

Speaking and listening

Sunday 27th March 2011



Eli and Samuel (1 Samuel 3.1-10)

Photo: Br Lawrence Lew, O.P. 

STARTING OUT

Communication skills

As we journey through Lent, one of the most important things we can do to prepare ourselves for Easter is to pay more attention to the relationship between speaking and listening. Over the last two Sundays we've thought about ourselves as human beings in relation to God and about what separates us or brings us close to other people and to God. We've also seen how Jesus bridges gaps, making it possible for us to know what God is really like, and removing all that separates us from the loving Father of creation. This week, we ask how we find out what God wants of us, how we hear the call, and how the way we communicate affects everyone around us.

Job descriptions often list communication as a very important skill. If you have ever been doorstepped by a skilled salesperson or cold called by someone who wants to make sure you don't hang up on them, speaking is used in a way that keeps you locked into the matter of interest – buying the product. Politicians and public figures learn to speak in a way that avoids talking about things that could be embarrassing for their party or make them look bad and many of them are highly skilled at deflecting awkward questions and turning them into points scored against the opposition. At the other end of the scale, doctors and police personnel often have to be skilled at delivering bad news and people like the Samaritans and negotiators have to be skilled at keeping open channels of communication when dealing with people who are desperate.

We are probably not really aware of how we develop different speaking styles for different occasions and probably even less aware of how the way we speak can potentially alienate people and create Unreconciled situations. We might want to complain about our grunting, uncommunicative teenagers, or stroppy, unhelpful elders, but sometimes it's us, nagging and worrying about them that drives them into monosyllables or grumpy refusal.

Listening is another important skill that we have to work on if we want to develop good relationships with others, but we often fail to listen properly because it's hard to keep our attention focused. Try talking on the telephone while doing another task and see how hard





it is to concentrate on what the other person is saying. Try listening really hard to the scripture readings or the minister's sermon in church and see how much effort you have to put in to concentrate. Sometimes worship becomes so familiar, that we switch off and let it wash over us without being aware of how important our prayers, songs and listening silence really is, not only in our own spiritual development, but in the witness, through our worship of God, to other people.

Activity

Choose from the selection below:

If you are using this resource as an individual some activities may need adapting.

A. Exclamations!!! and questions???

- Ask people to think about the last time they had a row with somebody. Did the other person say things which wounded them? Did they say anything deliberately hurtful? Even if they were really angry, were there things they were tempted to say but couldn't go that far? Ask the group to talk in pairs about what arguing makes you feel like inside. What kind of language do you need to make up after a row?
- Now ask the group to think about a time when they were trying to make friends or to comfort somebody. What kind of things did they say? What does it feel like to try and reach out to someone you don't know very well? How do you keep a new conversation going?
- You could write key words up on a flip chart or on post-its and compare the 'angry' words with the 'kind' words. What sort of body language goes with those words

Or: an advertisement for mobile phones suggested that hearing an old song would make you remember an important relationship. What song would make you call someone you hadn't spoken to in a long time, and why?

B. On a board write up some headings:

Anger, hatred, blame, offensive language, blasphemy

Ask people to choose words which fit into the different categories (you can use magnetic words, post-its or similar if you like).

- Ask people if they can say which of these words makes them feel particularly uncomfortable and why.
- How do people feel when these words occur in TV programmes and films?



GOING DEEPER

Who's listening?

People who have no voice, no ability to speak for themselves or about their situation often end up as groups of Unreconciled who are cut off not only by their circumstances, but by the fact that they cannot say anything about it. No one listens to them and so their needs are not met. Worse, well meaning people, including Christians, sometimes elect to speak on their behalf in such a way that they say what they think needs to be said without really finding out what is wanted, what the people would say for themselves if only someone was listening.

