

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Ezekiel 33:7-9 / Matthew 18:15-20)
10.09.2017

St Benedict's Rule – a Rule written to help monastic communities live together in harmony – opens with the word *Listen*. If Benedict prefaces all that he says with this word it is because he sees everything else in our life as dependent upon the quality of our listening. He underlines that we are to listen *with the ear of our heart*.

It is with this optic in mind that I propose we read today's gospel passage. In the few short verses we heard read this morning we will have noticed that the word *listen* was employed quite often. Moreover, in our first reading, the prophet Ezekiel is told that when he *heard* a word from the Lord's mouth he was to warn the people in God's name. I take today's Scripture readings as an invitation addressed to us to reflect upon the importance of **mutual listening**.

We all need to hear and to be heard if things are to move on in the various situations of difference and tension that arise in all our lives at certain moments. As long as people are not listening to others – and not being truly heard by others – then no true reconciliation can ever take place between them; mutual understanding and agreement will never be attained without all parties listening to each other. On every journey to reconciliation the very first step to be taken must be a commitment to communicate. When I say communicate, understand me. I want to emphasise that communication implies not only talking, but also, and above all, listening.

If we live in such a divided world, is this not because there is often more talking going on than there is genuine listening? I believe that much of the tension emerging and being vented in society at the present time – quite often very recklessly and with drastic consequences – can be traced back to the frustration of disenfranchised people who feel that they are not been listened to and heard. Whole classes of society feel disrespected and have become increasingly angry – dangerously so. The extent of their unarticulated expressions of discontent, the stamping of their feet in frustration, is making itself felt so strongly that in many places it is shaking the very fragile foundations on which our world stands.

When it comes to difficulties in communication which arise from people talking more than listening we are well placed in this part of the world to understand that. We just have to think of the present political impasse being experienced right now around agreement on devolved government.

Earlier this week I sat in a gathering with two politicians drawn from very different backgrounds who see things from opposite perspectives. I heard both of them say what many of us will have heard other Northern Irish politicians express over the airwaves in recent times in a bid to justify and excuse the on-going stalemate position which is the result of some political parties' intransigence: *We can assure you that we are engaged in intense talks. The important thing is that we are still talking.*

Now while I don't doubt that political parties are busy talking and presenting one's point of view is vital, of itself it is not enough to talk. For *Talks* to get anywhere all parties involved in them must be as prepared to listen as they are to speak. They must also be ready to see things from others' perspective as it is presented to them. The Chinese proverb reminds us *We were given two ears and one mouth*. Would it not be true to say that so often we operate as if it were the other way round? We talk much more than we listen! I dare to ask if our politicians

are just as committed to listening to each other as each one is ready to talk. If parties don't listen to each other then what we arrive at is what the French call *the dialogue of the deaf* and all that does is to leave those engaged in it in a blocked position. A dialogue of the deaf leads nowhere. If we don't listen to each other we will never arrive at an accord; we simply cannot be in harmony. Without attentive listening to the other voices in the choir it is impossible for all to blend together in a way that creates something beautifully harmonious. What I am saying here is as true for our personal relationships as it is in the political sphere and the wider social arena. It is as true in and for our Churches, our local Christian communities, our families, our marriages our workplaces, our friendship circles as it is anywhere else. It is probably fair to say that so much of the mess we can get into, so many of the breakdowns in relationships we suffer from, so many blocked situations in all these areas of our lives, stem largely from people's failures to listen to each other and to see things from a perspective other than our own.

There are many who say they are listening to others, but who aren't really engaged in a true listening process at all. There is much *pseudo-listening* going on in our world. There are people who pretend to be listening here, there and everywhere, but, in reality, many of these people who are supposedly listening to others, manifest little perception of the feelings and reactions of those who air their grievances to them. They will often set off to do a tour elsewhere in the world – supposedly in a bid to show others the way forward in the direction of peace and reconciliation – presenting their way as *the way*. All they are doing is peddling their goods and doing this to their own benefit. Pseudo-listeners frequently make their living out of their *talk*.

What I call *pseudo-listening* is superficial listening, as opposed to what Benedict calls in the opening words of the Rule *listening with the ear of one's heart*, which we might call *empathetic listening*. A Scriptural lament comes to mind when I think of pseudo-listeners – and such people can be any or all of us at times. I think of that saying which states: *They have ears but they do not hear. They hear but they do not understand; they manifest this by their failure to change their ways*. Those words of the prophet are as relevant for our own day and age as when they were first written. We have ears, but we don't always hear; we do not always listen properly. When we do not hear with *the ear of our heart* our ways remain unchanged; we stay entrenched in our positions, unaffected by others' voices, unmoved by their points of view.

Listening involves much more than allowing sound to drift through our ears. True listening to others requires of us that we *take in* and consider the message we hear – it requires of us that we take time to operate a discernment in regard to what is said to us; that we show ourselves willing to allow other points of view to touch and influence our life to the extent that we are ready to adjust our position accordingly.

To truly listen to someone who has offended us and/or whom we have offended is the first and most important step in a journey of reconciliation.

True listening leads past our ears down to the level of our hearts. Note that it is a step downwards that is required of us – a step of humility! Paradoxically, it is precisely this step downwards which lifts us up to a higher level of understanding. These shifts which true listening lead to within us – from ear to heart, from hearing to understanding – if lived sincerely and engaged with genuinely, can lead us to change the stance we have held hitherto; at the very least they make us ready to do so.

