

LISTENING

The clarity of children's comments always impresses here are some examples from a new collection of them:

'My Mum is a good cook but sometimes her gravy doesn't move and we have to help it out of the jug *Ceri 6*

My brother says that our Mum is the worst cook in the world. But I don't think that's fair. Michelle Higginbottom's Mum is even worse. *Alison 8*

Mummy why are more idiots on the road when Daddy's driving? *Olivia 6*

When Mum parks the car Dad says: 'Don't worry dear, I can walk the rest of the way to the kerb' *Alfie 6*

Mum asked me what I wanted for my birthday. I said, 'To be an only child again.'
Matthew 13

Children's logic, wisdom and wit are always razor sharp, their priorities and opinions expressed with such clarity. And this is what strikes me about Jesus' parables. The parable of the sower was the first parable Jesus told. Parables are good stories, the kind that will capture people's imaginations and Jesus does that really well; we can remember many: the Sower, the Good Samaritan, the lost sheep, the lost coin, the prodigal son. But parables also teach us things; there is a clear, unequivocal point to parables and most of them get to it directly and very quickly.

The theme of the parable of the Sower can be seen in stark terms. This parable is not about farming or gardening, or types of soil; it is all about listening. Billy Graham, the great American evangelist was often asked how he would evaluate the success of his ministry and the style of his mission and preaching. He would always quote the parable of the sower; in all of his audiences there were some who didn't listen or didn't hear, there were some who thought he was wonderful at the time, in the emotion of the occasion they were caught up in it, but in the cold light of day or when they went home, they forgot all about his message; others began well and seemed interested for a time, but other things got in way and their new-found faith seemed to get lost; others strengthen their faith over 40 or 50 years and were still in churches, believing and serving all these years later. This was how his ministry worked, he said; his job was simply to sow the seed by telling people about Jesus. That's what the parable is about; it is about the way in which people listen to the words of Jesus. It was a simple and clear-cut way for Jesus to 'explain' his mission that through his speaking and acting he will give people the greatest of opportunities to respond to the word of God.

We know from the gospels the ways in which people reacted to Jesus, some very positive, some more lukewarm, some quite antagonistic and some downright hostile! The point of the parable is to challenge people to listen, to listen in the right kind of way, in a way that will bear fruit in people's hearts and bring closer the kingdom of God. Quite likely Jesus was sitting on the hillside, looking over into a nearby field, watching the farmer walking up and

down, taking handfuls of seed from the bag over his shoulder and throwing it around the field; he had no control over the places in which the seed lands; it is taken by the wind, it bounces off the stones, it ends up in all sorts of places and it either grows or it doesn't. This is typical of Jesus' teaching. Here he is, God's Son, the holy one but not the distant one, who wants to listen and discern and who wants us to listen to him simply because he has meaningful things to say. Jesus worked with ordinary things, he met, talked to and listened to ordinary people. He borrows simple things like loaves and fish, boats and donkeys, bread and wine and made them holy. He talked of everyday events and routines like shepherding sheep and sowing seeds; he gave us the example that life itself and all that life involves was holy even down to a farmer throwing seeds onto his field.

Jesus' different types of soil are all about listening. Listening and learning to listen is a life-long process; it is God's gift to us all. What we do with this precious and priceless gift is our gift to God, to one another and to ourselves. A good listener is definitely a gift from God. From Luke's version *"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown."* When he said this, he called out, *"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."* (Luke 8:5-8). And that was that. Short, direct, simple, clear! But Jesus lands that razor sharp killer blow: "he who has ears to hear, let him hear."

Active listening involves an awareness of what is being said verbally and nonverbally, as well as what is not being said. It is perceiving not only with our ears, but also with our eyes, mind, and also with our heart. Active listening is strenuous work but listening is crucial. Like other aspects of spiritual growth, active listening is hard to assess. How can any of us measure our own listening and particularly listening to what Jesus has to say? How do I know how many of you are listening and the quality of your listening? How can I tell that you are not thinking of a raft of other thoughts like the member of the congregation who said to the vicar as he leaves, 'Thank you for your sermon, vicar, you preached for 25 minutes and 32 seconds and by the way did you know that there are 14 cobwebs in the nave roof that need clearing'?

The story is told of President Franklin Roosevelt, who often endured long receiving lines at receptions at the White House. He complained that no one really paid any attention to what he said. One day, during one reception, he decided to try an experiment. To each person who passed down the line and shook his hand, he murmured, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." The guests responded with phrases like, "Marvelous! Keep up the good work. We are proud of you. God bless you, sir." It was not till the end of the line, while greeting the ambassador from Bolivia, that his words were actually heard. Unfazed, the ambassador leaned over and whispered, "I'm sure she had it coming."

Some people are impulsive in their listening to what Jesus has to say but their emotion wears off, or other people (or things, or events) make life so hard for them and they give up their Christian commitment. Faith has not had chance to develop any depth and so when faith is questioned or challenged, there is nothing substantial to give it the strength to

withstand any pressure. Faith, at whatever stage, can easily get choked out. Faith that is not nurtured will become at least stunted and may wither away. A Roman centurion, tax-collectors, an unnamed woman with a bottle of perfume, a Samaritan woman at a well, a motley group of 12 disciples, a group of women who followed Jesus from place to place and supported him from their money – these are all the most unlikely of people who heard Jesus preach and who responded positively to Him and His message. They heard and they believed! They gave their faith time and space to grow gradually. The proof of active listening is definitely in the response.

In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus is calling each of us to actively listen to God's Word and to actively live our Christian lives. This bit includes listening to others about their faith, the challenges they have, the sadness and the joy, the dark and the good times. God's voice is never silent. In every circumstance and situation God speaks, without words and in forms we may not recognize at first as having meaning. Yet we are surrounded by clutter, noise and sheer busyness; we are used to incessant noise of conversations, mobile phones, the computer and TV, music, alarms and traffic. And we become uneasy when the noise stops. We fear something is wrong. This sad fact seems to prove that we are losing our ability to listen. Yet without meaningful listening we lack meaningful relationships. It is said that we should listen to others, listen to their whole story and listen to their whole story first! This applies to what Jesus has to tell us. Learning to listen and love God is the best preparation for listening and loving others. Conversely, true listening is vital if we are to discover God speaking to us. When a journalist, interviewing Mother Theresa about her prayer life, asked the question: *'What words do you use when you pray to God?'* she replied, *'I don't speak much to God; I just listen to him.'* *'What does God say?'* asked the journalist intrigued. *'He just listens too,'* said Mother Theresa.

So often God does speak to us through other people, sometimes through the most unexpected people. Our existence is meant to be a dialogue not a monologue. Sheila Cassidy writes: *'when we speak of listening to God we are talking about listening of the spirit, a tuning of our inmost being to 'hear' the word of God.'* *'By the word of God,'* she writes: *'I mean not only the factual written words of scriptures but God's message in all its manifestations. God 'speaks' to us through the scriptures, through the events in our lives, through the people we meet, through history, through nature, through everything.'*

Back to the children's comments: *'My teacher, says Mohammad aged 7, said that I have listening problems but I think she has problems teaching.'* Jesus has no problems in his teaching. God, in his speaking to us, uses a person or circumstance or he goes straight to our heart. All require a stillness. We know we cannot listen while we are moving our lips and we cannot develop a relationship when busyness takes a grip. We cannot understand the message when our wagging finger is in the face of the messenger. At some point, though, we all must create the opportunity for enough silence to actively listen which, when broken, will reveal a call to action, simply by saying that each of us has stayed in this place long enough, its time now to move forward and respond positively to what Jesus has to say to us.

Peter Smith
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