The women and the well

A Christian charity discovered a village in Africa where a group of women had to walk twenty miles to fetch water. This took up a large part of the day and the women had to carry heavy vessels of water for long periods in the heat. The charity undertook to dig a well in the village so that the people could have water whenever they wanted. After a while however, the helpers were disturbed to find that the well was being spoiled. The water deliberately being made undrinkable and the women still had to go on their long journey to fetch water. Eventually it turned out that the women themselves were spoiling the well. The journey to fetch water was actually important to them, giving them time to themselves, time to have important conversations about the men of the village and bonding them together. The helpers just assumed that the well was the best thing to make everyone's life easier and believed the women had said they wanted the well, but no one actually listened to what they had to say.



Jesus and the Samaritan woman

Photo: Br Lawrence Lew, O.P. (CC) (BY) (NC) (SA)

Activity

- Ask the group to think of any occasion when an important decision was made and they were not consulted about it. Such decisions might be about a family party or event like a wedding, or changes at work. What about changes and decisions that affect the church? Explore with the group what it feels like not to have a 'voice' or not be listened to.
- Now ask the group to think about people in the local community or in the world who don't have a voice about what happens to them. How do you think those groups become Unreconciled from the rest of humanity? How can those people be given a voice and allowed to speak freely? What are the problems in speaking on behalf of those people?





Find out more:

During a pop concert, the singer Bono invited mothers to speak the names of their disappeared loved ones during a performance of U2's song 'Mothers of the Disappeared'. What do you think about this way of giving silenced people 'voice'?

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mothers_of_the_Plaza_de_Mayo

Find out about the work of individuals, charities and agencies which seek to highlight the plight of those Unreconciled who have no means to speak for themselves.

The white shawl of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, painted on the floor in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

Picture taken by a user of the b612 blog



MOVING ON

Celebrating the Bible

Psalm 95

KJV

¹O come, let us sing unto the LORD: let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation.
²Let us come before his presence with thanksgiving, and make a joyful noise unto him with psalms.
³For the LORD is a great God, and a great King above all gods.
⁴In his hand are the deep places of the earth: the strength of the hills is his also.
⁵The sea is his, and he made it: and his hands formed the dry land.
⁶O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker.
⁷For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. To day if ye will hear his voice,
⁸Harden not your heart, as in the provocation, and as in the day of temptation in the wilderness:
⁹When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my work.

NRSV

A Call to Worship and Obedience

¹O come, let us sing to the LORD;
 let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!
²Let us come into his presence with thanksgiving;
 let us make a joyful noise to him with songs of praise!
³For the LORD is a great God,
 and a great King above all gods.
⁴In his hand are the depths of the earth;
 the heights of the mountains are his also.
⁵The sea is his, for he made it,
 and the dry land, which his hands have formed.
⁶O come, let us worship and bow down,
 let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
⁷For he is our God,
 and we are the people of his pasture,
 and the sheep of his hand.

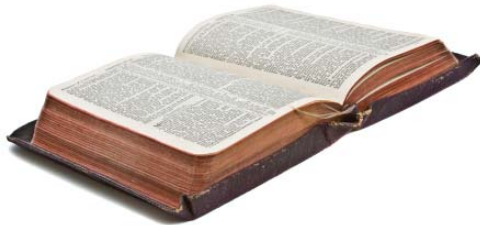




(KJV continued)

¹⁰Forty years long was I grieved with this generation, and said, It is a people that do err in their heart, and they have not known my ways:

¹¹Unto whom I swear in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest.



(NRSV continued)

O that today you would listen to his voice!
⁸Do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness,
⁹when your ancestors tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work.
¹⁰For forty years I loathed that generation and said, 'They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways.'
¹¹Therefore in my anger I swore, 'They shall not enter my rest.'

For discussion

KJV only

- Read the text through and make a note of any unusual words or phrases or things you didn't understand.
- Pick out any words or phrases you especially like or find meaningful. Why do you like them?
- Choose a phrase from this passage and write it up or make a banner for your church to share with others as a signpost for this part of the Lenten journey. Choose a phrase from this psalm and write it up or make a banner for your church to inspire others who come to visit during Lent.

