

Language is important. It is what enables our communication to be so much richer than threat displays and pheromones. It is what enables us to not only communicate with a person in front of us right here, right now, but also a person thousands of miles away who we may never meet, and a person hundreds of years after our deaths, who we will definitely never meet. If our bigger brains give us intelligence, it is language that gives us intelligence. It is language that means we never have to reinvent the wheel, but can always go on to bigger and, hopefully, better things. It is language that means that humanity at any given time is always going to be more than the sum of its parts. Without language we are nothing more than naked apes with an unusually depressing propensity for resolving problems with violence; with language we create computers and symphonies, novels and vaccines, films and spaceships, cars and sewers, human rights and United Nations.

I know we would all like to think that it is love that makes us unique, but actually, it is *language* that distinguishes us from our animal cousins. We may share 96 per cent of our genomes with a chimp, but we don't share a common language and that is an unbridgeable chasm of a difference. Uggly the dog may be more deserving of an Oscar than most actors but he can only really effectively steal the limelight, and our hearts, in a film without words.

Language is an important thing. And like so many other things that are absolutely central, vital even, to our existence, we do take language for granted. We are so drenched in language that we can be careless, even cavalier with this most amazing of human artefacts. Language is everywhere in our lives; so ubiquitous, so pervasive is it, that much of the time the temptation is to not really pay attention, to not really listen.

It pays to pay attention, it pays to listen carefully.

Take our new testament reading today. I had spent several hours preparing a sermon for this morning, trying to make sense of why the scriptures were so concerned with the various conditions, such as menopause, fever, Lyme disease and diabetic neuropathy which can cause the unpleasant sensation of insects crawling on your skin, before I realised that I had confused my 'm's and 'n's and St Paul wasn't talking about fornication at all. Maybe I can recycle that sermon one day.

Or take the famous 18th century actor George Bellamy. George Bellamy would have gone through life with the more appropriate and becoming name for the binary

Hanoverian age of Georgina, if only the vicar at her christening had been listening a bit harder to the response to 'Name this child'. Nowadays, we have the name written down beforehand; back then, christening was one of the few occasions in life when it's was a risky strategy indeed to smile and nod in the hope of giving the impression that we've been paying attention when we haven't, and that we've heard what the other person has said, when we haven't. Poor George.

We don't always or even often pay particular attention to what our fellows are saying. Much of the time there is so much being said around us, and with our own busy internal thought dialogues wittering away too, we can't realistically be expected to take it all in. And anyway, the light of experience seems to suggest that at least 90 per cent of what someone else is saying is not nearly as important or interesting as what we have to say ourselves; not an inducement to close listening. But even if we are more often than not only half-heartedly listening to what others have to say, you might expect that we would pay a lot more attention when God is speaking to us. After all, the chances are that he's got something a touch more important to say to us than the presenter on LBC or the person in the checkout queue.

We never fail to hear God's voice.

We don't, however, always recognise God's voice for what it is.

So the boy Samuel is called from his kip by a voice he thinks is Eli's. It takes him a few goes and a big clue, gratis, from a groggy Eli before he realises that it is not his boss, snoozing away in Shiloh, who is calling Samuel's name, but The Boss.

And many centuries later, when, anticipating his passion Jesus prays '*Father, glorify your name*' and God's voice booms from heaven in response "*I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again*", St John's gospel reports that: "*many of the crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder.*"

We don't always recognise God's voice for what it is.

More often than not, however, when God speaks, we can't, hand on heart, blame it on the weather and turn round and say 'Oh I'm sorry, I didn't realise anyone was speaking'. This is God after all. We certainly, though, might turn round and say 'I didn't realise you were speaking to me'. *That* response is so common as to be everyday.

Even if there is no denying that we have heard God's voice, *and* that he is speaking to us, there are plenty of opportunities we can take to not respond as we should.

There may be times when we are not really paying attention, smiling and nodding without really wanting to put in the effort to find out what's being said, betting that, if we look like we're interested, we'll get away with it and God will move on to somebody else. This is the superficial, bare minimum box-ticking token religious response the prophets, from Isaiah to Hosea were so scathing about and what Jesus had in his sights when he asked his listeners to listen again to the prophets and:

*Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'*

There may be times when we may only catch part of what is being said and then fill in the gaps. This is a *really* common human trick and it is a very useful function of our brains. Take away our ability to see a part of the picture and quickly fill in the rest without having to study it in detail, and we would spend all day paralysed in front of the first thing we saw when we opened our eyes, trying to take it all in. Filling in the gaps is a really useful neurological skill, though it can lead us astray, as every experience we've had of *deja vu* or every time we have fallen for a card trick should tell us. And when we only partially hear what God has said and then go on to fill in the blanks with what we think is right, then we get ourselves into real trouble. Welcome to the Lambeth Conference 2022.

We may mishear completely; more likely we will entirely misunderstand what has been said, which is a different thing all together. We can see this vividly, again, in the gospel of John. How many times does Jesus says one thing and his listeners hear another? The Samaritan woman who thinks the 'living water' is in the well; the sick man by the Sheep gate who thinks Jesus is offering to place him in the pool rather than heal him; Nicodemus, who thinks being born again must involve some mind-boggling surgical procedure. So we can hear the words but our self-obsessed, limited horizons prevent us from hearing what is actually being said.

And of course, we may hear clearly but choose to ignore what has been said. '*You shall not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil*' was the first thing God said to a human, but it took just one slippery serpent to convince us that he didn't really mean it, he wouldn't possibly do what he threatened, and so to ignore what God had said.

Having seen how easy it is not to respond to God as we should, how can we maximise our chances of getting it right? How do we attune our ears so like Samuel, the great prophet of the Old Covenant, we can get better at listening? After all, even he started out getting it wrong.

The first thing we can try to do is to ensure that our priorities, the priorities that guide our lives, are those of God's. That way, we will be much more likely to hear clearly and fully when he speaks to us, and much less likely to mishear or to hear what we want to hear. Those priorities are amazingly simple. Love God. Love your neighbour as yourself. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

The next thing we can do is listen a lot. Listen to everything we can that God has to say, to us and be sure that he has finished speaking. Blessed with language, we can listen to what others have heard, not only now all over the world, but through all the centuries we have been listening for God's voice. And, to filter out the times someone has only partly heard, or indeed, misheard, we must test everything others have heard against God's priorities. Love God. Love your neighbour as yourself. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

And finally, most importantly, we can pray. Because, though we babble a lot, prayer is not about talking to God. It is about listening.

What can you hear?