

MORNING SERVICE

Sunday 16 August 2009, Kilcalmonell, linked with Killean and Kilchenzie

11th Sunday after Pentecost

preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff

hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)

Welcome & Intimations

Opening Hymn : 'Now thank we all our God' (CH 182)

Children's Talk

Children's Hymn : 'Lord, I pray' (CH 541)

Prayer & Lord's Prayer

Blessed are you, O God,
for the words that speak to our hearts,
for your Word becoming our flesh and bones.
Blessed are you, O God,
for miracles that happen among us,
although we do not always notice.
Blessed are you, O God,
for the vision of prophets and fishermen,
the vision that liberates and empowers us.
And forgive us, O God,
when we speak before we have listened,
when we don't dare to believe in miracles,
when we refuse to follow visions.

And now as Jesus taught us, we pray:
Our Father...
...Amen.

Readings : Isaiah 35:1-10 & Mark 7:31-37 (*Good News Bible*)¹

Hymn : 'The voice of God goes out' (CH 283)

Sermon

Our daughter did not talk before she was a few months into her third year. The doctor was getting a bit nervous about it and we were told to start doing exercises with hear. Actually, we were not too worried. She had two brothers who were talking all day, apart from their parents. What she did was just listen to each and everyone and take it all in.

Then, very soon after, she said her first word, and another two days later. In a week the sentences began to come, then the paragraphs and pretty soon whole pages. After

¹ Following the Dutch *Oecumenisch leesrooster*.

two months we heard ourselves say, 'Can't you please stop talking for fifteen minutes?' In secondary school she was definitely the most verbal pupil in all classes. And still today she talks in pages. She even makes a living out of that.

Two years of careful listening had become a never-ending source of spoken language.

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On the eve of destruction, shortly before the people of Israel are going to be brought into exile to Babylon, Isaiah speaks of things unheard, unseen and unbelievable. *The wilderness will flower, sing and shout; the blind will see, the deaf hear and the lame leap; the burning sand will be a lake of fresh water, and a straight road will lead the people back to Jerusalem.* The world as they are about to face it, with all its harsh realism of exile and oppression, will be turned upside down again.

Now, prophecies like these are beautiful. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Visions only make sense if they can be realized, one way or another, at least to some extent. However, even if realization still has to wait for many years, visions are true if they can keep the people motivated to work towards that realization, even if they themselves are unlikely to see it happen.

This vision of Isaiah comes from the prophet we usually call 'the first Isaiah'. He lived around 740 BCE when the Assyrians were approaching the north of Israel with its capital Samaria. In 722 BCE Samaria would be captured and destroyed and the people would face exile. One and a half century later, in 586 BCE the remaining part with Jerusalem as centre was also destroyed and the people brought to Babel as exiles. Very much aware of the approaching end of Israel's independence, Isaiah had this vision of return.

Some two hundred years later the prophet we know as 'the second Isaiah' took this old vision up again. *Comfort ye, my people... Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem... Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God...* Only in the days of this second Isaiah the original vision was about to materialize. In 538 BCE the Persian king Cyrus allowed the people to return to Jerusalem. The original vision was true because it carried the exiled people through two hundred years, but also because eventually it became reality.²

Mind: the reality of the vision is not in an emphasis on revenge on Israel's enemies, but in true faith in the people's capabilities to rebuild the land that was laid waste. Not the judgement of the nations, but the blessing of the people makes the heart of Isaiah's prophecy.

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² Isa. 1-35 is usually attributed to the prophet Isaiah, and 36-39 are considered to be an addition (in prose) to this. Isa. 40-55 is supposed to come from 'the second', or Deutero-Isaiah, while Isa. 56-66 is either seen as the work of 'the third', or Trito-Isaiah, who should have lived shortly after the return to Jerusalem, or as a collection of prophecies from various times.

Let me draw a comparison – with some risk of being accused of political incorrectness, or worse.

Since the mid 19th century there has been a call for Scottish independence, and it has seen a long and winding history.³ It's not my personal history, since I am living here as *a stranger and a sojourner*.⁴ But if this call for independence has to be taken as a vision for the people of Scotland, it should foster the people's confidence and capabilities to make Scotland a good place for all – a fully positive approach. If it would be about fighting the union or being anti-English, it would cease to be a vision.

