

## **Sermon (#12)**

Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> July 2019. Gospel Reading: Luke 10:1-11, 16-20.

Word Count: 1472 words

Title: Hearing the Song of the Words

***May all I say and all we think be in harmony with you, God within, God beyond,  
God of all wisdom.***

***Amen.***

***Please be seated...***

There is much in today's gospel reading that I could have chosen to talk about. I could have talked about the second mission, when Jesus sent out seventy of his disciples, or seventy-two depending on your translation, 'like lambs into the midst of wolves'<sup>1</sup>, or his instruction to them to announce that 'the kingdom of God has come near'<sup>2</sup>. Equally, I'm sure there is a sermon somewhere in the idea that Jesus gave his disciples the ability 'to tread on snakes and scorpions'<sup>3</sup> without being hurt...a powerful argument against adopting biblical literalism if ever I've heard one...and incidentally, a notion that isn't exclusive to the Christian tradition; in Chinese Taoism, the book known as the Tao Te Ching says of those 'who (are) filled with virtue' that 'wasps and serpents will not sting' them; 'wild beasts will not pounce upon' them<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 10:3 (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> Luke 10:11 (NRSV)

<sup>3</sup> Luke 10:19 (NRSV)

<sup>4</sup> Tao Te Ching ~ Chapter fifty-Five

But I digress...today I've decided to reflect on verse 16 of the gospel reading where Jesus says 'whoever listens to you listens to me', and to focus specifically on the importance of listening.

Most of us are not very good at listening. We've all mastered the art of talking and most of us are blessed with the ability to hear, to physically perceive sounds but, as the Indian philosopher and spiritual teacher Krishnamurti said, 'listening is an art not easily come by'<sup>5</sup>. I wonder if listening, especially listening to another person, or indeed to God, is so difficult because it's not a passive activity. In listening we have to actively give our attention, we have to be present to the other person. We have to leave the self, the 'I', behind, suspend our own thoughts and defer our own responses. We have to be aware of their words, their language, their story, but we also have to listen for the hidden silences, the silences between the words that guide us to the place that words cannot reveal, the place of the unsayable. Listening is indeed 'an art not easily come by', yet in listening there is a bond of unity, a common goal, the process of healing.

We can often hear words without listening to them, without listening to their real message, without understanding what's really being said. Let me illustrate this with a story...

Two friends are out hunting in the woods when one of them suddenly falls to the ground. He isn't breathing, the situation looks dire, and his friend starts to

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<sup>5</sup> Krishnamurti, J. (1995) *The Book of Life: Daily Meditations with Krishnamurti*. New York: Harper Collins.

panic. He hastily takes out his mobile phone, calls 999, and frantically blurts out to the operator, “it’s my friend, he’s dead, what can I do?” The operator, trying to calm him down says, “Take it easy, I can help. Just listen to me and follow my instructions. First, let’s make sure he’s dead”. There’s a short pause, and then the operator hears a loud gunshot. The hunter comes back on the line and says, “Okay, now what?”

Clearly the hunter heard the operator’s words, but he wasn’t actually listening to, or understanding, what was really being said. I’m guessing he wasn’t awfully familiar with the apocryphal book of ‘Ecclesiasticus’ where he would have read ‘If you love to listen you will gain knowledge, and if you pay attention you will become wise’<sup>6</sup>.

Saint Benedict, who is often referred to as the founder of western monasticism, wrote the well-known ‘Rule of St. Benedict’, a guide for monastic community life. The first word in the ‘Rule of St. Benedict’ is ‘listen’; the first two words are ‘listen carefully’. Benedict puts listening at the very centre of life. Emphasising the significance of listening, Benoît Standaert [*Phonetically ~ BENWA STONDART*], a Belgian Benedictine monk, says, ‘blessed is the listener who keeps his inner ear constantly attuned to God’s promptings’...for ‘listening leads to a differently centred life’<sup>7</sup>. The differently centred life that I try to engage with is a life centred in the contemplative tradition of the church and you’ll know that, here at St John’s, we have for some years been exploring what it means for us to be a contemplative community. Recently we’ve held two periods of contemplative prayer, one at

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<sup>6</sup> Ecclesiasticus 6:33 (NRSV)

<sup>7</sup> Standaert, B. (2007) *Spirituality An Art of Living: A Monk’s Alphabet of Spiritual Practices*. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, p. 190.

