

## Sermon at St John the Evangelist on Trinity 5 2019

*+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit Amen*

Today's sermon is going to be all about listening – listening to God, to our lives & to what God is saying through each other.

And we're going to start with a simple exercise to get us thinking about listening, whether we find it easy or difficult. I'm going to read to you some words of Jesus, from the last but one episode in Luke's Gospel, and I want you to listen to what they might be saying to you... And I'm going to give you, after I've read the passage, about 30 seconds to reflect on these words, before we continue...

From Luke 10.23. Jesus said, 'Blessed are the eyes that see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, but did not see it, and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.'

There is a clear theme that unites our readings today: how do we truly listen to the Word of God? That Word which is our life, our health and our salvation. That living Word which is spoken not only through the scriptures, but to each one of us, empowering, challenging, guiding and sustaining us, as we seek to follow Jesus in the world. As it says in the Psalm, 'Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.' +The question is, of course, not only how do we listen? But more specifically, what are the conditions that help us to listen really well, open to growth and change? something which is, undoubtedly, in our own best interest.

Let's take a look, then, at our 3 readings & what they might be saying to us about listening.

1. St Paul, in his Letter to the early Church at Colossae, outlines a world-transforming vision of the Gospel: who Christ is, something that we're being invited to be attentive to. And he says some amazing things: Christ is the image of the invisible God; through Christ all things were created; God dwells in Christ fully; and through Christ we and all things will be reconciled to God.

It's a vision radically at odds with the secular mindset today – which sees a world & a universe (like the first moon landings, 50 years ago) to be exploited, for our own self-interest.

And at the start of Chapter 2, Paul draws out the significance of this for his readers, when he says, 'As you therefore have received Christ, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith...' In other words, to link back to our theme, the challenge is to 'listen' to Christ & His gospel, just as we were taught. For here are words here of eternal life, of profound significance to each one of us, if only we clear space – in our busy lives – to listen to Him, and to imbibe what the Word of God is saying. For God yearns, Paul says, to unite all things in Christ, and that includes you & me, drawing us back to God, as we follow him in faith, leaving behind the old life which we once led. For, 'God has rescued us from the

power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.' Now what could be better than that...

2. Our Gospel, today, from Luke 10 is one of the classic texts of Christian spirituality, of listening and responding to the Word of God, although it's often been misinterpreted, and is a source of sometimes fierce debate between different Biblical scholars.

Remember that Luke's Gospel, as a whole, has a consistent theme of listening to Jesus, and obeying him, at the root of Christian discipleship. Whether it was at the Transfiguration, when God says, 'This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!'; or his dialogue with the lawyer, the context for last week's Parable of the Good Samaritan; or today's dialogue with Mary and Martha; it's clear that Jesus wants us to learn to take time, to stop, and listen to his words, which we so much need to hear... Something, in our busy lives today, we find increasingly difficult to do.

Martha often gets a bad press, and it's easy, as the feminist theologian Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza noticed, for the Church to exalt Mary's passive role of listening, while Martha's servant leadership – in offering hospitality to Jesus – is downgraded. The Church has often seemed only too willing to relegate some people to the kitchen, while others get to do the really exciting work – of sitting at the feet of Jesus, and speaking his words to others! + I won't ask which category you're in!

But the fact is all of us need both Mary and Martha within ourselves; we need to be able both to stop and listen to Jesus - like Mary, to sit at his feet - as well as going on to offer hospitality, like Martha - putting his words into practice. Yes, we need to be able to share the work of the kitchen, welcoming others in, whilst also, taking time to be still and sit at Jesus' feet. Something that I'm sure we'll need to remember, when our new St John's Centre, opens next month, and we become busy again, with all kinds of activities.

For we are all called - in Christ - to be people of prayer and action, of listening and responding, of witnessing and serving... For notice how Jesus, in the Gospels, also took time, both to be busy, in serving others, but also to withdraw into solitude and rest, to spend time with his heavenly Father. We all need to be able to listen to God, to learn obedience to his Word – over and against our tendency to self-sufficiency and over-work – in order to be truly resourced as Christian disciples.

