

Holy Listening (Matthew 18. 15-20)

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The church is a body and not a collection of individuals. As a body, we are called to be a sacrament of God's new creation, a sign of God's reconciling love, which means that our life together must witness to God's own Trinitarian life. This is a life characterised by unity in diversity – oneness constituted by love of what remains irreducibly other. Chapter 18 of Matthew's gospel sets out a string of Jesus' teachings about the implications of this vocation – including not causing others to stumble, not despising the 'little ones', seeking out those who 'sin against you' for the purpose of reconciliation and the injunction to forgive 'seventy times seven'. And all of this seems to me full of promise and also fraught with danger and the likelihood of abuse.

The promise is in recognising that we are not isolated individuals, each on a private journey to salvation or self-realisation. 'No man is an island', as John Donne famously put it. My wholeness is bound up with your wholeness and life. For me, there has been deep liberation in recognising that we are members of a shared humanity, a shared creation. In the humility of that realisation (becoming humble, like a little child, as Jesus puts it) we can let go of huge burdens of self-expectation and the need to 'make it'. We learn to take our place in a bigger whole, recognising our need of each other and contributing our part – persons in community.

The danger is when these teachings are used to justify an oppressive and immature conformity, individuals sacrificed for the sake of some supposed greater good of unruffled, complacent collective life. Those who have suffered abuse from priests and other church workers have been told they need to forgive 'seventy times

seven', rather than insist on being heard; those who've come to a costly and difficult discernment about the end of a marriage or about their sexuality are too often treated as 'offenders' and shunned because other members of the church hold pre-determined views about what can possibly be true or of God. And it's all too easy for those who refuse to take responsibility for their own reactions and projections to complain of others that they 'have caused them to stumble'.

So – being the church, being a community of persons in relation – neither simply private, self-sufficient individuals, nor those at the mercy of oppressive collective requirements to conform – is no easy matter. How are we to go about it?

It seems to me that the essential practice called for is the practice of listening – profound, respectful, attentive, open-hearted, non-threatened, patient listening. It's striking how often the word 'listen' occurs in the passage we've heard tonight, although I admit to being troubled that the 'listening' is apparently all on one side. 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you ... If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector'. Well, our contemporary experience indicates that it is equally 'the church' as a body which needs to be willing to 'listen' to those it has sinned against, and those it is in the process of deeming 'sinners' – for the church is simply the gathering of its members, and we are, all of us, continually in need of conversion to deeper truthfulness through listening to God, to our own lives and to one another.

So this listening each other into deeper integrity and relationship is the vocation of the church as church. It is how we make visible the life of God. But what I want to suggest tonight is that if we learn how to do this, then we also have something of profound significance to communicate to those around us – something that could radically transform the possibilities of our political, our common life.

Because live in a society, we inhabit a political culture, that seemingly cannot risk the vulnerability of real listening. Debate, rather than conversation, dominates our public life – and debate is about winning and losing, listening for weakness and exploiting it, more than it is about listening for understanding and mutual conversion. True listening, the kind of listening that enables us to drop into a deeper relatedness, to risk new understandings and creative action based on our best discernment, requires certain conditions. It requires a hospitable space characterised by solidarity, openness and the suspension of judgement, by curiosity rather than the need to dominate or manipulate or condemn, by respect for the needs and the otherness of the world and other people. And that open, hospitable space is something that our political culture, aided and abetted by the mass media, finds extraordinarily difficult to hold open.

Yet how are the complex realities of our world to be responsibly engaged, if the atmosphere in which they are addressed is bristling with the threat of shame, failure and condemnation? And how might those who live and seek to serve in such an atmosphere be given courage to listen to and deepen their own integrity?

A few weeks ago, there was an extraordinary story in the *Good Weekend* (it was written by my brother, and was about Scott Poynton, a former forestry student of my father's – so I had a particular interest in it!). The story began:

'In November last year, Scott Poynton was on the verge of convincing the owner of the world's biggest palm oil company to clean up his environmentally catastrophic business. Poynton, an Australian raised on the hard-scrabble outskirts of Melbourne [and director of The Forest Trust], thought Kuok Khoon Hong, the chief of palm oil giant Wilmar, should agree to stop his company and its suppliers from cutting down tropical forests for land to produce his ubiquitous product. But other, more belligerent industry players disagreed, and the man who controls 45 per cent of the global trade was pulling back, nervous about going it alone.

'Poynton, who had been negotiating with Wilmar for months, pleaded with Kuok in a long email, reminding him of the business case for change. But then he deployed the biggest weapon in his armoury. He sent the Singaporean tycoon a cartoon by Michael Leunig.

"At the top of the tallest building in the world sat the saddest man in the world," the poem-cartoon begins. The final panel depicts a shabby angel, shining white and smiling in the mud at the bottom of the deepest pit of the lonely man's heart. "I sent this to the chairman of Wilmar, and I said, 'I believe you have an angel in your heart that's ready for change, and I saw that angel, and now you're denying it. So listen to it. And do this thing,' " Poynton recalls.

Two days later, Kuok wrote back.

"'We're doing it', he said."¹

I cannot think of a better illustration of the teaching of Jesus: 'If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one'. Scott Poynton regained Kuok into fellowship with the whole by listening to him, and helping him to listen to what was deepest in himself. Poynton is not a Christian – he says 'organised religion is just as likely to choke off spirituality and the connection to nature as foster it'. But he lives and acts out of a profound knowledge of our mutual belonging and the possibility of listening each other into deeper integrity.

At one level, the magnitude of the forces arrayed against real listening, real relationship and radically creative action seem overwhelming. When we think of our own lives in the public service, in the church, in parliament, in school staff rooms, hospitals and businesses, we (I) can feel vanquished by endemic and falsifying management speak, by cynicism and despair, by the seeming impossibility of creating

¹ Michael Bachelard, 'Stopping the Chainsaws', <http://www.smh.com.au/environment/stopping-the-chainsaws-20140324-35cg9.html#ixzz3BkzMjUaX> (accessed 29 August 2014).

spaces where real truth can be spoken and received, the ground of truly authentic and courageous action reached. But here is a story of someone (not a Christian) who is truly being the church, and who is calling others into their own integrity and into the fullness of their belonging to the whole. 'Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in among them.' To be gathered in Jesus' name is to be together in the presence of God's hospitable, reconciling, pain-bearing truth – responsive to that truth, and allowing it to enliven our listening of one another and our listening for the well-being of the whole creation. It is to accept our vocation to participate in, to give ourselves for the creation of the space where true healing and transformation becomes possible. May God help us be the church our world needs us to be.