Any Bible version

- The psalmist invites us to worship God with a 'joyful noise' but also asks us to find time to 'listen to his voice'. Thinking about a typical service at your local church, work out how much of it is spent speaking or singing to God and how much of it is spent listening to God's voice – through his Word, through testimony or homily, through prayer, prophesying or silence. Do you think the balance is right? What other opportunities are provided by your church for listening to what God is saying?

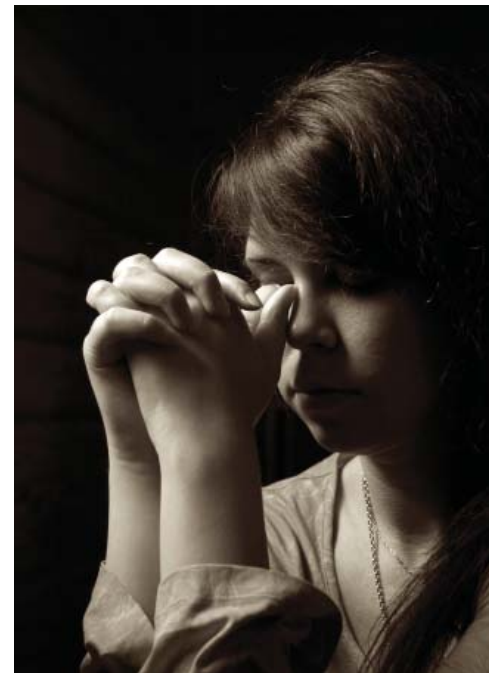


Photo: Kevin Rawlings





CELEBRATING THE BIBLE

Gospel

John 4.5-42 (KJV), 4.1-30 (NRSV)

KJV

⁵ Then cometh he to a city of Samaria, which is called Sychar, near to the parcel of ground that Jacob gave to his son Joseph.

⁶ Now Jacobs well was there. Jesus therefore, being wearied with his journey, sat thus on the well: and it was about the sixth hour.

⁷ There cometh a woman of Samaria to draw water: Jesus saith unto her, Give me to drink.

⁸ (For his disciples were gone away unto the city to buy meat.)

⁹ Then saith the woman of Samaria unto him, How is it that thou, being a Jew, askest drink of me, which am a woman of Samaria? for the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans.

¹⁰ Jesus answered and said unto her, If thou knewest the gift of God, and who it is that saith to thee, Give me to drink; thou wouldest have asked of him, and he would have given thee living water.

¹¹ The woman saith unto him, Sir, thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep: from whence then hast thou that living water?

¹² Art thou greater than our father Jacob, which gave us the well, and drank thereof himself, and his children, and his cattle?

¹³ Jesus answered and said unto her, Whosoever drinketh of this water shall thirst again:

¹⁴ But whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.

¹⁵ The woman saith unto him, Sir, give me this water, that I thirst not, neither come hither to draw.

¹⁶ Jesus saith unto her, Go, call thy husband, and come hither.

NRSV

So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon.

A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, 'Give me a drink'. (His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?' (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, "Give me a drink", you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?' Jesus said to her, 'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.' The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.'

Jesus said to her, 'Go, call your husband, and come back.' The woman answered him, 'I have no husband.' Jesus said to her, 'You are right in saying, "I have no husband"; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!' The woman said to him,



(KJV continued)

¹⁷ The woman answered and said, I have no husband. Jesus said unto her, Thou hast well said, I have no husband:

¹⁸ For thou hast had five husbands; and he whom thou now hast is not thy husband: in that saidst thou truly.

¹⁹ The woman saith unto him, Sir, I perceive that thou art a prophet.

²⁰ Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship.

²¹ Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father.

²² Ye worship ye know not what: we know what we worship: for salvation is of the Jews.

²³ But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth: for the Father seeketh such to worship him.

²⁴ God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth.

²⁵ The woman saith unto him, I know that Messiah cometh, which is called Christ: when he is come, he will tell us all things.

