

Along the track

Whoever has ears, let them hear

(Matthew 11: 15)

Jesus spoke to a variety of people who could not or did not want to hear. It was not only the Scribes and Pharisees who came with their own agendas, wanting to trap him, to discount or disprove what he was saying, to quibble over words. They were ready with the answer before He had time to speak. Even some of those who had followed Jesus found what he was saying just too hard to hear and they walked away (Jn 6:66). Hence the 'whoever has ears', whoever is open to listening, open to new ways of understanding. Many weren't. "Therefore", Jesus said "I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear.... Matt 13:13"

I wonder how we would go if we were part of that audience two thousand years ago. Would we have the ears to hear? Would we be open to 'understand'?

When you look around, almost everyone seems to be 'listening' these days. Go for a walk or ride on public transport, so many people are connected to some listening device. But are they hearing? Can you remember the last conversation you had when you didn't check or respond to your texts or wonder what you are going to have for dinner tonight or look over the shoulder of the other to check who's around, or wonder when you could get back to what you were doing?

The busy-ness of our lives today makes us perennially preoccupied and often we don't give proper attention to the person who is talking. Do you ever notice people looking around when someone is talking to them, impatient to find someone else to talk to or rehearsing what they are going to say in response. Do you find yourself or the one you are talking to saying "yes, but...?" Do you find yourself wanting to jump in with advice, a possible solution perhaps? Body language, tone of voice, posture and gestures convey just about as much as the words. What did Jesus do when people tried to trick him; for example when some wished to stone the woman accused of adultery?

"Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?" They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him. But Jesus stooped down and with His finger wrote on the ground..Jn 8:6"

Writers and preachers still speculate as to what he was writing – what is more important is how powerful was that gesture of disinterest. The 'conversation' was over – they walked away.

People have always wanted someone to listen but genuine listening means hearing and understanding as well. But no one is 'the perfect listener'. Our prejudices and preconceptions can get in the road. Consider how some people reacted to Pope Francis' statement "who am I to judge?" or to his messages about the causes of poverty or climate change! "He just doesn't understand how the system works", or "He's been hijacked by the left" are not uncommon responses. Active listening asks us, as far as humanly possible, to leave aside for the moment our own point of view and to be open to the other person, to 'tune in'

to the other. That doesn't mean we always agree but it does mean we make a genuine attempt to hear what she or he is saying and why, to show some empathy. That is a great gift – to the person talking but also to the one listening. We can be changed, our understanding of the other enhanced, we may even see the situation from quite another perspective.

Genuine listening doesn't always come easily – it takes practice. The Listening Centre in California (did you ever think we would need one of those!?) recommends that we be silent for at least a few minutes every day. Intentional silence it is called. Just take some time out, stop and let the mind roam free. Then try to blot 'stuff' out and enjoy the peace. That's not new – such moments of silence have been a feature of life for hundreds of years for those in places of religious formation (nuns, brothers and priests). That didn't always make them good listeners though. It takes a certain attitude, a daily commitment. Those who try this say not only does it become a restful moment in the day, it can help us resolve our own problems.

So here's some free advice!

- If we are to become genuine listeners and maybe even hearers, being patient is the first priority. Good listening takes time – not everyone is as articulate or concise as we are!
- Being present to the other is an essential ingredient in this encounter – that means we stop talking and avoid interrupting, even when we feel we have the solution. Often we haven't heard the full story yet! Pausing before speaking is a good discipline to learn. Asking 'is there anything else?' can make us take more time to listen.
- Don't be afraid of silence in any conversation
- Making sure our body language shows we are listening is a big help. People can be very sensitive at these times and our body language needs to be too.
- We listen to understand, we don't need to agree. It's a tough call to try to put aside our own preconceived notions, our solutions, our prejudices, our tendency to judge the other. Listening with an open mind is not easy – that too takes practice.
- It's always good to ask yourself, what did I learn from this conversation? About the other? About myself, my ideas, my beliefs, perhaps even my prejudices?
- Remember that listen and silent have the same letters.

St James offered this advice:

My dear brothers and sisters, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and even slower to become angry (James 1:19).

Regards
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