

JOHN 10:22-30
LISTENING
(Preached in Balerno Parish Church)

Here's a listening exercise to try at home. I was at a Church leaders conference and in pairs we had to listen to each other. This is the exercise we were set: one of us had to speak about himself for one minute and the other is to listen without interrupting! We simply had to listen to what the other person is saying, without commenting on it, without interrupting, but listening in such a way that we could repeat at least some of what we had heard at the end. After a minute, the roles were reserved and we had to repeat it, this time the first person to speak now had to listen. Listening is incredibly hard! Someone tells you of their experience in life and instinctively you want to join in and share a similar experience! Or you want to ask questions of something that was said, to know more, to challenge it; or you want it to become a conversation and you're already thinking of the next thing you want to say!. To listen well is to give the other person your complete attention, taking in what they're saying, being focussed on this other person for the whole of the time.

It is hard to listen; it is hard to concentrate in that kind of unbroken way for that length of time. But it is hard for other reasons too: we want to tell our story; we want to have our voice heard round the table; want to offer our opinion of things. So we're much more willing to speak than we are to listen. We listen to obtain information. We listen to understand. We listen for enjoyment. We listen to learn. The picture is of a family having fun listening to the radio together, perhaps for all of these reasons. We can learn how to be better listeners: there is a technique by which we can learn to do it: you look at the speaker directly; you put aside all the distractions of whatever kind; you don't mentally prepare for next thing to say! You "listen" to the speaker's body language. You use your own body language and your gestures to tell someone that you are actually listening to them. Maybe you've developed a technique of selective listening, only hearing the bits of the conversations that you want to hear! Yet we feel hard done by if we think someone is not listening to us!

There is another profound sense of listening for the Christian and that is listening to Jesus. Clare Balding has taken over the Radio 2 Sunday morning programme and I never hear all of it and didn't hear the item itself last week, but she was asking people to tell her their experiences of hearing God speak to them. I expect that she would have people tell of voices and dreams etc and ways in which God spoke directly to them as individuals; I'm not sure what Clare would have made of all of that as an unbeliever. There are more ordinary ways in which we listen; by reading the Bible and when we pray, we listen for what the Spirit would say to us about God, life, and faith. There are all kinds of distractions: the other things we need to do; people interrupt us.

We read Psalm 23, many people's favourite Bible piece. It is a fantastic picture of God as the One who provides for us everything we need. It is a picture of the shepherd looking after the sheep and this is what God is like, this is what God does. He provides for us in every way; He gives us food, peace and rest. He guides and leads us in the choices that we make. He has promised to be with us in all the days of our lives, even in the dark valley where death looms; He comforts us. He treats us royally, the generous host who surrounds us with His goodness and love all the days of our lives. It is a wonderful description of the generosity of God to us, of all of the gifts He has given to us. It is a piece that we enjoy reading and singing and marvelling at the ways in which God

has blessed us as His people. If ever there was a piece of Bible that will help us enjoy God and follow Jesus it is Psalm 23.

So we are all secure believers, people of such strong faith that we can face up to anything and not flinch; even death is an experience to sadden us, but not make us afraid. We are totally persuaded that God is with us always and that He is full of grace, so generous that He will provide for us in every way and that He will certainly guide us in the choices we make in life. No? Are we not like that? Why not? After all, Psalm 23 tells us that this is what life is like when God is our shepherd; don't we know Psalm 23 off by heart? If the Psalm is right and this is what God is like, why are we not strong in our faith, and certain of His grace? Have we not listened to the Psalm?

Jesus came bringing all these 'shepherd' themes with Him. When He said "*I am...*" (*John 10:11*) He very clearly identified Himself with all that Psalm 23 stood for. So we listen in to the conversation that took place in Jerusalem at the time of the feast we call Hannukah. This Feast of Dedication centred on the temple and the story of Judas Maccabeus. The nation had been overrun by Antiochus Epiphanes, and this pagan king had deliberately brought all kinds of profane things into the temple to make it a place of horror rather than a place of worship. The Jewish hero Judas Maccabeus had defeated their enemies and sent them packing in 165 BC and the temple had been restored. A feast was held to rededicate the temple newly cleansed. The people expressed their gratitude to God for His grace; there was new temple worship when they'd scarcely dared hope for it. This was a new start for a transformed people. Does John see Jesus as the fulfilment of all that this feast stands for? He is a new beginning for the people of God, for a transformed people who are ready to believe.