²⁶ Jesus saith unto her, I that speak unto thee am he.

²⁷ And upon this came his disciples, and marvelled that he talked with the woman: yet no man said, What seekest thou? or, Why talkest thou with her?

²⁸ The woman then left her waterpot, and went her way into the city, and saith to the men,

²⁹ Come, see a man, which told me all things that ever I did: is not this the Christ?

³⁰ Then they went out of the city, and came unto him.

³¹ In the mean while his disciples prayed him, saying, Master, eat.

³² But he said unto them, I have meat to eat

(NRSV continued)

'Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.' Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.' The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming' (who is called Christ). 'When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.' Jesus said to her, 'I am he, the one who is speaking to you.'

Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, 'What do you want?' or, 'Why are you speaking with her?' Then the woman left her water-jar and went back to the city. She said to the people, 'Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?' They left the city and were on their way to him.

Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, 'Rabbi, eat something.' But he said to them, 'I have food to eat that you do not know about.' So the disciples said to one another, 'Surely no one has brought him something to eat?' Jesus said to them, 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work. Do you not say, "Four months more, then comes the harvest"? But I tell you, look around you, and see how the fields are ripe for harvesting. The reaper is already receiving wages and is gathering fruit for



(KJV continued)

that ye know not of.

³³ Therefore said the disciples one to another, Hath any man brought him ought to eat?

³⁴ Jesus saith unto them, My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work.

³⁵ Say not ye, There are yet four months, and then cometh harvest? behold, I say unto you, Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest.

³⁶ And he that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together.

³⁷ And herein is that saying true, One soweth, and another reapeth.

³⁸ I sent you to reap that whereon ye bestowed no labour: other men laboured, and ye are entered into their labours.

³⁹ And many of the Samaritans of that city believed on him for the saying of the woman, which testified, He told me all that ever I did.

⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans were come unto him, they besought him that he would tarry with them: and he abode there two days.

⁴¹ And many more believed because of his own word;

⁴² And said unto the woman, Now we believe, not because of thy saying: for we have heard him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world.

(NRSV continued)

eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. For here the saying holds true, "One sows and another reaps." I sent you to reap that for which you did not labour. Others have laboured, and you have entered into their labour.'

Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman's testimony, 'He told me everything I have ever done.' So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there for two days. And many more believed because of his word. They said to the woman, 'It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Saviour of the world.'

For discussion

- Where in this passage can you spot different speaking and listening strategies?
- What kinds of jobs and situations provoke people to speak aggressively or defensively? What kinds of jobs and situations require people to speak gently and carefully? What can we learn about these different ways of speaking and listening from this passage?

This is one of the most famous conversations within the four Gospels. Yet it also illustrates how Jesus treats women with compassion and respect – people who in his own time typically had little voice or opportunity to speak openly. Jesus gives women voice, not only by speaking with them and listening to them, but also in his miracles and within the stories he tells – Parables. Here Jesus lovingly and gently opens up a conversation by asking for help (offering himself as vulnerable, by refusing to react and protect himself against the barbed words of the woman (he accepts her pain), and by refusing to be side-tracked by her 'religious' questions which were meant to appeal to his ego and nationalism (he keeps her own need as his focus).





MOVING INTO LENT

Following Jesus

Jesus spent much of his ministry, going out of his way to speak to people from various Unreconciled groups who had no voice in his own society. We see him raising up women, children, diseased people, poor people, and the mentally ill, and the gospels sometimes record how he created a space for these voiceless ones to speak and then listened to, and engaged with, what they had to say.

In John 7.53-8.11 (a story which does not seem to have been part of the original gospel) we are told how Jesus is faced with the question of how to treat a woman who has broken religious law and should be stoned to death for adultery. Jesus is surrounded by powerful voices, those who believe they have right on their side, using the woman's plight to trap Jesus. He has to be very careful about what he might say. What is interesting is that Jesus doesn't say *anything* immediately, he doesn't pronounce or argue back. When he does speak he talks about another kind of speaking and listening altogether – the voice of conscience, the way we communicate with God. Only those people who have a perfect communication with God, whose conscience is clear and have nothing to put right with God have the right to stone the woman. He turns the matter of communication from public condemnation to spiritual examination: we are all Unreconciled before God and need to repent.