A person who truly listens will strive to be alert; he or she will engage the whole of their being in the listening process and be willing to modify or, at the very least, refine their opinion.

In Jesus we have an example of the kind of total listening I am evoking here and claiming to be that which is required of each one of us.

The gospels show us how when Jesus listened He was moved by what He heard; His listening affected and changed Him.

Jesus listened and He felt compassion. We see His response of compassionate love in many of the miracle stories which depict Him as having responded to a person's cry for help and plea for mercy. Jesus listened and He was surprised by what He heard. Saying that, I think of His exclamation: *Never have I have an expression of faith like that of this foreigner – a Roman centurion – among the People of Israel.*

Jesus listened and, as a result, He changed His position. This is illustrated for us quite remarkably in the story of the Canaanite woman which was the gospel passage we heard at Eucharist two Sundays ago. Christ's first reaction to the Canaanite woman's plea for her daughter was to say that He could not help her because He was sent first to the People of Israel, but, when this woman insisted and explained her reasons to the Master, we were led to see how Jesus modified the position He had held hitherto. He came to understand through listening to this outsider that His ministry was to be wider still. Jesus' listening to the Canaanite woman was a really important landmark upon His way; it brought Him an insight He lacked; it led Him into a greater self-discovery. Christ came to a fuller understanding of the Father's will for Him through this simple woman who turned to Him in distress, seeking His intervention in her daughter's favour. To begin with, Jesus saw Himself as the Christ of Israel; He was led with time to see Himself as having a saving mission in regard to the whole world.

If Jesus could change His position through listening, how would we ever dare to claim – as some are wont to do – that our stance cannot change? How could any of us dare to say: *never, never, never?*

Jesus was undoubtedly a man perfectly attuned to others. His being attuned to others stemmed from His being accorded within Himself. Jesus was a man who was in-touch with His own heart; someone in harmony with the grace and graciousness of God which He carried within.

This is a very important consideration; it is one we must apply to our own lives.

A psychologist friend of mine – someone whose life's work has been one of gracious, compassionate listening to suffering people – once reflected to me how she drew the inspiration and strength she needed for her work (I call it her ministry) from her contemplation of Jesus in the gospels. The gospels portray Jesus over and over again as someone really intent upon listening wholeheartedly to every single person who came His way. Our attention is drawn to how Jesus listened fully to each person He encountered. Clearly, Jesus engaged His whole being in the listening process. This was possible for because Christ perfectly assumed His humanity. There was nothing in His own or anyone else's human condition that He shunned. Would that we all had the graciousness and humility to do the same! Would that we accepted our lives as they have been given to us and as they have unfolded! Such acceptance would better equip us to serve the Lord our God and be with others with all our heart and our whole being, accepting others as they are.

That being said, it is important for us to recognise that for Jesus – as for all of us – listening was not always easy. The gospel writers don't hide from us that there were times when Jesus,

like every human being, was overcome with weariness; there were times when He felt the heavy burdens He was asked to carry in His own life and also those which He bore with and for the people who were confided to His care. On certain days Jesus knew that He could just take no more; He recognised at certain moments that He needed to get away to rest, to pray and to reflect, to be in communion with His Father, to listen only to the silence... otherwise He simply could not continue to minister as He was called to.

Jesus was self-aware enough to realise that He had to attend to Himself at times in order to be able to serve others more wholeheartedly.

A valuable lesson is taught to us here.

We are shown by Christ's own example that if we are to be good listeners, truly attentive to other people, then we have to begin by first of all listening to our self. We must discern what our own feelings and behaviours are saying to us, so as to be able to carry this over into our listening to others – or, as the case may be, so as to hold it out of the space wherein we listen to those who ask us to lend them a listening ear.

Just as Jesus' attention to other people was rooted in and stemmed from a healthy self-awareness, so we can only truly empathise with others once we have properly connected with our self.

So many of our relational difficulties stem from our lack of self-awareness. When we are not fully self-aware it happens that we ignore the negative impact we can have upon others by certain attitudes and character traits we manifest.

All that to say that while we are called to be reconciled with others and to become instruments of reconciliation in their regard, the only way forward for us if we are to advance in this ministry is to open our hearts to God's reconciling grace in and for our own lives – not just once in our lifetime, but over and over again and in an on-going manner.

We can only come to forgive others and assure them of God's forgiveness in their lives once we realise that we are men and women who need to be forgiven ourselves – men and women who have experienced and are continually experiencing the blessing of pardon in our own regard.

Called to go to speak to our brothers and sisters who have done something wrong, in a bid to win them back, we can only expect to be listened to by those we seek out if we ourselves are men and women who are ready to hear what other people may have to say to us about wrongs we have done. Otherwise, we run the risk of wanting to take the splinter out of neighbour's eye while ignoring the plank in our own.

The goal of communication between us – including the communication of mutual correction – is nothing other than the hope and expectation that we will be led together into an experience of renewed communion: the blessing of being made one with each other in mutual love.

In the agreement we reach with others, what we accomplish is nothing less than to make God present in our midst. We have the Lord's own promise: *Where two or three agree and meet together in love I shall be there with them.*

As Christians we are called to live the parable of reconciliation by our communion in love. St Augustine reminds us that as Church our vocation is to be *a living sign of humanity reconciled.*

May the word of God heard this day confirm us in our calling.