

2015

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This article was originally published as:

Ryan, T. (2015). Our pathway to God: Hearing. *Compass: A Review of Topical Theology*, 49 (1), 21-27.

Original article available here:

<http://compassreview.org/autumn15/7.pdf>

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OUR PATHWAY TO GOD: HEARING

TOM RYAN *sm*

Let's start by doing a brief exercise.

Think back to an occasion when someone confided in you. It may be a family member, a friend, colleague at work, even a stranger sitting next to you on a plane. They may tell you of a loss they have had recently, or of a disappointment in their job or of hurt caused by someone close.

As you reflect on that incident, consider these questions for a moment. Perhaps jot down a few words or phrases as you do so.

- What did I feel as that person shared something painful with me?
- Was I different at the end of the conversation and how?
- Was the other person different and how?
- What does this incident tell me about sharing of personal confidences?

There will be as many answers to these questions as there are readers of this article. But it would be a safe bet we can find some common threads.

- Part of me would probably resonate with the person's hurt. Perhaps a memory from my own life would hover in the background. I may feel something of the other person's anger. But most of all, I think I would feel trusted. The other person felt safe enough to reveal something of their personal and inner self.

- Looking back I may see how I had shifted even slightly in my attitude to the other person. I tried not only to hear. But I tried to 'hear' in the sense of listen and understand. I think I had more sympathy and understanding of her. I can see that I was a bit more sensitive and careful about not judging people too hastily or putting them into compartments.

- I am also aware that sharing the burden

meant that my conversation partner felt better. Talking about what happened, without removing it as an event in life, lightened its impact in some way. It was summed up in 'thank you for listening.'

- As for being a partner in confidences, two things stand out.

First, in a strange way, listening to the sharing of the pain nourishes us. My horizons and my heart expand just a little. I sense somehow I am more human and even better for the experience. I feel that in 'hearing the word' from another I am 'not living on bread alone.' Moments of personal revelation, even with a stranger, touch and feed our inner depths.

Second, a condition must be fulfilled for such disclosures to happen. The person must freely choose to do so. A personal revelation cannot be demanded or forced. It is a gift that is offered (which tells us something very important about God and Revelation). It is a risk which involves being vulnerable. There is the possibility of rejection. Patrick O'Sullivan sums this up neatly:

When vulnerability meets power the result is alienation; but when vulnerability is met by vulnerability, the result is intimacy. The only way into intimacy is through vulnerability.¹

What does this have to do with the sense of Hearing and God? I will explore this in four stages: hearing and listening to God in the Scriptures; call and response in Jesus and then in Mary; finally, God's listening and silence as presence and absence.

Hearing and Listening to God

Read Mark 12: 29-34 (Jesus and loving God

with all one's heart). Note the first two words in Mark: 'Listen Israel.' Jesus' reply is from Deuteronomy 6:5, one of the three texts of the *Shema*—the principal expression of Jewish faith—which His listeners, and all observant Jews, recited each morning and evening. This expressed faithfulness by acts of remembering regularly what was most important—what was dear and near to one's heart. It was also a practice that constantly reminded them of God's fidelity in what He had given them (His *Torah* or Way) and what God had done for them (past and present).

But Jesus goes further by combining Deut. 6:5 with Leviticus 19:18 'The second resembles it: You must love your neighbour as yourself.' Jesus is saying that neither commandment can find its full meaning without the other. Further, in combining these two 'laws', some scholars consider that Jesus is doing something that seems to be distinctive to him in his time.² To love God and to love one's neighbour are two wings of the Covenant. They are far more important than 'holocaust or sacrifice' since they animate and direct our worship and actions (Mark 12: 33).

As we know, talking and listening are at the heart of an oral culture. Until the advent of printing, for Jesus and the bulk of human history, most communication has been through speech. In an oral society, then, listening intently is important. There are no typed versions, recordings, YouTube or computer storage to double check what is said.

In the Christian tradition, the culmination of our spiritual quest is expressed predominantly in terms of sight, *i.e.*, the beatific vision. Nevertheless, there is something about the sense of hearing (and associated speech) that makes it a particularly apt metaphor for being open to God. Even in regard to human virtue, Aristotle held that, in relation to wisdom, hearing makes the largest contribution indirectly since it serves as means of verbal communication.³ Listening and being receptive are, to a large extent, then, the heart of prayer. This is seen as a quality both of God



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and ourselves. The Psalmist prays 'I call with all my heart, Lord hear me...I rise before dawn and cry for help. I hope in your word' (Ps. 118): Two-way listening and responding is seen as part of the relationship with God.

