I am surprised to find myself delivering a sermon to you today.

In recent years I have found it increasingly challenging to ‘preach’. Deeper connections seem to come, I find, from telling stories, provoking wondering or inviting questions and shared reflections. But it seems I need to preach this message to you. So a sermon, entitled, ‘Words: windows or walls?’

Let us pray …

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen

For a text in this unusual context? From the Old Testament, Micah 6v8 …

O mortal, what is good;
   and what does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
   and to walk humbly with your God?

And from the gospels, Mark 9 v 42 …

Jesus said, ‘If any of you put a stumbling-block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.’

The showings of Project Violet’s revelations as graphic posters was something I experienced, in the company of many other English Baptists, at our annual Assembly last May. We were greatly moved. Invited to share our responses, I found I could do no other than recall those words of Jesus about stumbling-blocks and millstones.

Stumbling-blocks and the injuries they’ve caused have been revealed and now it has been published abroad that inadvertently or knowingly obstacles have been placed in the paths of believers seeking to do the will of God and be all God wants them to be.

Lamentation is necessary.

Redemption is necessary also.

There must be lamentation as stumbling blocks are acknowledged and we must help one another to remove them as best we can. It is what God requires of us for redemption is God’s business.

We need to acknowledge, or perhaps to learn, that it is not always straightforward to identify the obstacles that cause us or others to stumble.

In the 1970s I went to an all-girls secondary school. In assembly we would sing ‘Who would true valour see, let **him** come hither’. It never crossed my mind how bizarre this was.

At my ordination service in 2012, we sang an altered version of that hymn - ‘Who would true valour see, let her come hither … there’s no discouragement will make her once relent, her first avowed intent to be a pilgrim’.

During the years in between, I’d woken up. I’m not alone. Some, however it seems, have not yet had their eyes opened.

A lot of Jesus’ time was spent bringing sight where once there was none.

Project Violet’s recommendations are based on the identification of three layers of Baptist church life where change is needed if all women are to flourish in ministry. The first of these is ‘The everyday language and behaviour we use in church life’. In this sermon I want to look at how the everyday **language** we use in church life causes stumbling blocks.

The words of hymns, songs, Bible stories and teaching in my formative years opened doors in my young mind and heart; they gave me a spiritual window which brought light and direction into my life. They gave me a language to help me understand that I was - am - loved and valued profoundly by God, and gave me a deep thirst for a greater acquaintance with that love and a yearning to live a love-filled life.

However, the universality of the male-gendered language in which that teaching was couched, nurtured in me a self-image that I was someone who would never be a key player in the God’s work. I was destined for a supportive role, a meek, prayerful observer from the margins.

Project Violet is right to highlight the need for churches to review, to revise the everyday language we use - for at the heart of our Baptist understanding of the gospel is the conviction that we are all key players in God’s work: each with the privileges and responsibilities of discipleship. We believe God loves us all in equal measure; making no distinction between male or female, gentile or Jew, slave or free ... no one beyond the pale, no one specially entitled.

But there is more.

We’re not just gathered here as 21st century women no longer able to accept man-made conventions, wanting to resist manipulated language or world-views which disadvantage half the population; there is more for us because we believe ourselves to be light and salt, partnering with God in sharing Christ’s loving, liberating, illuminating life. ‘The everyday language we use in church life’ is not just a questions of how we speak to one another about ourselves, how we speak - and behave - justly with each other; the everyday language we use in church includes - crucially - how we talk about God.

I’ve come to see that the God-language we use is often a stumbling block to others who hope to encounter God for themselves.

Our words are not windows, letting in light and enabling a beholding of the face of God but walls, causing a barrier or necessitating a lengthy diversion if God is to be recognised.

My desire in preaching to you today is to urge you and our Baptist family to reflect on our God language.

I care about my Baptist sisters, I care about the Christ-likeness of the people who make up our churches; but my heart aches for those without the church whose glimpse of, or movement towards God, is obscured or blocked because we have chosen language which inadvertently or knowing places obstacles in the way.

I believe God wants us to do something about it.

Is God calling to us through Project Violet, to something more than implementing the 57 recommendations? I do not want us to overlook any possibilities of redemption.

I will suggest two angles to approach the issue today. Both come from the limits of words.

God didn’t want to give a name when Moses asked for one, when pushed God finally says, ‘I am who I am’. God refuses to be pinned down, to be contained in word.

We need to remember that at the heart of our faith the Word became flesh. Words were not enough, God needs to be embodied and self-giving, living among us full of grace and truth. When the crunch came Jesus chose silence and the death of a criminal not convincing arguments that could be captured on words.

We must bear this in mind as we reflect on the language we use in our churches.

So firstly - the actual words we frequently use in our churches. As dissenting, congregational, non-conforming gathered communities, we have no liturgies or creeds passed down to us that we have to use routinely and formally assent to. We can freely choose the language we use to worship and talk about God.

So why do we unthinkingly accept so much of the language we’ve received without considering how that language is heard by others outside our community?

Why are we so robotically programmed to merely repeat what has been inputted into us without attempting more effective communication?

Is it because of laziness tinged with fear? It is undoubtedly easier to use the familiar words which come unthinkingly to our lips, but do we persist with them as a way of exempting ourselves from having to wrestle with the complexities or mysteries of our faith?