Passiontide and the other as our response to the Church of England's 'Thy Kingdom Come' initiative. In contemplative prayer we seek to quiet our minds so that we can open ourselves to the presence of God and listen for God in the cave of the heart, that place of restorative silence and sacred stillness. It's in that deep silence that we can hear, and listen to, the 'still small voice'<sup>8</sup> of God; and indeed, as John O'Donohue, the Irish priest, poet and author, reminds us 'true listening is worship'<sup>9</sup>. Listening is also at the heart of other contemplative practices so, for example, in our Lectio Divina groups we listen for God speaking to us through the words of scripture. It never fails to amaze me how in Lectio Divina, which means 'divine reading', we can slowly and prayerfully listen to a bible passage or verse that we know so well and hear something new from it each time. To complete the quote from Krishnamurti that I mentioned earlier 'listening is an art not easily come by but in it there is beauty and great understanding...it is only in listening that one hears the song of the words'. In the contemplative practice of Lectio we strive to hear 'the song of the words', the melodic echo of God's voice resonating in our lives. In the contemplative tradition, prayer is always more about receptive listening than active talking.

This practice of receptive listening reminds me that central to the scriptural tradition of Hinduism are the sacred texts known as the Upanishads. The word 'Upanishad' literally means 'to sit down near', and they're often referred to as the 'listened to' texts because the disciple sits at the feet of the master listening attentively to their teaching. This evokes the story from our own tradition, found a little later in the same chapter of Luke's gospel, of Mary and Martha when we're told that Mary 'sat down at

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<sup>8</sup> 1 Kings 19:12 (KJV)

<sup>9</sup> O'Donohue, J. (1997) *Anam Cara: Spiritual Wisdom for the Celtic World*. London: Bantam Books, p. 99.

the Lord's feet and listened to him speaking'<sup>10</sup>. And, of course, when Martha complained that she wasn't getting any help, Jesus made it clear that Mary had 'chosen the better part'<sup>11</sup>. Mary had put her 'self' aside and found the unity and healing that comes from listening. To paraphrase a verse from Galatians<sup>12</sup>, in that moment Mary no longer lived, but Christ lived in her. This suggests to me that we too are meant to sit and listen; we are meant to find that deeper place where we can abide with and listen to Christ, to God, in silence and stillness. It's a delightful piece of serendipity that the word 'listen' contains the same letters as the word 'silent'. Silence and listening are integral to Christian contemplative practice, the practice of recognising God in this moment, in the eternal now. As Paul tells us in his second letter to the Corinthians, 'now is the acceptable time...now is the day of salvation'<sup>13</sup>. Esther de Waal, a scholar and writer in the Benedictine and Celtic traditions, says that 'to listen closely, with every fibre of our being...is one of the most difficult things in the world, and yet it is essential if we mean to find the God whom we are seeking'<sup>14</sup>. To sit and listen, to 'be' in the present moment, to find God in silence and stillness, seems to be the antithesis of what the modern world expects of us, indeed I sometimes wonder if it's antithetical to what the church expects of us. But it is, I believe, the one thing, the better part, of which Jesus spoke, that we put our 'selves' aside so that Christ can live in us and we can hear the song of his words.

I'd like to finish with a prayer written by Esther de Waal...

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<sup>10</sup> Luke 10:39 (RNJB)

<sup>11</sup> Luke 10:42 (NRSV)

<sup>12</sup> Galatians 2:20 (NRSV)

<sup>13</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:2 (NRSV)

<sup>14</sup> De Waal, E. (1999) Seeking God: The Way of St Benedict. Norwich; Canterbury Press, p. 27.

'Un-crowd our hearts, O God,  
until silence speaks in your still, small voice;  
turn us from the hearing of words,  
and the making of words,  
and the confusion of much speaking,  
to listening,  
waiting,  
stillness,  
silence.'<sup>15</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>15</sup> Esther de Waal ~ Lost in Wonder: Rediscovering the Spiritual Art of Attentiveness