Foundationally, it is captured in the first Beatitude. 'How happy are the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matt. 5:3). I once saw that translated as 'happy are those who admit their need for God.' Brendan Byrne is helpful here when he notes 'while the sense of economic poverty is not excluded, Matthew's formulation reflects a biblical tradition in which the 'poor' is an honorific name for the faithful of Israel, who, conscious of lack of resources on their own part, look to YHWH for salvation.'⁴

This admission of need for God finds resonances of the summons to 'choose life' by a love that obeys God and 'clings' to Him in trust (Deut. 30: 19). This puts the spotlight on one aspect of the personal relationship with God that characterizes faith. We have seen earlier that faith can entail sight and light. Faith can be understood as believing what God reveals or objective faith. But there is also subjective faith, namely, that 'by which we believe.' Since faith is about God, then, to say yes to God we need God to give us the 'yes' to do so.

But Aquinas also defines faith, in a third sense, as personal trust in, and surrender to, God.⁵ This is faith understood as a form of willing or desire, namely, as an affective movement, which underlies faith as a cognitive reality. Faith as trust, then, is even

more basic. 'I believe in you' can be said about someone else, even when they have revealed nothing of themselves nor communicated something they claim to be true. In other words, we trust someone ('I believe in you') even before we say 'I believe you.' Admitting our need for ('clinging to') God seems to underpin prayer as a cry to be heard, for God to 'hear the cry of the poor'.

Attentive listening, then, is a mark someone who is faithful whether we are speaking of God or a disciple. Deafness denotes hardness of heart and unfaithfulness. Just as being profoundly deaf isolates a person, so it is in our relationship with God and with life itself. Genevieve Lacey captures what it means to listen and to hear, for a musician and artist and, more generally in everyday life:

Listening is an activity that connects us deeply with others. It can change how we perceive the world, and then, how we decide to live in it. To listen suggests an open, receptive stance, without necessarily knowing what will arrive. It suggests alertness, willingness. Listening is essentially an act of respect and generosity...⁶

Let's probe this a bit more in relation to Jesus and Mary.

Call and Response: Jesus the Word

Anthony Kelly points out that Aquinas, for instance, 'insists on the biblical priority of hearing, for, in all revelatory experiences, hearing precedes the seeing—even in the original experiences of seeing related to the risen Jesus.'⁷ While, at times, hearing the Word of God is superseded by a seeing and a touching (as in 1 John 1:1-3), Kelly continues with an important observation in the light of our discussion:

It remains, however, that the experience of hearing is still basic in the economy of faith since, while sight and touch play their parts, they are less able to register either the excess of God's self-giving or to underline the essential self-surrendering receptivity of faith. *To hear the word of God places the hearer in a profoundly interpersonal context of relationships which occur in time, as a call and response.*⁸

We have a variety of theological models to understand Jesus and also the Christian Life. When we discussed 'sight' the emphasis was on Jesus as Logos, the Incarnate Word or the Prototypical Image for all creation. Growing in our relationship with God was growing 'into' the likeness of Jesus, sharing in the divine life through seeking and seeing the 'face' of Jesus. Again, we use analogical discourse to see the Trinity in terms generation of life through love. The Father as origin expresses his love in the person of the Son and communicates his love in the Spirit. This process is also couched in terms of speech: the God who is essentially love finds self-expression in the Word—the affirmation of God's unique 'self' as lover and giver. The Word is the divine 'yes', the definitive utterance of God as one of love 'overflowing.' As Aquinas says: 'The beauty conceived in the heart of the Father is the Word.'⁹

Drawing on Kelly and Moloney we see how the first three verses of the Prologue of John's Gospel illuminate this from a specific angle. These authors ask: Who is the God of this Gospel? They suggest that the answer must be framed in reference to 'the Word' where 'God is primarily the one who speaks, and is spoken' by 'Word-ing' creation into existence but, beyond time and from the depths of the eternal silence, 'the divine mystery words itself.'¹⁰