So if Paul challenges us to listen to our amazing Gospel, and Luke challenges us – through Mary and Martha - to be hearers of the word, as well as doers, what about our Old Testament reading, from the prophet Amos – one of the most hard-hitting and honest of the ancient prophets?

Well these are really hard-hitting words, dividing joints from marrow and soul from spirit, but perhaps words that we – in our divided culture today – need to hear. Amos is full of judgement on those who follow religious ritual, claiming to be attentive to God’s Word, but neglect the weightier demands of justice and the needs of the poor. And today’s text is particularly hard-hitting. For he says, and as we hear these words we can perhaps reflect on some of the voices in our recent political debate – on both sides of the Atlantic – ‘Hear this, you that trample on the needy, and bring to ruin the poor of the land... buying the poor for silver and the need for a pair of sandals.’ And Amos ends with a startling image, when he foresees a time of famine, not of bread or water, but ‘of hearing the words of the Lord.’ In other words, because of people’s actions, ignoring God’s commandments and the demands of justice and compassion, they will no longer be able to hear what God is saying. Their ears will be stopped and their hearts closed. Something that will be a real desolation to us, no longer being able to hear the truth, which is always bigger than any one individual or family or groups’ self-interest.

And this reminds us that being able to hear what God is saying – having open ears - is as much about our attitude, our values, and how we seek to love our neighbour as we love ourselves. For if we close ourselves off from the teachings of Jesus, we will inadvertently find ourselves cut off from the very word of life that we so much need...

So how do we genuinely listen to the Word of God, as well as to ourselves, and to the voice of God in other people?

We have a problem with listening, don’t we, in our western world today? For we are all afflicted by the clamour of the world – of instantaneous tweets, images and soundbites; of over-simplified adversarial arguments and disagreements, at every level of society and the church – as well as the clamour, often, of our own hearts and minds. But how much, at a deeper level, we crave and genuinely need, stillness, in order to truly listen and hear what God might be saying.

Last weekend I spent 48 hours on a silent retreat – all clergy are encouraged to take an annual retreat, as do many lay people – and it reminded me just how liberating it can be to take time out from the clamour of the world, in order to recover living in greater depth, and time to really hear to what God might be saying... And if you’ve never had a retreat or quiet day, I thoroughly recommend it! Whether it’s full of joy, or positively challenging, as you hear things that perhaps you’ve never heard before, but need to tune into...

So let me finish, as we acknowledge all that we've learnt about listening from our three readings – Paul's challenge to listen to the Gospel; Mary & Martha's challenge to stillness, in the midst of busyness; and Amos' challenge to read the signs of the times and hear God speaking through the voice of the poor... with a few axioms about listening, drawn from my own experience of a Christian spirituality of listening:-

- Listening to God requires genuine humility, a willingness to put aside our own egos, in order to hear God's truth, at the heart of every situation, that which we most need to hear.
- Listening takes time, requires inner space, and the recognition that above all Jesus speaks not primarily to the mind, but to the heart – as we worship and pray, and listen to the Bible, in the context of our everyday life experience.
- Our capacity to listen is most definitely linked to our search for values, discernment and right action – and acknowledges how often we are deaf and blind and mess up, and therefore need to be brought back to God, who is always merciful.
- Listening, as Mary and Martha reminds us, involves both taking time to hear Jesus speak, and modelling our lives (as Jesus did) on a balanced rhythm of engagement and withdrawal, of work and rest, in order that we may be refreshed in our listening.
- Listening involves not only attending to God in worship, but having the confidence to listen to our own life, and what it's telling us, as well as to the lives of others, including the poor, the neglected and the unloved, those whom we might be least inclined to listen to.
- Listening, as our P.M.C. process shows is also about listening as a whole church, to God, to each other and to the world around us.
- And finally, listening, as St Paul reminds us, is about being willing to open ourselves up to the amazing and transforming and utterly joyful truth of the Gospel, by which we are filled with all that God promises, are loved into the fullness of being, are guided by his hand, and are reconciled to Him, not just now, but for all eternity.

May we, at St John's, truly learn to listen – to God, to one another and to the stranger in our midst; and so be blessed with all wisdom and insight.

May we say with the boy Samuel, 'Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.' *In the name of the Father, Son & Holy Spirit Amen*

