

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

¹⁵ As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, "I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹⁷ His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

²¹ Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Let me start by telling you how great it is to see you all. What a pleasure to be able to stand and speak in front of you of all people. What a privilege! I couldn't think of a better audience than you, to have such great and highly educated people listen to what I'm about to say!

That felt good, right? How would you have felt if I'd told you that, of all people it had to be you... that I'd rather speak in front of anyone else, but there you are. Fine, let's get this over with then, it's not going to get better anyways. At least someone listens to my words, even if it's just you... but then again, might as well speak to an empty room, what's the difference?

How did that make you feel? Probably not so good. I would be at least confused, probably hurt. And all that just because of a few words I just said. Nothing but wind, moving air that triggers your drums and still causes such an effect. Scary... and fascinating!

Words can be incredibly powerful. They can make you laugh or cry, they can motivate you or make you drop everything. They can bore or excite you, spark creativity or extinguish it forever. Depending on what someone says you can either hate that person or fall in love with them for the rest of your life. Words can give you ideas, make you think, lead to growth or downfall. They can create entire stories in your head, build worlds, faces, sounds, music out of nothing or simply make you picture a pink elephant juggling balls on top of the Eiffel-Tower.

Remember that teacher who always told you that you're not going to make it? And then a year later the one that made you feel as if you could achieve anything? Your parents saying they're proud of you? Your favourite joke or song? An honest Thank You, someone ignoring your greeting, that one compliment some stranger gave you 15 years ago? Or maybe that one time you accidentally really hurt someone?

Nothing but wind, right?

How you say and communicate things has a huge impact and we're often not aware of that responsibility. Students belonging to a cultural minority perform significantly worse in exams if they've been told that their ethnic group is less capable than others. So do female students in math exams if you tell them that men are better at it. Political systems that focus prison time on punishment rather than rehabilitation face higher rates of the same people committing crimes again, schools that focus on progress rather than deficits house happier and far more motivated students. It even goes so far that throughout history, authoritarian governments have repeatedly targeted authors and comedians out of fear, that one well-written commentary could make their entire ideology crumble, which was created and communicated using stylized speech as well by the way.

Now let's think about John for a moment: he was in a pretty tough spot if we consider what I just talked about. People were convinced that he might be the Messiah. What would you do? He wasn't some nobody in the first place. People came from all over the country looking for him to get baptized. He was already holding a lot of power and now they even start telling him that he could be their saviour. He'd be forgiven if at some point he started believing that too. And from there on it would have been a paved road for him. No one even knew Jesus that well yet and John already had many followers. He could have rallied them all and maybe seriously challenge Jesus' position. The odds were in his favour at least. Why didn't he take that opportunity? Must have been tempting. Maybe he wasn't interested in power, knew how corrupting it can be. Maybe he didn't even realize the opportunity or deliberately ignored it? Was it trust or faith that made him wait for Jesus and not raise himself? What a huge amount of loyalty towards someone you've never met, of whom you couldn't even be sure if he really existed. Or did he know?

I have no way of figuring out what it was that made John act the way he did in the end. He showed a great deal of both, trust and humility, and maybe even confidence. And he ended up right, Jesus did show up and he did turn out to be the one people were waiting for.

In fact, John did two things: On the one hand, he told everyone that he wasn't the Messiah and on the other hand announced his arrival with such fiery words that it must have left people speechless. He clearly knew how powerful words can be and therefore I believe could

withstand them and used them very efficiently to keep peoples hopes up. He knew about his power and took the responsibility it brought with it.

There's a lesson to be learned here, an example to take. Each and every one of us holds a lot of power. We decide how we shape and influence the people around us, their thoughts, their life, maybe even their future simply by our choice of words. And so can others with us. I can't tell you what to do with that knowledge and responsibility, whether you should use it wisely or ignore it and I won't. All I can do is make you aware of it, make you think about it, invite you to think about John and the power of words.

Amen