James 3:1-12

The author is a teacher ("we who teach") and so has written this book, a treatise on Christian conduct. The code of ethics for teachers is stricter than for others. V. 2 says: he or she who makes no mistakes lives a "perfect" Christian moral life, but none of us achieve this. The tongue is small, as are the horse’s bit (v. 3) and the ship’s “rudder” (v. 4), but through this small part of the whole, the teacher, rider and pilot guide – and exercise will. Teachers are tempted to boast (v. 5b). Any deviation from the truth taught by a teacher can have horrific consequences! The meaning of v. 6 is obscure; perhaps it is saying: the tongue can be used evilly; when it is, it adds to the evil in an already corrupt world, affecting all humankind. An Old Testament wisdom book says that, were it not for sin, we would not die.

The “cycle of nature” is successive generations: a person is born and later dies. The devil is the agent of evil; hence the “tongue ... is ... set on fire by hell”. During creation, animals were given to us to tame (v. 7), but the tongue cannot be tamed: it is capable of continually spreading evil, perhaps like a poisonous snake (v. 8). It can be used for good and for evil: we honour God with it, but we also curse fellow humans (“made in the likeness of God”, v. 9). It should only be used for good. In nature, any one “spring” (v. 11) only produces good or bad water. Fig trees and grapevines only yield what God has intended – so we should only speak good. The devil (“salt water”, v. 12) only yields evil.

Mark 8:27-38

Jesus travels north from the Sea of Galilee to the villages around Caesarea Philipi, a prominent pagan town. He asks: who does popular opinion say I am? There are various opinions, but the Messiah is not one of them (v. 28). Now he asks the disciples: “who do you say ... I am?” (v. 29). Peter’s answer, for the disciples, is pious, but misleading and incomplete. Jews expected the Messiah to come in power, to free them from Roman domination, but they did not expect the Messiah to suffer (v. 31). (Were it to be widely known that he is the Messiah, his time on earth might end before he has done all that he has come to do.) This is the first prediction of Jesus’ Passion. Jesus “must” suffer, for it is in God’s plan. Jesus’ mission is now stated completely, so he speaks about it “openly” (v. 32). He rebukes Peter for his shallowness, seeing his reply as inspired by the devil, as not being godly (v. 33).

What will happen to Jesus has implications for those who follow him: (1) we must cast aside self-centeredness (“deny themselves”, v. 34) and submit to divine authority (as a prisoner submitted to Roman authority when he carried the cross-arm to his execution); (2) we must be willing to die for the cause – real life, true self, comes from God (vv. 35-37); and (3) we should not be ashamed of the way he is treated and his message in this wayward (“adulterous”, v. 38) world; for such an attitude will detract from Christ’s glory, his godly show of power, when he comes as judge at the end of the era.