A vision is true as long as it brings out the best in people and has at least the potential to unite people – and only then it will sustain. Realization of a vision may have to wait, but as long as the hope in it is true, it can last long. And perhaps a strong vision can already be found in the Declaration of Arbroath, AD 1320,⁵ where it says that in Scotland *there is neither emphasis on nor distinction between Jew or Greek, Scot or English*.⁶

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Now the question is: how do we cope with visions? How do we cope with *blind* who see, *deaf* who hear and *lame* who leap? Jesus heals a deaf man. To us it can be a very strange story. We tend to leave all healing in the hands of medical professionals. But is that all we can see and hear about healing? Curing diseases?

To hear is a physical thing. You need properly working ears. But it is just as much a mental process. The chaos of sounds entering our ears need constant sorting. And as far as language is concerned there is the point of understanding what someone says. But even beyond physical and mental processes there is more to say about hearing. We may hear somebody perfectly well, but are we really listening? That is more a matter of the heart than of the mind. And finally, all these processes interfere with each other. Hearing is pretty complicated.

Jesus heals the man. First he does something pretty physical: touching and spitting. Then it looks as if he tries to get through to the man's mind: he groans and speaks. And he succeeds: ears and mouth are opened, and the man can hear and speak.

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Healing stories continue to leave us behind in a state of puzzlement. Do we have to

³ Have a look at [Wikipedia](#).

⁴ Hebr. 11:13.

⁵ See [Wikipedia](#).

⁶ As all medieval official documents written in Latin: *cum non sit pondus nec distincio Judei et Greci, Scoti aut Anglici* – which clearly bears a reference to Paul's letter to the Galatians: *there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus* (Gal. 3:28).

believe in magic? Is this proof of Jesus' divine nature? I am not going to answer that. Instead I would look for a message we can take in from this story about the deaf man who can suddenly hear and speak.

About the physical side of deafness we have become pretty competent. There is a lot we can do with hearing aids, operations or other technology. Also about the mental part we have learned a lot. We can train ourselves in better hearing or better listening, we can learn other languages.

But the most difficult part is still: our heart. What do we *want* to hear, or not? And why is that? What are we *able* to perceive, or why can't we? But this is exactly the level on which we can or cannot connect to true visions. It is the best part of hearing.

If we want to be healed and able to hear visions, we need to be touched by others, almost physically. Hands-on communicational skills are the first step. Then we need to really listen to the other person's words, trying to hear God's Word in and through it. That is the point where we suddenly think, 'That's true!' or 'Now I see!' That is the moment where we can start to see the bigger picture, a way forward, a vision that binds us together. To be honest, if that happens it really *is* a miracle.

There is one more aspect to hearing: silence. In a world that is so totally filled with noise, human, mechanical or electronic, silence is a gift from God. It enables us to listen to our heart. Unfortunately that is something we have to learn again. Initially silence can even be scary. But silence really is needed to listen well.

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So, for our daughter it is a good, although difficult, exercise to stop talking sometimes. In her work as Technical Helpdesk Operator she really has to listen carefully, and she is doing fine on that.

We are asked to listen honestly to others. Is their vision a good one? If we do not think it is, then why is that? Are we open and honest? And if we are convinced of our vision, then why can we not convince others? Did we really hear what they said?

I wish you all a few good weeks to become each others' hearing aids.

Amen.

Hymn : 'When out of poverty is born' (CH 291)

Offering brought forward

Prayer of Intercession

God who opens our ears to hear,
be with us if we don't want to listen,
go with us if we try to hear the faint voices

of the little ones who are forgotten,
touch us so we will listen.

God who opens our mouths to speak,
be with us if we remain silent despite screaming injustice,
go with us if we are afraid to speak,
touch us so we know when to speak.

God of miracles,
grant us to see your miracles,
to work on them,
to proclaim them to your people.

God of all people,
make us find, maintain and realize
the visions that really serve your people,
empowering, liberating, making human.

In silence we remember those we know
who need us to remember them.
(silence)

So we pray,
through Jesus Christ,
healer of ears and tongues,
teacher of God's Word.
Amen.

Closing Hymn : 'You shall go out with joy' (CH 804)

Blessing