The Word, then, exists outside time and creation ('in the beginning'), 'as something spoken, something communicable, the source of revelation about God, but it stands in its utter originality as 'turned towards God.' This original turning is so complete and the relationship so is so communicative and receptive, that 'what God was, the Word was such that 'God will be revealed in a new originality through this Word that will be spoken into creation and into human history.'¹¹

We will focus here on 'incarnate' Word, the embodied divine statement that is 'communicative and receptive' in time and history. At the same time, He is a testimony about,

and a call, from God. The Word spoken in Jesus is to be heard and requires a response. He is 'the Beloved: Listen to him' (Mk. 9:7). As we consider hearing and listening, Kelly's suggestion above is appropriate: the receptivity of faith in call and response is a model applicable to Jesus as it is to discipleship and prayer. In that context, what does 'attentive listening' look like? Let's consider Jesus.

Jesus, understood through the call-response lens, is paradigmatically the Prophet, who is called by God to proclaim his word. The Prophet's response is as much through his life as is the 'yes' to the divine summons. Like Moses, Jesus' prophetic role is captured primarily in his relationship as 'turned towards' his Abba Father. Whereas Moses spoke to God face to face 'as a man speaks with his friend' (Ex. 33:11), Jesus is the One who is, in the fullest sense, the Beloved, the one 'closest to the Father's heart.' Nevertheless, this was not done without a struggle on Jesus' part. Such struggle, even resistance, was applicable to the Prophets in general, as it applies, clearly, to all of us. The paradigmatic expression of resistance to the call is found dramatised in the Book of Jonah. It offers a mixture of satire, humour with the Israelite community's humble and self-deprecating insight into itself and the limits of its horizons compared to the scope of divine mercy.

In sharing in our humanity, we know that Jesus 'was tested' (Mark 1:12-13). Drawing on Israel's testing in the desert (Deut. 6-8), this testing is dramatised in the three 'temptation in the wilderness' scenarios in Matthew (4:1-11). Murphy-O'Connor suggests these are backgrounded by Gospel scenes where Jesus was pulled in two directions.¹² Jesus had to 'struggle to remain faithful to his Father's call', to steel himself and remain alert in to be faithful to his mission. But in each situation, His response to his Father is one of loving obedience such that he says 'I always do what pleases him' (John 8:29). Perhaps Jesus' response to the

first wilderness 'temptation' is foundational: 'Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Deut. 8:3). In this, He reaffirms His complete trust in his Father: that His heart was not divided. It is through his attentive listening that Jesus entrusts himself into the hands of his Father who is worthy of such trust. This is his primary form of nourishment. Ultimately, he walks the path of his passion and death in self-surrender, revealing to the world the self-giving life and trust-worthy love of God.

Call and Response: Mary

Let's now turn to Mary and Luke 1: 26-38. In this Annunciation scene, there is the underlying hint of the *Shema* noted above. More importantly, there are resonances with the first Creation Account of Genesis where God's spirit hovered over the water (darkness). Creation emerges from the divine power bringing light and order (cosmos) out of chaos (darkness and disorder). It is the action of God's Word in a performative utterance; as 'Word-ing,' it makes things happen and is life-changing. In this 'new' creation, it is the same Spirit of God at work in Mary as one fully open to receiving God (*capax dei*). From the beginning of her life, Mary was enveloped in the love of God, God's self communication with the gift of grace, namely, the Immaculate Conception. Elizabeth Johnson points out that one German phrase for the celebration of December 8th 'feliculously' captures this meaning: it is called 'the feast of the be-gracing of Mary.'¹³

What is striking about Mary's response of 'yes' to God's call in Luke's portrayal? First, it is an expression of whole-hearted and self-surrendering faith that offers a picture of the model believer. She represents those who 'hear the word of God and put it into practice' (Lk. 8: 21). Second, it is an act of consent that has past and future implications: she joins company with those women in Israel's history who

have consented to cooperate in God's desires and plans; she is the 'forerunner of Luke's rogues' gallery, i.e., women, sinners, little people whom not one would expect to respond favorably to God's revelation.'¹⁴

Third, Elizabeth Johnson's distillation of recent studies by women scholars offers an interpretation that has contemporary and a more universal significance. In this scene with Mary, we have a young peasant girl who rises above the constraints of her culture and her position. In discerning the call of God in her life, she exercises 'independent thought and action. . . . asks questions, takes counsel with her own soul. In a self-determining act of personal autonomy, she decides to go for it.' Rather than a passive and timid reaction, hers is 'a free and autonomous act [that] encourages women's efforts to take responsibility for their own lives.'¹⁵

Further, Mary's attentive listening has a centrifugal trajectory. She makes the journey to be with her cousin Elizabeth. Contemplation, worship and prayer must move towards others in responsibility for making our world a better place. Most importantly, the attentive listening that has led her to be in solidarity with the 'project of the reign of God' is now completed by 'the radical depiction of Mary's no to oppression' in the *Magnificat*.¹⁶ This brings us to another phase of our discussion.