When the loud public voices have been silenced and the accusers have gone, Jesus speaks to the woman and at last we hear *her* voice. She is no longer the passive object of the powerful voices, but given the space to accept the new chance she is given. She has to say it. She also has to listen to Jesus' judgement and accept what it means for her life.

Lent gives us a special time, a breathing space when we have the chance to listen more closely to what God is saying and also to listen to the voice of conscience, our understanding of right action. Are there things we should be putting right in our lives? Are there people we should forgive, feelings we should let go? No matter how hard it seems and how many stones are poised to come down on us, it is possible to find a space to start again, to be given another chance.



Activity

Have a look at news reports of a woman currently condemned to death by stoning for adultery. For example:

www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/news/2010/07/100708_stoning_wt_sl.shtml

Iran has spoken out against the US for hypocrisy following criticism of this incident, since some states in the US also put people to death. What do you make of the various voices being heard in this incident? Can you identify any Jesus-like voices in the controversy?

- Consider the story on page 9 of the woman taken in adultery. What does the episode tell you about Jesus' relationships with the Unreconciled? What does it tell you about human behaviour?
- Find out what happens at your local magistrate's court, or ask a magistrate from your local community to come and talk about the work they do. What kind of voices are heard at court? What kind of listening is involved? Could your church do more to support people whose voices are not heard adequately in your community?

MOVING OUT

Action in the community

Design an event (or, if that's not possible for you, imagine you were designing an event...) that will be welcoming and accessible to everyone in the community regardless of faith or background. It could be a concert, book or poetry readings, a school event, or festival event, or something already in the calendar like a nativity play. Look carefully at the language of the event, what is being said or sung together, what people are being asked to listen to. If you want to do this, see if you can involve your local press or radio etc. How would the language, music or drama of the event invite or prompt people to think about faith and how could the event provide space to allow people to explore faith questions and ideas?



Christ and the Adulteress
by Lucas Cranach

(part of a collection of reproductions
compiled by The Yorck Project)



RESTING ON THE WAY

Theological reflection and prayer

Spend some time in silence thinking about this saying from Mother Teresa:
God speaks in the silence of the heart. Listening is the beginning of prayer.

Prayer

Lord,

*You offer us a gracious speech,
a speech you have written in us
to be spoken to the world.*

*Help us not to twist your words,
not to say what suits us or gloss over
the message of your love,
but speak always of your gift to us,
tell everyone the joy of your good news. Amen*

DECISION TIME

What is going to change?

Now gather up your thoughts and ideas, and with these things in mind, consider these questions:

- **Where is the seed of new life?** What gifts has God given us to build better relationships with those unlike ourselves? How can we understand better those who find relationships difficult?
- **How will we carry it?** What resources will we need to reach out to the Other in our own situation and make the world around us more neighbourly?
- **Where can it be born?** Identify **one** reconciling action we can commit to which will help make the Unreconciled around us feel more included.
- **How can we nurture it?** How can we support that reconciling action and make sure it follows through?
- **What will we hope to see?** What will be changed at the end of this process and what difference should it have made?

Going further

This resource is based on the chapter 'Speaking and Listening' in the book *Unreconciled?* where you can find lots of information, stories, and further ideas you can use for personal study or in a group, including more ideas for activities.

Marshall Rosenberg, *Non-Violent Communication: a language of life*, Puddledancer Press, 2003
Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence*, Granta Books 2008

The Daily Service on Radio 4 from 28th March – 31st March offers more readings and reflections on the theme of Speaking and Listening.

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Photo of *The Unreconciled* (The Cross and broken glass): CTBI / Vicki & Chuck Rogers / Phil Dragash 