

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 some distance away, stopped to look.

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. This also applies to our dealings with people. We could shut our ears to the views of certain people we don't see eye to eye with on the same issues. 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 paramount if we want to be better communicators and indeed better lovers. 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 and compassion will deepen the man's misery, making him more likely to drink again.

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. So how do I fare in this department?

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 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'. If we're poor listeners, let us ask the Lord to take away that sin from us.

What keeps us from listening? When we're so focussed on our own concerns or our own point of view, we may not be in the right frame of mind to lend a listening ear to those who need us the most or who need to hear what we're saying the most and so fail to love them as we should.

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 hear your word and the cries of our brothers and sisters in need and open our hearts to respond to them with love.