. Now, the same Archbishop Williams is calling a world summit of the Anglican Communion to resolve the issue!

From that story, we can see why last words are very important. They can resolve or worsen a problem. For example, when an argument arose between Jesus Christ and the Pharisees over whose son Christ was, they answered that He was the son of David. Then Jesus offered the following reply, “How then doth David in spirit call Him Lord saying, The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit Thou on My right hand, till I make Thine enemies Thy footstool? If David then call Him Lord, how is He his son?” The Bible records their reaction this way: “*And no man was able to answer Him a word, neither durst any man from that day forth ask Him any more questions*” [Matt. 22: 41-46]. Jesus used scripture to deal with the matter.

So, whether at the deathbed or on the departure of your ward from home, appropriate last or parting words are necessary for the following reasons, among others:

- a) *To guide our continued walk along the true path*

¹ “World summit over gay bishop, www.cnn.com/2003/WORLD/europ/08/08/anglican.meeting/index.html

Truth is not relative. In other words, it does not depend on time, place or circumstances. What is true remains so forever. That is why Jesus always concluded some of His sermons by saying, “Heaven and earth shall pass away, *but My words shall not pass away*” [Matt. 24: 35].

These days, we hear of so many paths to the truth. Militant Islamic suicide bombers claim that they are doing God’s work. Even the gay bishop said on television last week that he was following God’s calling! Unless we know the truth, our last words can only mislead others.

b) *To serve as a point of reference*

In the process of moving forward, we are bound to make mistakes or run into unanticipated blockages. Going back to what we were told helps us to find the solution. The Bible has played that role for believers all through history. For example, when Paul and Silas came into the synagogue of noble Jews in Berea to preach the gospel of Jesus, the people were willing but skeptical. What did the people then do? They “searched the scriptures daily, whether these things were so. *Therefore, many of them believed*” [Acts 17: 10-12].

c) *To immortalize the speaker’s legacy*

The words may not make sense to the hearers at the time that they are uttered. Over time, however, as the truth of the words begins to manifest, the hearers go back to dig up the speaker’s legacy and propagate it. For example, until subsequent kings of Israel failed spiritually and administratively, the significance of David’s last words could not be appreciated [1 Kgs 15:5]. Until Pentecost Sunday and thereafter, the disciples could not appreciate the words of Jesus that “you shall receive power after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you and ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth” [Acts 1: 8]. Later, when the thousands of people who had heard Peter’s first sermon asked him what they should do to be saved, he replied, “Repent and be baptized every one of you *in the name of Jesus Christ* for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” [Acts 2: 37-38].

2. Knowing what to say

If last words are so important, in that they could lead or mislead followers and hearers, it is necessary to know what to say. A good guide will be to study the parting words of David and Jesus Christ.

a) *David’s last words*

David had grown “old and stricken in years and they covered him with clothes but he gat no heat” [1 Kgs 1: 1]. Thirteen years as a fugitive and forty years as king of Israel had taken their toll on his health.

Nevertheless, his spirit was well and alive. He penned psalms of thanksgiving to the God who had delivered him from all his travails [2 Sam. 22: 1-51]. Close to his death, he spoke some last words, which began with: “The Spirit of the Lord spake by me, and His word was in my tongue” [2 Sam. 23: 1-7]. What did the Lord lead him to say? They were as follows:

- i. Rulers must rule with the fear of God [v. 3]
- ii. Rulers must be transparent “as the light of the morning” [v. 4]
- iii. Rulers must acknowledge their human limitations, submit themselves to God in repentance for that is the only road to grace, salvation and enthronement [vv. 5-7].

If we examine those words carefully, we will find that David was giving his hearers *his success factors*. He was telling them that any king of Israel that hoped to succeed had to anchor his life and work on God.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom [Prov. 1: 7; 15: 33].

David was known to always behave wisely:

David behaved himself wisely in all his ways, and the Lord was with him. Wherefore when Saul saw that he behaved himself very wisely, he was afraid of him. But all Israel and Judah loved David, because he went out and came in before them [1 Sam. 18: 14-16]

A house is built through wisdom, established by understanding, and “by knowledge shall the chambers be filled with all precious and pleasant riches” [Prov. 24: 3-4].

