

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Listening to God's word Preached 12th August

Proper 14B

(After Gospel reading)

Now I'd like you to listen.

You might say, 'Of course we're listening. We've just been listening to a passage from the Gospel which has been read. And now we're getting ready to listen to you.'

But not just yet!

I want you to sit and just listen to whatever sounds there around you – some sounds from within the church, some from outside. Some near, and some further away. Just listen for a little while, and see what you can hear....

[Gather up some offerings of what people heard. If they heard the baby, refer to Psalm 8.2 which says to God, '*Out of the mouths of babes and infants you have founded a bulwark because of your foes...*'

Hard to understand exactly what that means, except that it does tell us that the sounds babies make are significant to God – and can be significant to us. I wonder how far we listened to exactly what sounds he was making.

Other things...]

Did you hear any sounds far away which you had to stop and interpret? 'Is that a car on the A1307? Or might it be a lorry – a motorbike?

Sometimes I sit in church alone in the evening and hear little creaks. I have to interpret them a bit... Is it just a change in temperature making the furniture creak, or is it something else? Was that the faint voice of a bird outside, and can I hear people talking? How far away are they?

When it's raining – how hard is it raining? Are the gutters overflowing? What's the sound of the rain, and what's the sound of the wind?

Listening is more than just hearing; it calls for greater attention, and it involves interpreting sounds to understand their significance. In a busy restaurant or pub, I may hear the sound of background music – but I don't necessarily listen to it! Not when I'm talking with my friends or family.

And, talking of music – when I really listen to music, there's a sense in which it becomes part of me, ; my mind travels along with it. I may anticipate what's coming next. And if something unexpected comes next, I can be jolted – because my inner direction of travel with the music has been derailed.

Do you know what I mean?

Listening is something much more than hearing.

And we know that's true with people, as well. There's a great difference between having someone just hearing what you say, and listening to you – and perhaps hearing more than just the sounds you've made; hearing what 's sometimes called 'the music behind the words'. Understanding not just what you say, but to some extent, understanding *you*.

When we come to church, we hear readings from the Bible; we usually hear a talk or sermon; we also hear all the other words of the service but do we hear what 's behind them? Do we interpret what we hear and try to make sense of it for ourselves? Does it become, in some sense, part of us?

Are we listening in the kind of way that might be described as 'feeding' on the words we hear – taking them right into ourselves? And how open are we to the possibility that sometimes, what we hear as we listen might be God's own voice – not the Bible reader's voice, or the preacher's voice, in themselves – but God's Holy Spirit speaking to us directly – just as, if we listened intently when the church was quiet, we might hear a voice from beyond its walls calling our name?

Our Bible e passage talked about Jesus as the Bread of Life; I think the passage is pointing to two things – both to the bread and wine of Holy Communion – his flesh and blood given to us to feed us – but also his message, his word. We also come to Church to feed on that .

Sometimes when we want really to listen to a Bible passage, it helps to hear it not just once , but more than that . Sometimes it helps to follow it with our eyes.

I'm going to read the last few verses of the Gospel passage (from 'Very Truly') once again, quiet slowly – you can follow it on your Red Top sheets if you like. Then we'll another moment or two of quietness, to inwardly digest it.