

The Power of Words

INTRODUCTION

Explain to students that this session is about words: Why are words important? What power do they have?

ACTIVITY

Show this 5 minute Stephen Fry video about the power of words in Nazi Germany: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ohrtFuxUzZE and ask the students to respond to such questions as:

- *What words did the Nazis and the Hutus use to dehumanise their enemies? [e.g., rats, sub-human, vermin, ape-men, sub-human, virus, lice, insects]*
- *What is wrong with using language in this way?*
- *What does it show about the power of words?*

ACTIVITY

Explain that words are tools. They can be used in many different ways. They can heal or hurt, reveal or hide. Give out the following quotes on separate sheets of paper and spread them around the room on different tables:

- "Words are like eggs dropped from great heights; you can no more call them back than ignore the mess they leave when they fall." Jodi Picoult, *Salem Falls*.
- "The language we use to communicate with one another is like a knife. In the hands of a careful and skilled surgeon, a knife can work to do great good. But in the hands of a careless or ignorant person, a knife can cause great harm." Anon.
- "Be careful with your words. Once they are said they can only be forgiven, not forgotten." Anon
- "Language is the father of thought." Anon.
- "The limits of my language means the limits of my world." Ludwig Wittgenstein.
- "The instant you open your mouth you miss the point." Taoist saying.
- "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me." Traditional saying.
- "and God said: Let there be light" Genesis 1:3.
- "The one who knows, does not say, the one who says, does not know." Zen Buddhist saying.

Encourage the students to circle round the room and write comments on as many of the sayings as possible, noting their ideas, for example on what the saying mean and the extent to which they agree with them.

After the exercise, ask students to offer some reflection on such questions as:

- *Which is your favourite quote and why?*
- *What is your advice about how we should use words?*

Extend the conversation with such questions as:

- *How are words powerful in religious traditions?*
- *How do Christians use words?*
- *Why do you think Christians call the Bible "the Word of God"?*
- *What do they mean when they say Jesus is "the Word made flesh"?*

ACTIVITY

Read out loud 'The Mystic' by Anthony De Mello:

*The mystic was back from the desert.
"Tell us", they said, "what God is like".*

*But how could he ever tell them what he had experienced in his heart?
Can God be put into words?*

*He finally gave them a formula-
so inaccurate, so inadequate-
in the hope that some of them might be tempted to experience it for
themselves.*

*They seized upon the formula.
They made it into a sacred text.
They imposed it on others as a holy belief.
They went to great pains to spread it in foreign lands.
Some gave their lives for it.*

*The mystic was sad.
It might have been better if he had said nothing.*

CONCLUSION

Ask the students for their reflections on whether they think the mystic should have tried to put God into words, and to explain their views.