

RETREAT AT AMPLEFORTH: TWO

I would like to suggest that today be a time when we share the experience of listening to the Word of God (and hearing it). We need to draw a distinction between this theme, and the theme of *study* which has been our concern for so long. Study is necessary, but it is not the heart of the matter. It is only a means, so that, when we have removed all the misapprehensions, distortions, impoverishments, and misunderstandings which stand between us and the word of God, we can truly and simply listen to it, hear it with our hearts.

If we can think of some analogy for the situation we are in, perhaps it will help.

We've all been in practical situations where a misunderstanding has become chronic; someone is about to set off on a useless journey, and we can't stop them because there's no phone; they're beyond our reach. A disaster has struck at home, and we forgot to ask where someone went for a fortnight's holiday. If only we had communicated more clearly, more wisely! Now think of these petty frustrations on the big screen: think of someone, a modern person, whose whole life is in real difficulties because of the absence of help. (If you find this hard you're probably in the wrong place today.) Find the person who most embodies this situation for you. If you're using imagination, lay on the hardship as thick as you like: imagine an autistic person, who cannot be reached, for all the care and compassion that has been tried. Imagine someone, Madame Butterfly, who is waiting with devotion for one who will not, cannot return. Think of an alienated youngster, trusting no-one, except the kind of abusive company that gathers around such people. Find someone in your own mind who is far from the land, a lost sheep. Maybe there is someone in your own life, whom *you* can no longer reach, the person you wrote off, or who severed relations with you very painfully. The only qualification is that the lines have been cut, there is no possible contact in place.

This is the situation which we must understand between humanity and God. The story of the book of Exodus dramatizes this to perfection, and it is the archetypal Biblical drama, against which all subsequent religious experience can be recognized and understood. Exodus is the meaning of the celebration of the Passover, for every Jew, every year: and the Passover creates the cradle for the Paschal mystery, and therefore the Eucharist.

Exodus 3: 1-15

Your chosen image of isolation must now come into play. How can you reach this person, lead this person out of isolation into communion - remembering that, for us, communion means the Eucharist? An ordained minister in the Catholic Church has the task of leading people to the Eucharist, and Christ has told us clearly that the most important people are those who are furthest away from communion.

You are to be a minister of the Word. This, as we have learnt, is far from being the simple business supposed by the fundamentalist, who sets out armed with nothing but "the plain truth of the Gospel". The Word is indeed the matter of our communication: but it is encrusted with age, it is in several other languages and embedded in cultures far from our own. Grabbing a translation like the Jerusalem Bible and pretending the Bible was composed in Mansfield last year won't help. We need to enlarge our minds and hearts, until the experience of Moses in the thirteenth century BC can speak to us thirty-three hundred years on. God is the same God. The hearers do not think they are the same. Across this gulf we have to reach, and we start where all Christian effort begins - with ourselves. Holiness for an evangelist begins with hearing the Word deeply and personally, like everyone else; but like Moses, I have to learn how to hear *not*

only for myself, but for the others. Hearing the word for you involves organically the fact that it is not going to stay between your ears, but to come out of your mouth and into the ears of others.

So your duty of listening has to be taken particularly seriously: your ears are the ears of those who soon will hear you speak. Insofar as you have heard correctly, they might be led to the truth. This does not mean that they *will* accept it; other things will come into play to determine the next stage. But your good work (as God reminds Ezekiel) will be the saving of your life.

Insofar as you have heard the word imperfectly, clouding it with your prejudices, causing it to accrue yet more confusions and misunderstandings, that isolated person, whom you are trying to reach, will be driven further away from communion, and the fault will sadly be yours. In the course we have almost completed, we have tried to train your ears for this sensitive work. I am sure it has often been very arduous for you. But your power to hear the Word is critical for your power to deliver it, and it must become a way of life for you *to be a listener*. Do not accept anything which lets you off this hook. Never say that you have cracked the code of any part of the Gospel, or that you have cracked the code for the person you are trying to help. There is always more to understand, and we have to make our own the words of the psalms which call on God to teach us, to lead us, to fill our mind with his laws, to make us understand his ways. Deutero-Isaiah, writing at his deepest, is a voice before which we have to be silent. Yet he writes in the third song of the servant (50:3ff):

The Lord has given me a disciple's tongue
for me to know how to give a word of comfort to the weary.
Morning by morning, he makes my ear alert,
to listen like a disciple.
The Lord has opened my ear,
and I have not resisted,
I have not turned away.
I have offered my back to those who struck me,
My cheeks to those who plucked my beard,
I have not turned my face away
from insult and spitting.
The Lord comes to my help:
that is why insult has not touched me.
This is why I have set my face like flint
and know that I shall not be put to shame.
My vindicator is at hand: who brings a case against me?
Look: the Lord is coming to my help: who dares condemn me?
Which of you fears the Lord, and listens to his servant's voice?
Which of you walks in darkness and sees no light?
Let him trust in the name of the Lord,
and lean on his God.