

ARE WE LISTENING?

We need God's help to relearn the art of listening, writes Pat Took, for the sake of ourselves and of each other, for the sake of the church and of the Kingdom

"Hello", I say, looking down at the bundle in my arms. The baby peers up with squiffy eyes, straining to discern where the sound is coming from and what it might mean. In this overwhelming need to communicate we reflect the image of the God who is Word, the God who speaks life.

Three years later the little girl wakes up chattering and goes to bed without pausing for breath. Listening has become talking in the drive to uncover meaning. And from that early reversal we seem set to find speaking both more congenial and considerably easier than listening. This is not surprising, since what I have to say is already within my head,

within my mind, awaiting the opportunity for articulation, whilst what you have to say requires a pause in my thoughts and speech, a journey outwards on my part to discover your meaning. Our instinctive desire to communicate has become problematic. We have become curved in on ourselves and struggle to step generously over our threshold to give proper attention to someone else. We need God's help to relearn the art of listening, but we must decide to do this, we must make the effort to do this, for the sake of ourselves and of each other, for the sake of the church and of the Kingdom.

We must listen for our own sake. No-one's life is long enough to acquire, simply by our own discovery, the knowledge and experience we need - we depend on the wisdom of those who have gone before. Our wellbeing, perhaps our survival, depends on our paying attention to accumulated and inherited knowledge. This requires a degree of humility in those

who grow up so much more technically skilled than their elders. They have to discern that age brings a different kind of wisdom – a wisdom worth listening to. It also carries a responsibility to courtesy and love in those who are older, to listen to and learn the shape and pattern of life as it is experienced by this generation, which is so different from that which shaped us, and to discover new knowledge and new wisdom. What if that new wisdom challenges, undermines ideas we have held sacred, principles we hold dear? Perhaps at that point the shutters come down. But thoughtful discussion with those who think differently enables our own perspective to be clarified, or changed. To be genuinely open to the new and the different we need not just humility but also courage, generosity and confidence. The conversation among us on issues of gender has demonstrated the difficulty and the fruitfulness of this. In the voyage into understanding I need to listen to all the voices, the dissonant

ones, the strange ones, the harmonious ones, allowing myself to glean truth wherever it is to be found, to be enriched, to have my heart expanded and my mind broadened by them all.

And then there is you. To listen seriously to you is a proper honouring of the debt I owe to love and to humanity. It requires that I should set myself aside, my opinions, my experiences, and pay attention to what you have to say, to who you are. When this self-forgetting does not take place, conversation becomes a fraud, communication self-enclosed, impervious, fruitless as two people talk past each other in a kind of concurrent monologue – two voices speaking and no-one listening.

And just as we are called to speak the truth in love, so listening for the truth also requires love, to look for the kernel of what the other is attempting to convey – to look for the best within that. Simply as a human being I am obliged to pay attention to you because you need to be heard. And I too, needing to be heard, have a right to expect you to listen, as a matter of humanity and love. And very occasionally, with a proper reticence and care, we may be called to speak for God into the situation of someone else's life. Within the Christian community we have the gift of intentional and holy listening: confession. Many of us have known what it is to hear someone pour out the grief and distress, the regrets and hopes of their life, and listening with the greatest care to gather up those broken fragments before God in prayer. And we have seen that person go on their way liberated and restored simply for having been heard – heard by God – heard by us. The therapeutic power of being heard is widely

appreciated: the awareness of the presence of God brings hope and power to such conversations.

Above all, for the sake of the Kingdom, we need to listen for the voice of God. And those most careful in listening to each other will have the greatest facility for hearing God. That God speaks, and that his speech is personal, is the testimony of all the faithful. Most often we hear him in the words, the voice, perhaps the action of another person. Frequently it is through those who are closest, family, colleagues and friends. We must pay attention even to the most familiar because it may be God who is speaking in this familiar tone. The one who speaks in Scripture and preaching and worship, through mentors and spiritual friendships and all the wealth of the Christian tradition speaks also through the nine-to-five mundane experiences of our daily lives. But are we listening?

The difficulty we have in listening is a particular problem for Baptists who are governed by community discernment. We aim to discern together the mind of Christ. Pointless for those who come to the meeting already knowing Christ's mind, fixed already in their own opinion. Difficult when our agendas of self-aggrandisement and success run counter to the teachings of Christ, when fundamentally we do not want to know his will. Only by listening to each other within the company of pilgrims will we learn what tones are recognisably his – those that call us forward out of ourselves into demonstrations of love, into that which is generous, grace-full, hopeful. Every church meeting opens up the possibility of further conversion to the ways and priorities of Christ, provided we are listening – listening to

the least significant, the least articulate, the least sane, in the knowledge that they too might be speaking with the voice of Christ.

*In the stillness of the night,
I listen.
Only footsteps and shouts of the
guards,...
Brother, we seek and call for
thee!
Brother, do you hear me?*

Voices in the Night Dietrich
Bonhoeffer 1945



CONVERSATION

How would you describe yourself as a listener?

What has helped, or will help, you become a better listener?

STARTERS



Pat Took is a former Team Leader of the London Baptist Association, and was Baptist Union President 2011-12