The conversation began with a question: "*How long...*" (*John 10:24*) Who is Jesus? This is still one of the big gospel questions. Who is Jesus? The Jews wanted to know if He is Messiah? "Tell us; don't keep us in suspense any longer; tell us plainly and clearly, once and for all; are you the Messiah?" There are three things about His answer:

1. See the miracles – "they are your answer; they tell you who I am; I do them in the Father's name; if you have eyes to see you will know who I am by what I do". John calls them signs!

2. See the secure salvation – "*I give them...*" (*John 10:28*) we're back in Psalm 23 territory here, the great blessings of God's grace for us; nothing can take that salvation away from us; we are safe and secure in the grace and power of God.

3. My Father and I are working in harmony. "*I &...*" (*John 10:30*) this is a great declaration of faith and there is huge insight into Jesus and why He came and what he did. The answer full of good news.

What happened next? "*Again the...*" (*John 10:31*) These are such powerful words, great promises full of the grace of God, full of hope and comfort, yet the Jews only heard what shocked them. They accused Jesus of blasphemy and tried to stone Him. Why did they not hear what we hear in these words? Why did they not hear these words as a great affirming of Jesus and the offer of grace? They were stopped from listening by one thing: by their prejudice. They did not ever believe that the Messiah could make these claims, or that God would come into the world in someone like Jesus. So strong was their prejudice that even though Jesus' miracles were the works of the devil! It was even worse later because they simply could not accept a crucified Messiah, so their prejudices stopped them listening to Jesus and hearing of the grace of God through Him. So they lost these great promises of salvation and hope and grace because their

prejudices got in the way and instead of loving Jesus for what He brought to the world, they hated Him and tried to kill Him.

What stops us listening to Jesus?

Prejudice do we only listen to certain people, or certain kinds of people? A friend of mine was a minister who had an associate working with him and he used to advertise their Sunday services in *The Scotsman* and who was preaching, but he discovered that the congregation was substantially smaller when the associate was due to preach, so he stopped telling people!

Pride "I can sort out my own destiny; I don't need any help from anyone; I don't believe this nonsense about sin; I can be master of my own life." So we don't listen to anyone, let alone the Lord Jesus; and Bible and prayer play no part in our lives.

Distractions there is no time to stop and ponder, we're too busy doing other things, keeping the family going, taking our (grand)children here, there and everywhere; we're thinking of other things, such as Sunday lunch; a friend of mine, also my flatmate went to Church and as soon as he stood up to sing the first hymn realized that he'd forgotten to put on the lunch and he spent the rest of the service trying to work out how to tell us in our student flat that there was no lunch; he heard nothing that day because he was distracted!

"*My sheep...*" (*John 10:27*) There were no dogs to drive the sheep in Jesus' time. The shepherd would walk along in front of the sheep, leading them, and he would call out to them by name. They would know his voice and would follow him everywhere. He would lead them to find fresh food and good water and they would follow, listening and instinctively trusting the shepherd's voice. Jesus promises us all kinds of good things: life in all its fullness, forgiveness, a secure salvation, love beyond measure; He promises to be with us always and everywhere; He promises to guide and lead us in the choices we make in life. How do we react to these promises? Do we listen to these promises and believe them, instinctively trusting Jesus, rejoicing, enjoying the grace of God and following Jesus? Or is there something else going on? Something that stops us, that prevents us from taking these promises to heart? There must be something, because we're not always the people we should be. Are we distracted? Does pride get in the way? Or prejudice?

Good listening today will give us two things:

1. how good and generous God is so that our faith will be stronger.
2. a greater determination to listen to Jesus in the Bible and to be more willing to follow Him.

It all begins with listening!