

How good is your hearing? We talk about listening and hearing. We might be familiar with the kind of argument that goes: “yes but you’re not listening to me”, or the person who nods in all the right places, but isn’t listening at all. We might ask ourselves how much we really listen when someone speaks to us.

Hearing and listening come up a lot in Bible. Earlier in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says that whoever hears His words and acts on them, is like someone who builds their house on a good solid foundation, so perhaps listening is hearing and then acting upon it.

Today’s reading from Matthew is something we’ve probably all heard before a bit like a recipe for how to tell somebody they’re wrong; a holy way to have a go at someone. I have heard it spoken of in those ways before.

It’s always helpful with a Bible passage to try to see the bigger picture, and this one comes in between the story of the lost sheep, and Jesus telling Peter to forgive seventy times seven times. The story of the lost sheep is one where a shepherd finds there are ninety-nine in the fold, and of a flock of a hundred, there is one missing, and it ends with Jesus saying, as the lesson from the story, “It is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost” And of course Jesus sums up our relationship with each other, that we’re called to, as, to love our neighbour as ourselves.

So, to go to the reading: Jesus says what we should do if someone in the church sins against us, someone from our family, our brother, or our sister in God’s family.

It’s worth noticing that it’s if someone sins against us, not if we see something, we think needs putting right, so maybe the first lesson is to mind our own business. And then, when we look at other things Jesus has already said to His disciples, to think about whether our offence is really that important, our sense of being offended against, and what Jesus says about considering that we might have a plank in our own eye while we’re worrying about a speck in someone else’s. Maybe that thing that we’re cross about, if we just take a breath, take a thought, isn’t worth getting that hot under the collar about.

So the first step in this is for the two people to go alone privately and talk about their differences, and sometimes that’s how friendships grow, or even begin: to go to someone privately and say “I’m sorry, but what you said, what you did, it really hurt me” - it begins a vulnerability and an openness that can grow into a great friendship. So Jesus says, well if that person listens, that’s wonderful, but we’ve also got to ask ourselves perhaps, if we’re the other way around, if we’re the one who’s been taken aside, how much do we really listen when someone complains to us? We are usually really good at finding excuses for ourselves. Perhaps to love our neighbour as ourselves is to find an excuse for our neighbour as we would for ourselves.

The next step that Jesus says, if things don’t go well to start with, take a couple of others with you. This isn’t ganging up on the person we’re cross with, this is taking a couple of referees, and perhaps when they listen they’ll say, “you know what, you really have got the wrong end of the stick, I’m sure we can sort this out”.

And then there's this, it sounds quite antiquated, and I've seen it in films, "take it to the whole church", so you have your argument out in front of the whole church. And Jesus says, if this doesn't work, and the person still won't say sorry, or take back what they've done, treat them as a Gentile and a tax collector, which sounds pretty awful, until we think of Jesus' reputation at the time - "He spends His time with Gentiles and tax collectors", and He called His disciples to show God's merciful love to Gentiles and tax collectors, with love and kindness.

The last verses of today's reading are quite similar to ones from a few weeks ago, and they seem to give Jesus' followers absolute authority: "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven", and perhaps even to have requests granted by God, as long as we ask for them in Jesus' name.

It's hard to say what Jesus meant by this, because, I don't know about you, but my experience is that just because I ask in Jesus' name, it doesn't mean it will get done.

The experience of history is that the idea of the church having absolute power has never gone well, and the idea of the church proclaiming certain things in God's name, hasn't gone well, and when two or three people have sat together and become convinced that they have a special understanding of God, that has not gone well, and a group hounding someone out over a disagreement - none of that speaks of God's love for God's world.

People say we seem to be living in angry times, we're going around with short fuses, ready to burst. There's not just road rage, these days there's Covid rage, mask rage. These are certainly stressful times, and painful times, with the virus and all its effects on our lives, including bereavement. There's so much uncertainty, about our health, about our livelihood, about our nationality and our place in the world, and, what will happen here in Kent as, in the news the looming effects of Brexit have come back to the forefront?

A few chapters later from this reading, Jesus sums up the teaching of God in two phrases which we're very familiar with: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" and "Love you neighbour as yourself"

Perhaps a large part of what we can learn from this reading is the importance of listening. Maybe it even helps to put the word listen where love is: "Listen to the Lord your God with all your heart, listen with all your soul, listen with all your mind", and "Listen to your neighbour as you listen to yourself", and perhaps the more we listen, to God and to our neighbour, the more we learn to love, and so as we learn to love we may begin to see what is happening on earth, coming to look more like what happens in heaven.