

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Two old friends who hadn't see each other for ages were walking down the street. Just a minute said one, I hear something and bending down he turned over a large paving stone to liberate a cricket which was chirping endlessly. The other said, 'well that's amazing, of all the people in the street hurrying home from work, you alone can hear the cricket above all the traffic'. My friend said the first, I learned a long time ago in life that people hear only what they want to hear. Watch what happens when I drop a silver half dollar on the pavement. He did so and everyone, even those further away, stopped to look.

The Psalm today tells us that 'God does not ask for sacrifice and offerings but an open ear'. We could muffle our ears to his teaching if it's not to our liking. This also applies to our dealings with people. We could shut out certain people from our lives whose views on specific topics are not in line with our own. That's what we mean by 'cancel culture'. In order to forge closer bonds with those we claim to love, we need an open ear and a listening heart. But good communication also involves not just listening but also being listened to. It's two-way traffic.

Listening with the heart is part and parcel of Christ's command to love one another. Mere head to head talk is sometimes described as 'listening with apathy'. Heart to heart talk is 'listening with empathy'. For instance a man admits to being dejected and guilty about his excessive drinking. The person who listens to him with apathy asks: "How many pints do you drink each day"? On being told, he replies: 'You're drinking too much; you should do something about it. The troubled drinker is well aware of this already. The listener's lack of empathy means the dejected man ends more miserable than ever.

But when a person listens with empathy to the same person's story, he might respond: "From what you're telling me I can get

a sense of how isolated and hopeless you must be feeling". This opening response is far more likely to lead to a positive outcome.

The desire to listen with understanding is a necessary element of Christian love. Marriages often stand or fall on the strength of it. You give yourself in love to another person if you take on board what they're saying or perhaps not saying by listening compassionately and non-judgementally to them. In today's Gospel it says that Jesus came to 'take away the sins of the world'. If we're poor listeners might we ask Him for forgiveness and healing in that area of our lives?

What keeps us from listening? When we're so focussed on our own point of view, we may not be in the right frame of mind to listen with empathy. Pope Francis emphasises this in his vision for a synodal catholic church. He says that everyone should have a voice within the Christian community.

Let us listen again to God's Word, 'You do not ask for sacrifice and offerings but an open ear'. Open our ears, Lord, to listen with understanding to those who share their concerns with us and open our hearts to respond to them with love.