

This is one of a series of my reflections based on the banners that are hanging in St Peter and St Paul's Church, Aylesford. There are 8 banners:

GOD Listens
GOD Loves
GOD Creates
GOD Cares

GOD Enables
GOD Provides
GOD Encourages
GOD Lives

Other banner reflections will follow, but in the meantime a printed version of series of reflections are available in the church.



GOD LISTENS

When to speak and when just to listen is an interesting question. James, in his epistle writes: "Remember my brothers! Everyone must be quick to listen, but slow to speak and become angry." So does God listen to us? Does he respond? If so how do we know?

Listening, according to the Oxford Dictionary, is hearing attentively, making an effort to hear something. This identifies that it is not something we do passively; it doesn't fill up a space when we don't happen to be doing or saying anything else so we are able to listen. It is a conscious action, requiring alertness, focus and control of our whole attention.

I can relate to Samuel when God speaks to him on several occasions and each time he believes it to be Eli. He didn't know it was the Lord. Why should

he? The Lord had never spoken to him before. Why would he want to speak to him? Why now? The Lord had become detached from the people as they abandoned him. Visions of the Lord at the time were rare. But God speaks to Samuel and Samuel eventually hears and responds, "Speak your servant is listening." Can you imagine his feelings? Was he a bit apprehensive or anxious? Maybe he was really frightened. Or perhaps he was encouraged, even excited. He was certainly challenged.

The listening theme is common throughout the Bible. Abraham, Jacob, Job, Isaiah, Elijah and Samuel, amongst many others, listened to the Lord. So too did Mary, Joseph and Jesus himself. John writes in his Gospel that the Spirit will not speak of his own authority but he will speak of what he hears. There is evidence that God listens to us and he wants us to listen too. But surely in order to know if he listens to us we have to listen in return. It is, somehow, a two-way process.

Steve Turner's satirical comment on our noisy society suggests that we have a difficulty. He writes that when he plays his music at full volume, in stereo, he has to close all the windows because he cannot stand the noise of the birds outside in the trees. So what happens when the noise and the 'buzz' stops? Do we get a bit uncomfortable with the silence? Does that mean we are losing our ability to listen? Yet if we do not actively listen we will not be able to have meaningful relationships and, in our relationship with God we may forget the basics of prayer. George Denis Lant, in *First Steps in Prayer (1945)* writes that Samuel's prayer was 'Speak Lord for thy servant hears' whereas our prayer is often, 'hear Lord for thy servant speaks.' We often find it really difficult to know how to pray but, whatever, it should not be done for effect. The Chaplain at the dinner was asked by the American president to say grace. When his voice failed to carry to the president, Lyndon Johnson said, "Louder Bill, louder!" The reply came loud and firm, "Mr President, I am not talking to you." When God does talk to us and we manage to listen, he is probably responding to our needs, to our special circumstances, maybe to our requests, to our prayers.

Learning to actively listen and love God is the best preparation for listening to and loving others. Listening to others is also vital if we are to discover God speaking to us. God speaks to us through the Bible, through the events in our lives, through the people we meet, through nature itself, through everything.

It is really interesting that active listening is a skill that we can only perform if we are still and quiet. As James, in his Epistle, emphasises that we cannot listen if we are speaking and we cannot listen if we are too busy doing something else. At some point, however, there is a silence and this is a call for us to act and do something. The same God, who encourages us to do this, invites us in to share with him and to build a relationship with him. God demonstrated His listening and saving action in the death of his Son, Jesus. He therefore not only spoke through Jesus, but listened through him too. As

Samuel was to discover, God not only gives us a sense of his presence, he goes on to ask more of us.