Or is it selfishness? Do we prioritise the comforting sense of identity and belonging that our churchy vocabulary gives us over the desire to enlighten those uninitiated in our specialist use of words?

I urge you to stop and imagine what others are hearing when they encounter our words about God.

My hope is to trigger in you a renewed vigilance and mindfulness of what we’re communicating.

As a catalyst I will use an example of one key word. Our calling God ‘Father’.

I’m not the first to ask questions about the usage of the title and concept of ‘Father’ for God.

We’ve all had pastoral conversations which have reminded us that ‘father’ is not always a helpful model for God. The person whose family was abandoned by their father; the teenager who left home to escape an authoritarian and controlling father; the adult who lives with the scars of the father who physically or sexually abused them.

We know too that usage of God as Father has become more than a metaphor based on the relationship with our own Dads. Pater, Latin for father, gives us the word patriarchy. Giving inherent power to male household heads, and describing the way many cultures have ordered society, a model which empire and the historic institution of the church has been happy to replicate and develop.

Mary Daly has said, ‘If God is male, then male is God’, which is a subconscious message we can collude in sustaining.

Back specifically to ‘Father’ as a model of God.

We use ‘Father’ differently from other metaphors for God - like shepherd, rock, creator, light, shield and so on. By ascribing ‘Father’ to the first person of the Trinity we have allowed its evolution into becoming, to all intents and purposes, the **name** of the first person of the Trinity - ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit’.

Sallie McFague writes, ‘The feminist critique of God as father centres (sic) on the *dominance* of this one model to the exclusion of others, and on the *failure* ofthis model to deal with the anomaly presented by those whose experience is not included by this model.’ (Metaphorical theology p145).

She wrote that in 1982, over 40 years ago. Little has changed in our usage of the term in church life.

Sallie McFague also wrote ‘father is an example of a good model gone astray.’ (Metaphorical Theology p145).

That’s the problem.

My favourite parable is the story Luke alone tells of the loving father’s joyous, hope-filled reunion with his son who got so many things wrong. I think Jesus’ choice of Abba is a wonderfully eye-opening lesson for prayer as being a grounded, intimate, honest turning to God for reconnection and reorientation. I also really love the hymn ‘Dear Lord and Father of mankind forgive our foolish ways’.

Imagining God and talking of God as father is so deep in our thinking that we don’t know where to begin revising our usage. But in 2025 we can no longer pretend that the language we’re using about God as Father is fine.

It is a mine-field, risky business

… and few of us choose to voluntarily enter such a place of danger

… unless perhaps to save a loved one.

If we love the world as God does, I think we need to do this. It really matters. The language we use about a male, patriarchal God is a big obstacle to many, particularly perhaps women. If we love them we must do what we can to remove the stumbling block.

Project Violet is right to get us to be more mindful than we have been in the past about our language. Language is formative as well as expressive. In the light of Project Violet, in the affirmation Project Violet gives you of your calling, despite the stumbling blocks often on the path, I urge you to consider how you can more truly speak of God in the world you know, the world God loves. Resist just ingesting and regurgitating traditional jargon.

The whole question of ‘words’ is an additional stumbling-block for us as Baptists. Our tradition loves ‘The Word’ and historically made preaching central to worship. How can we still treasure the Bible and be rooted in it’s message without over-emphasing the words themselves to the exclusion of all the ways God communicates with us? Remember we are warned of the dangers of idolatry, focussing and relying on what we can grasp, and missing the depth and breadth of our living God.

This brings me to the second angle from which we might reflect on our God-language, for it is perhaps more unfamiliar territory for Word-loving Baptists than for Christians in other traditions. As well as reviewing the words we use, we need to look beyond words.

Project Violet started with gathering women’s stories and arrived at recommendations for change across all our church life. But for me Project Violet has been about more than that. It has been a call reminding Baptists that God can also be heard through art, tears, touch, creativity and silence. Those of you who have encountered the creative graphic posters capturing Project Violet’s research may remember that alongside them were three pieces of art work. Those paintings speak, evoke emotion and have shifted viewpoints. No words.

When Project Violet was discussed in the October Baptist Council meeting for England and Wales, Jane and Helen received another piece of artwork, by Neil Whitmill, depicting a woman moving one way whilst glancing back in the other direction. That Council meeting passed resolutions urging a period of lament in relation to Project Violet’s findings. The second of these 3 resolutions was ‘Council welcomes the offering of prayers, liturgy, poetry, song and art and other creative approaches to help us express our lament in this period’.

Attend to this.

Not just the particular artworks but attend to Council’s direction to seek alternative ways of communication and expression. …’ poetry, song, art and other creative approaches’. Let the legacy of Project Violet include Baptists becoming more expressive, more authentic and creative in the way we communicate what we know of God.

We need to draw closer and be more attentive to our God. We worship and respond to God and God’s love. It is not a matter of saying the right religious words, it is a matter for all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We need to be alive to God. Alive in Christ. We need to be walking humbly with God. We must stop self-consciously obsessing about the fingers that are pointing to the moon and to gaze at the moon itself. And let our absorption and wonder with God speak for itself - and may we aim to try to express and communicate our understanding and awareness of God’s love authentically and sincerely doing all we can to enable others to encounter the wonder of God too.