

(2A)

A man had been in a public telephone booth for half an hour – this was before mobile mania took over. This man appeared to be very bored and, though he held the receiver to his ear, he made no attempt to speak. At last one of the crowd outside, exasperated with waiting, opened the door and asked him abruptly, "Are you speaking to anybody, or what"? He replied: "yes, I am speaking to my wife".

The Psalm today tells us that God does not ask for sacrifice and offerings but an open ear. We could shut our ears to his teaching if it's not to our liking or if it too challenging. This also applies to our dealings with people. In order to forge closer bonds with those we claim to love, we too need an open ear and a listening heart. But good communication involves not just listening but also being listened to. It's two-way traffic.

Listening with the heart is vital if we want to be better communicators. 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 depressed 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 and compassion will deepen the man's depression, making him more likely to drink again.

But when a person listens with empathy to the 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. So can I be described as an apathetic or an empathetic listener?

The desire to listen with understanding is an essential 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 are 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'. Let us ask the Lord to deliver us from the sin of 'not listening' with empathy or just hearing the sound of our own voice.

What keeps us from listening? If we're so focussed on our own concerns we may not be in the right frame of mind for listening dispassionately to those who need us and so fail to love them as we should.

We hear in today's psalm: "You do not ask for sacrifice and offerings but an open ear. Open our ears, Lord, to hear your word and the cries of our brothers and sisters in need and open our hearts to respond to them with love."