

Sunday 7 July - Sixth Sunday after Trinity

Sermon by Anne-Marie Renshaw

An audio recording of the sermon will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)

Take a moment just to be quiet and to listen. Notice what you hear: probably things that are usually in the background without you really noticing them. We are all quite good at tuning out background noise so we can concentrate on what we want to listen to. If you are wearing a hearing aid, you may find it amplifies things you don't want to listen to as well as things you want to hear. You may sometimes have found yourself listening to someone with one ear while trying to listen with the other ear to the TV or the radio or a conversation someone else is having that sounds much more interesting. And we have probably all had the experience of talking to someone who quite clearly isn't listening. We've probably all been on the other side of that too, thinking about something else and not listening at all to what someone is trying to say to us.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus is speaking in the synagogue in his home town. To begin with, people are listening to him, but then they start to take offence. They are hearing what he is saying, but they are not really interested in listening to his teaching. They think they already know who he is and they think he isn't anyone worth listening to, so they don't bother, even though they have already noticed he has a wisdom and power that they were not expecting. Jesus is in the synagogue, he is speaking to people who believe in God, who have chosen to go and worship God, so you might think they would be open to listening to what God is saying to them through Jesus, but no. Jesus finds himself amazed at their lack of belief and their unwillingness to listen to what God is saying and notice what God is doing among them.

The disciples will find a similar problem when Jesus sends them out in pairs. Jesus warns them that not everyone will listen to what they have to say. They are sent out into villages in a Jewish area, places where people are already supposed to believe in God, and they are told to call people to turn back to God. They are given authority to heal the sick and cast out demons just as Jesus has been doing, but they still encounter resistance from people who simply aren't prepared to give them the time of day. There are places where they are not made welcome and no one wants to listen.

We don't always find it easy to listen either. If we find it hard to listen properly to one another, how much harder is it to listen to God? It isn't always obvious when God is speaking to us. We don't always know for sure whether what we are hearing really is from God. There are so many other things that can distract us and stop us thinking about what God might want to say to us. Yesterday, some of us spent the morning at Easthorpe church focusing on listening for what God might have to say to us. We used some verses from the Bible and spent some time just reading them through, thinking about them prayerfully and giving God the opportunity to speak to us through them. We don't always find such things easy.

And if we in the church don't find it easy to listen to God, how much harder is it for people who don't go to church? There are people who think of themselves as Christians, they might tick that box on a hospital form, they may have been baptized when they were young, they might have been married in church, they might even come to church at Christmas, but it doesn't occur to them that God might actually have anything to say to them or that they ought to be trying to listen to God in their everyday lives. Or there are other people who describe themselves as being "spiritual" but wouldn't ever think of going to a church to be spiritual with other people. We may find, if we try to talk to others about what we believe, that, like the people in the synagogue, they think they already know who Jesus is and they are not interested in listening to what we have to say.

Does that mean we should give up and not try to talk about our faith? Well, I don't think that is really an option for Christians. The last thing the risen Jesus commands his disciples to do before he returns to his Father is to go and preach the gospel to the ends of the earth. Judging by what Luke writes about in the Acts of the Apostles, they didn't do a bad job. It is up to us to continue that work in our own day. It's hard work. Lots of people don't want to listen. We aren't always sure what to say.

And that's why, before we start, we need to make sure we are listening to God ourselves. Why should anyone listen to us talking about God if we are not listening for what God might have to say to us first? This is why we all need to make time somewhere in each week to stop and listen. We might do that when we come together to pray on a Sunday or when we meet with others in a Bible study group. We might have a quiet time each day when we spend time reading the Bible and praying on our own. We might find it

easiest to listen to God while walking the dog or tending the garden. But we all need to make space in our lives to listen. I know we all get busy and there are many competing demands on our time. But for Christians, making space for God in our lives needs to be a top priority. If we are not listening, we might miss what God is saying to us.

You might be worried that God won't have anything to say to you. You might have tried listening to God before and found you couldn't really hear anything. God speaks to people in many different ways. Sometimes God speaks to us through other people and what they say to us. Sometimes we are reading a passage from the Bible, perhaps one we have read many times before, when something jumps out of the page and strikes us anew. Sometimes we feel a deep sense of peace or an urge that we need to do something in particular. When we pray, God always listens and when we listen, God will speak, although it may take us a while to hear. The prophet Elijah had to learn to listen for God in the sound of sheer silence. Another prophet, Habakkuk, went up into the watchtower and declared he wouldn't be coming down until he got an answer to his question from God. Jonah heard what God said, but didn't like the sound of his mission, so decided to pretend he hadn't heard and go somewhere different instead. That's always a risk: if we invite God to speak to us, we might find God saying something we don't want to hear.

Throughout the gospels we find people who do listen to what Jesus says and people who don't. We find some who don't want their preconceived ideas and their prejudices to be challenged, who don't want to have to change the way they think about others and about God. We find some who have a fixed idea in their head of what the Messiah should be like and who cannot accept Jesus because he is so different from who they had thought he would be. And we find others who are willing to give up all that they have to follow him. There is an occasion when Jesus offers some particularly difficult teaching and a lot of people decide to stop following him. He asks the disciples if they too want to leave. "To whom can we go?" they reply. "You have the words of eternal life." May we have ears to hear his words and the courage to help others hear them too.

We regret the prayers are not available this week.