

Matthew 13 v1-9 and 18-23

Romans 8 v1-11

Tuning-in to God

I have spent much of this last few weeks listening.

In the last week I've spent a few concentrated days fulfilling a long-standing commitment to take an annual personal retreat. I have sat in warm, dry surroundings and listened to the sound of rain on a flat roof, and then the creak the next day as the sun warms and dries the wooden construction - listening to the same building respond to the changes in the weather. I've also tried to listen to what God is saying in and to my life, and my ministry; why it is I am with you for the next few months, and what that might mean for you, and me; how might it grow us? This sort of spiritual listening is not just something to do one week a year, but something that I try to do all the time, it's just easier to reflect on the big picture when you take a concentrated run at it!

In the last few weeks, I've also been trying to listen to what God has done, and is doing, through you. You as individuals, and you as a church, a community working together to extend his Kingdom on earth. It is helping me to discover who you are, what it is that makes you tick and gives you life and growth, and where there may perhaps be stuff that is making life difficult, and growth limited. It is about listening as a third party observer to

what God is doing through the pattern of your lives, and it too is an ongoing process.

Much of all this listening is about tuning in to what God is telling us through the practicalities and problems of our everyday lives, the typical issues that we face.

Tuning in to what God is saying can be tough, not least because the noise of the many things that have calls on our time and energy constantly try to crowd him out. We have to remember we're not using a nice modern DAB radio, giving us crystal clear reception at the press of a button. It's a bit more like good old analogue which requires much twiddling to get a clear reception, especially if we're on longwave trying to tune in to the cricket commentary! Sometimes, as with that image, God uses the very ordinary things with which we interact regularly, to speak to us... if only we're tuned in.

In our Gospel today, Jesus is using ordinary, every day imagery with which his listeners would have been very familiar, to explain to them the part they are called to play in the Kingdom of God. Unlike us, they were used to the imagery of someone walking a field, sowing the seed corn by hand. They'd have known that whilst the field would have been roughly ploughed and prepared, such a distribution method meant that some seed would fall prey to the birds, shrivel among the rocks, or be shaded out by weeds, rather than grow to productivity. But knowing something is true is one thing, but

understanding that it might have spiritual significance is another, which is why Jesus said, 'the one having ears, let them hear'. Were they really listening, had they really tuned in to what Jesus was saying about their specific role in the kingdom of God?

Hearing spiritually is related to the concept of deep listening. Deep listening is the idea that we listen with compassion, hearing not just what is said, but how it is said; recognising what needs to be said, and knowing how it might best be expressed to be heard. We listen to understand and we listen with intention, specifically the intention to act appropriately based on what we have heard. In other words, to open one's ears is to open one's heart, to the person speaking and to God, at one and the same time. Jesus the teacher, is ending the parable by telling the crowd to listen not only to understand, but also to act on the teaching, to obey, and in this particular case by obeying, participate in the manifestation of God's kingdom on the earth.

As Christians, we can do this multi-tasking mode of listening, because we have the power of God working in us, the Holy Spirit. It is this that Paul is referring to in the passage from Romans this morning, when he compares the focus of those who are concerned purely with matters of the 'flesh' and 'sin' with those whose focus is matters of the 'spirit'. Through God's grace, we are gifted this ability to discern and focus on God's concern for the world and his desire that we might all

know life and peace, but it requires continual practice on our part to stay tuned to God's frequency.

The Holy Spirit runs on a frequency that can be counter cultural and prophetic, to the life of the church, and/or to the way the world hears itself. As Christians we need to listen to each other's joys and pains, fears, aspirations, and experiences - as individuals and corporately as a church. We need to do so with compassion and honesty, and with ears tuned to what God is saying to us, so that we can know whether, and if so how, we can contribute positively with guidance, healing or hope. It might be a personal contribution to the problems being faced by particular members of the fellowship, or it might be wisdom that helps us work out the direction and focus of mission in this church. It may require us to do something extra. It may actually need us to do less of something. By doing this spiritual listening, our journey with God becomes a life-giving adventure to extend his kingdom, reaching out to others in ways in which they will recognise as inspired by our love of Jesus, and his love of them.

Often when God is trying to speak directly to us about our own lives, he will do so through what we might describe as intuition. We have to respond positively for anything creative to come of what might be called a 'holy hunch'. Sometimes we may need to create some space, some silence even, to listen prayerfully to our own experiences, or we may need to be patient wait for

the pieces of a jigsaw to fit together as we discern the way forward in a complex situation. But I can also give testimony to the fact that it can be a moment's sudden realisation that something spiritually significant has just been either said or done, and it's in the moving forward with that promise that our lives are changed by God.

My listening here at St. Mary's so far has suggested several things, but I'm not going to share all of them with you this morning. There is a need to be ready to listen corporately, and honestly, in the months after the new vicar arrives, to where and how God wants his kingdom extended in Eversley, in Derby Green and further afield – and to how that dynamic is going to work. But another thing that has struck me, is that for some people, consciously making space for some personal holy listening to God could be helpful. I'm no expert, but I'd be happy to use **this** book that's been helping me, to facilitate others to do that too, so do chat to me later, or when I'm back off holiday, if that's the case, and we may be able to create some plans for the autumn.

The law that brings life, is ruled by the compassion and love of God, and the mechanism for making that compassion and love available both to ourselves and to others, is our belief in the work of the Holy Spirit. Our task is to tune in to what it is saying to us, a process that requires us to be open-minded to this grace-filled gift in the ordinary occurrences of our life, and open-

hearted to the needs of others. So, anyone with ears,
let them hear.