When David sinned against God in the matter of Uriah the Hittite and his wife, Bathsheba, David gave us the pattern of how to repent as summarized in **Psalm 51**. Throughout his life, David forgave those who had hurt him, notably King Saul that he had twice the opportunity to kill but spared. David was zealous to build the Lord’s house until God told him that his successor would do that. A eulogy on David says: “David did that which was right in the eyes of the Lord, and turned not aside from anything that he commanded him *all the days of his life, save only in the matter of Uriah the Hittite*” [1 Kgs 15: 5].

David was telling his listeners that the key to their success lay in being Spirit-filled and God-led all their lives. Did the message strike a cord in somebody’s heart? Yes. On ascending to the throne, Solomon began with

praise and worship like his father, David. When God appeared to him in a dream and asked what he wanted from Him, Solomon said:

Thou hast shewed unto Thy servant David my father great mercy, according as he walked before Thee in truth and in righteousness and in the uprightness of heart with Thee; and Thou hast kept for him this great kindness, that Thou hast given him a son to sit on his throne, as it is this day... Give therefore Thy servant an understanding heart to judge Thy people, that I may discern between good and bad: for who is able to judge this Thy so great a people? [1 Kgs 3: 6,9]

Compare Solomon's request with his father's last words and the similarity is striking! God was pleased with Solomon's prayer. He granted him wisdom that he had asked for and added riches and honour. In addition, God said to Solomon, "And if thou wilt walk in My ways, to keep My statutes and My commandments, *as thy father David did walk*, then I will lengthen thy days" [vv 12-14].

b) *Jesus' last words*

Forty days after His resurrection, Jesus assembled His disciples at the appointed mountain from which He was going to ascend to Heaven. He told them to remain in Jerusalem to await the promise of His Father, that is, baptism of the Holy Spirit "not many days hence" [Acts 1: 4]. Then, He left with them the following last words:

But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto Me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth [v. 8].

A witness is somebody who was there when something happened. The disciples were to witness at local, national and global levels. These were the same disciples who were not bold enough to witness for Him during His trial. Peter denied Him thrice and the others ran away! You can be sure that those last words did not make any sense to them at the time. So, when they returned to Jerusalem after His ascension, the 120 of them [the apostles, disciples and women, including Mary the mother of Jesus and Jesus' brothers and sisters] all huddled together in an upper room where they "all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication" [vv. 12-15].

True to His last words, the Holy Spirit descended on the group ten days later and they became empowered. They began to speak with boldness and in new tongues about Jesus of Nazareth! [Acts 2: 1-13]. As God would

have it, there were visitors from all over the Roman Empire, “Jews and proselytes (i.e., converts to Judaism)” who had come to observe the Jewish feast of Pentecost. The first three thousand converts came from that group and they formed the seed, which the disciples were to later water as they moved around the world to witness in accordance with the last words of Jesus! [vv. 14-41]. The Sanhedrin (the Jewish Council) became scared of the boldness of the disciples. For example, “when they saw the boldness of Peter and John, and perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, *they marveled and they took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus*” [Acts 4: 13]. By the time that Paul was converted, churches had spread “throughout all Judeae and Galilee and Samaria and were edified and *walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost*” [Acts 9: 31]. Do those words now ring familiar to you?

3. Conclusion

As the people of the world move more deliberately away from the ways of God, you may be called upon to give the last words to settle a matter. It can take the form of your political or personal views on premarital sex, same-sex marriages, abortion, etc. You may choose to be politically correct and say what will be popular or generally acceptable. Or, you may choose to be led by the Spirit of God and walk in the fear of the Lord and speak the truth of the Bible, no matter how unpopular it may sound. Remember, whatever you say will be used against you “for by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned” [Matt. 12: 36-37].

Today is the beginning of the rest of your life. Whatever you are saying today, *right now*, on any issues of personal, family or social concern *could be* your last words. Would you be proud to be so remembered? The choice is yours!