God Listens to Us

'O Lord hear my prayer' sings Psalm 55, a sentiment conveyed often in the Psalms (e.g., Ps. 137 or Ps. 17:1-5. Perhaps to cry out to God in need most reveals the meaning of being open to God. It is the attitude that is most appealing to God, seen in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. Or the Psalmist: 'my eyes are drawn to them man of humble and contrite heart who trembles at my word.'

But there is still the question 'does God answer our prayers?' Sometimes, yes, but sometimes it seems 'no.' God's response may be different from what we expect. Or perhaps

God gives us the strength and insight to cope with the difficulty or pain that prompts our prayer for help. In that sense, 'how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him' (Luke 11:13).

It is this promise of God's attentive listening that encourages us in intercessory prayer. As Patrick O'Sullivan points out in the book noted above:

If something is of concern to us and so becomes part of our life, and if we pray about it, we make it possible for Jesus to be at work in that area. We enable him to be effectively present, establishing the Kingdom.

But what about listening that meets silence or attention that is met by silence? We can consider briefly silence as presence (understood in the affirmative sense).

We are reminded by the psalmist 'Be still and know that I am God (Ps. 46:10). Meredith Secomb's illuminating discussion on silence reminds us that the 'saints cherish silence and monasteries maintain a 'Great Silence.' Such silence develops an interiority that is foundational to the spirituality manifested by the withdrawn contemplative and the person in active ministry alike.'¹⁷ In the spiritual life, silence gives external shape to a 'more profound dynamics that can be both healing and freeing.' The silence of contemplative prayer 'is a portal through which we touch the depths of reality. Isaiah tells us: 'In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength' (Is 30:15).'¹⁸ While silence can reach us through many of the senses, Secomb points out that, in the experience of 'the poet and mystic silence reaches us through hearing' and cites Hopkins:

Elected Silence, sing to me
And beat upon my whorled ear,
Pipe me to pastures still and be
The music that I care to hear.

And Secomb, then, reminds that the 'silent music' of St John of the Cross is another instance of the spiritual capacity to 'hear' silence.¹⁹

But what about silence as absence, spe-

cifically, as a sense of the absence of God, of a God who is not listening or responding? This is an area that has drawn increasing interest in the past two decades. Experiences of silence and darkness understood as negative or apophatic forms of encounter with the divine are probed theologically and spiritually at the personal, social and cultural levels.²⁰ A comprehensive discussion is beyond our scope here so I will offer one comment in the light of the main focus of this article.

Dark night or 'impassé' ('no way round it') experiences can involve suffering, life-crises, loss, powerlessness, 'hitting a wall', with an accompanying inability to draw on accustomed resources for normal ways of functioning, for instance, in prayer and in relationships.²¹ Such moments or 'passage' events, while experienced as dark, as a form of death, can, in reality, be signs of, or occasions of, new life. They can be points of growth or transformation if they are engaged and appropriated consciously. This will mean that the limitations and existential powerlessness of the human condition are accepted and, even, embraced. It really means a surrendering of the controlling 'ego' and the 'willingness to admit the mystery of its own being and submit itself to that mystery' such that one freely chooses a path into the uncontrolled and unpredictable margins of life... when the path of deadly clarity fades.²²

Listening to the call in self-receptivity and responding in self-surrender is a conscious allowing of the self to be drawn to a deeper love and trust that is no longer received in the accustomed way. Its situation and communication are perceived as 'darkness.' What is experienced as a lessening of commitment or love, a point when everything seems to be falling apart

and 'limitation looms large', is, in reality, the context within which occurs the call to a 'new vision and to deeper, more genuine intimacy with God.'²³ Perhaps it is to be with Peter who is led where he 'would rather not go' (John 21: 18). Even more, it is joining company with the experience of the crucified Lord: from the darkness of 'My God, why have you deserted me' (Mk. 15:34), with Jesus to move to 'into your hands I commit my spirit' (Lk. 23:46).

