

Reading: Luke 18:1-18

Open the meaning of the Scriptures to us in a fresh and exciting way.
In Jesus name we ask it.

The old man rang me with his request. "I would like you to bring me communion on Easter Day." I said okay and got his address and put the phone down. When I got to his place, he began to tell me something of his story. All the time I had to steel myself to listen to this man as I wanted to go home and spend some time with my family. But he talked on and on. He explained he wasn't really an Anglican. "Nobody's perfect," I assured him. He was a Russian Orthodox Christian. He had been put in Stalin's Siberia for many years and had been treated terribly at the hands of the guards. He showed me the marks they had branded into his forearms to identify him and no doubt find him again if he tried to escape. He cried buckets. In the end he thanked me. Nobody has listened to me for many years he said. I just go on holding it in. "Nobody has listened to me for years." I wonder how many can say that with conviction in our community. Many, I believe. To really listen to another human, takes patience. It takes courage and it is a wonderful gift to another human being. A listener steps inside our situation, walks in our shoes, listens to what it is like for us in the here and now. A listener does not give some theory of how we ought to be.

We have in our Gospel today an example of very poor listening. There is a judge who neither fears humans nor God and he can't be bothered listening to a widow's pleas for mercy. In fact, she has to wear him down with her nagging. English translations use the phrase persistence, but the Greek really means to give a black eye. It was only the threat of a black eye that got him to finally listen.

Sometimes we mistakenly think in this parable God is the judge but the God we worship is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. I think Jesus told this

parable to teach us to listen. The frustration we have with the judge we don't need to have with God. God is more ready to listen than we are to speak.

Listening is a dying art form in our community.

A wise person wrote. "If a hundred people offer me advice, I have one hundred conflicting solutions to my problem. If one person listens, I am set free to find the one solution that is my own." I am set free. To be really listened to by another human being is a liberating experience.

Sometimes good listening can be a matter of life and death. The story is told of the officer in the trenches. The order he gives is: "We're going to advance, bring reinforcements." By the time the order got to the troops it had become. "We're going to a dance, bring two and fourpence."

I believe we need to learn again what it means to listen to one another and what it means to listen to God.

Nowhere is listening more important than in marriage.

The husband was convinced his wife had gone deaf and could no longer listen to him. Try this experiment the doctor said to him. Stand at the door about 5 metres away and ask a simple question like "What are we having for tea dear?" If there is no answer move in a little closer each time until you are right beside her. So, the man went home with this newfound skill to discover if his wife was going deaf. He went to the door and asked, "What's for tea dear?" No answer. So, he went three metres away from her. Again, he asked, "What's for tea dear?" Again, no answer. This time he went right up to her. "What's for tea dear?" This time she answered: "For goodness sake, I've told you three times already. Mince. Are you deaf?"

In 'The Complete Idiot's Guide to the Perfect Marriage', it is written that you can make your spouse feel good by showing that you are really listening. The

best way to do this is to get in the habit of rephrasing what they say to you. This simple action will bring you closer together.

So often in conversation we aren't really listening. We are just pausing while we think about what we are saying next.

Henri Nouwen, my favourite spiritual writer, wrote: "Somewhere we know that without silence words lose their meaning, that without listening speaking no longer heals, and that without distance closeness cannot cure."

What's true of communication with each other is even more true of communication with God. Do we really allow God the time and space to talk to us? Are we comfortable enough with the silence of our own hearts to allow God to speak to us? Or has praying become like a long shopping list of requests? Do we think that if we just somehow nag at God eventually, we will get our own way?

Has the busyness of everyday life made listening to God an impossible task?

St Anthony was walking through the forest one day. He came upon a man chopping wood. For a while he watched. It became pretty clear that the man was finding it really hard going. So, the saint got alongside him. "Why don't you take a break and I will sharpen your axe for you." "I'm too busy," the man said, "to stop and sharpen my axe."

Whatever we do, we can become like that woodcutter. We have lost our cutting edge, but we are far too busy to stop and spend time with the source of all life who can renew, refresh and hone us - namely God.

A village had to farewell one whom most thought was the village idiot. But at the funeral more and more people paid tribute to how he had been the friend and the support they had all needed over hard times. In the end they wrote this tribute on his tomb stone.

*“His thoughts were slow,
his words where few,
and never formed to glisten
but he was a joy to all his friends
you should have heard him listen.”*