Conclusion

In our extended meditation on the sense of hearing, we are, perhaps, more consciousness how much listening involves learning, being affected, silence, and, how these are inescapably connected with words. From that, three final thoughts arise.

First, there is the extent that we need to be nourished by the 'words' of others in moments of self-disclosure. Think of the dinner gathering where we get so engrossed in a conversation that our meal gets cold. Clearly, we do not live on bread alone. Second, we are reminded of the central place of language with its scope and also its limits. These are captured so elegantly and eloquently by Gustave Flaubert:

Language is a cracked kettle on which we beat out tunes for bears to dance to, while all the time we long to move the stars to pity.

Finally, we return to St. Anselm mentioned the first article on Desire. He begins writing theology by praying that God will help him find God. Love seeks to understand what it already loves. John Caputo says this quest is like a blind person who asks someone to keep talking so that they can follow the sound.²⁴

That is attentive listening. Its goal is to be filled 'with the utter fullness of God.'

NOTES

1. Patrick O'Sullivan, 'Sure Beats Selling Cardigans': *Fostering Our Relationship with God* (Richmond, Vic: Aurora Books, 1995), 8.

2. Moloney lists scholars who support or dissent from this view. He notes that it is 'not clear' whether the combing of these two 'love' commandments 12. See

Jerome Murphy-O'Connor OP, 'Was Jesus tested?', *Priests and People* (March 2000), 92-95.

13. Murphy-O'Connor makes the point that these are situations where, any normal person would judge, that Jesus 'was forced to make a choice, not necessarily between good and evil, but between two goods', at 94. He offers examples in Jesus' ministry of choices between the claims of God and those of his family or of his parents (Mk. 19-35; Lk. 2:41-51); situations where his life was at risk and a choice between self-preservation and not deviating from his mission (Luke 13:31; John 11:8 and in Gethsemane (Mk. 14: 32-42).

14. Elizabeth E Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York, London: Continuum, 2003), 108.

15. Robert J Karris OFM, 'The Gospel according to Luke', in R. Brown, J. Fitzmyer, R. Murphy (eds), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989), 681.

16. Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, 256-7.

17. *Ibid.*, 257.

18, Meredith Secomb, 'Being Attentive to Silence',

Australian eJournal of Theology (21:1 (April 2014), 15-28, at 16.

19. *Ibid.* 16, 19.

20. *Ibid.*, 22.

21. Representative are Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation* (United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and Constance Fitzgerald OCD, 'Impasse and Dark Night', *Living with Apocalypse, Spiritual Resources for Social Compassion*. San Francisco: Harper & Rowe, 1984. Available at <http://www.baltimorecarmel.org/saints/John%20of%20the%20Cross/impasse%20and%20dark%20night.htm>

22. An instance is found in the discussion of CS Lewis' grief, his sense of the door being slammed and 'After that, silence' in the previous article on seeing God in this journal.

23. Fitzgerald, 'Impasse and...!', 96.

24. *Ibid.*, 100.

25. John Caputo, *On Religion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 10.

When Jesus gave us his body, he was expressing the deepest meaning of what it is to be a body. To be a body is to receive all that this body is from one's parents and their parents before them. It is ultimately to receive one's being from God. Our existence is a gift in every moment. God gives me being now. So our sexual relations should be expressive of the gift of oneself to another, and the acceptance of the gift which is the being of the other person.

Jesus' words at the Last Supper take us to the heart of a sexual ethic. Sexuality is about communion; it speaks. And what it should express is mutual generosity, the giving and the receiving of gifts...

The Last Supper teaches us that the heart of a Christian sexual ethics is the renunciation of violence. We seek mutuality and equality. When someone desires the body of another person, then that desire should not be rapacious, seeking to take possession of the body, as if it were a piece of meat to be devoured. We must learn to desire in a way that delights in the other, that treasures their vulnerability, that takes pleasure in their very existence. We must delight in another as God delights in us, tenderly and without dominion.

—Timothy Radcliffe, 'The joy of giving ourselves', *The Tablet*, Feb. 23, 2008.