A friend of mine who has had to learn to communicate again following a stroke, reminded me that we have two ears and one mouth, so we should listen twice as much as talk. As well as showing that sometimes it’s better to keep your mouth shut, the story about the turtle that we heard earlier in this service reminds us that people who talk too much are often avoided by others, who get fed up and stop listening to them. But by doing this we might be missing something that they really want to tell us. Why is listening so important?

I’m a speech and language therapist, and many years ago I worked with a little boy part of whose speech problem was that, although he could say the right sounds on their own, he didn’t use them at the ends of words, so that bus was ‘bu’, fish - ‘fi’, cat – ‘ka’, bike – ‘bye’. So in a sentence, he might say “I wi i ha a bye” for ‘I wish I had a bike’. My first task was to teach him that words do have endings, so one of the games we played was that he had to choose the right sound picture when I said a word. I would say, What does ‘bike’ end in, Andrew? He’d find the ‘k’ picture and say ‘k’. We worked through words such as cat, dish, bus, and so on, but when I said What does ‘fish’ end in, Andrew? He looked at me, grinned and said ‘tail’. Well, it showed he was listening!

Listening is more than just hearing – it’s being able to get meaning from the sounds we hear. We recognise patterns to distinguish noise from signal, and that’s what I was teaching Andrew to do. Our listening is also affected by usually unconscious filters which are culture, language, values, beliefs, attitudes, expectations and intentions. Listening is vital for learning, to speak but it’s also important in so many other ways. To quote Yvonne’s version of the Lord’s Prayer: ‘help us listen to Nations, their religions and faiths to achieve peace, understanding and sanctuary upon this earth’.

When researching for this address on the internet, I came across the TED talks, which coincidentally a friend had told me about only recently. TED is a non-profit-making organisation devoted to spreading good ideas, usually in the form of short powerful talks (18 minutes or less). I found one about listening by Julian Treasure, an international speaker who advises businesses about sound and how to use it.

Like Julian Treasure, Unitarian Minister Danny Crosby, writing in The Inquirer in March 2014, comments that we are losing our ability to listen. Danny says “I feel that so many of our troubles are caused by our inability to truly listen to one another and to new ideas; our troubles are caused by our arrogance and belief that we know
In February 2014, retired Unitarian minister Richard Gilbert also wrote in *The Inquirer* urging us to Listen – his article title was “Man of 10 million words urges silence.” In the article he says “There is no sound, no language, no music without the listening ear. Without silence between notes, there would be no music.”

Sometimes it’s very hard to listen, especially in our increasingly noisy world. Noise affects our concentration. And listening is affected by the behaviour of others. Mike Everton, one of the Hinckley Unitarian Congregation, commented on how irritating it was when someone in the audience talked through the live ballet he was watching – surely in ballet there is also appreciation of the music as well as the spectacle? And how rude to spoil someone else’s enjoyment!

Gilbert also talks about listening requiring discipline: “for even when I’m listening to another, I am often distracted, thinking ahead to what brilliant thing I’m going to say in response.”

I think that part of the problem is our electronic age: people are looking at screens all the time. At home we can comment about things on the TV and that seems to have extended outside the home to the extent that we have lost the ability to passively sit and listen, which affects not only us but those around us. In fact Julian Treasure points out that since the invention of recording, listening is no longer primary; the premium on accurate and careful listening has disappeared. He says that we spend 65% of our communication time listening, but that we retain only 25% of what we hear. In order to escape from all the noise around them, some people take refuge in headphones; but that can be quite antisocial when it cuts them off from social interaction and might not help those around them to escape from noise. Before I retired, I used to commute into Birmingham from Hinckley by train. It was so annoying when I was on the train and could hear the noise from someone’s headphones – sometimes the music or speech itself, but more commonly the ‘shch’ noise (demonstrate). Goodness knows what damage they were doing to their hearing with the volume at that level!

Treasure also points out how the demand is for ‘sound bites’ rather than speeches, and that we have become desensitised so that the media use techniques to ‘scream at us’ to get our attention, so that it’s harder to pay attention to the quiet, subtle and understated. And the increase in communication via texting and social media, though useful in its place, is killing the art of conversation. Is this the communication age or the impersonal / antisocial communication age? It’s conscious listening that creates understanding, and, as Treasure comments, a world in which we don’t listen to each other at all is a very scary place.
He describes 5 simple exercises which we can use to develop our listening skills. These are quite interesting and effective. I'll mention just some of them. Firstly he suggests spending 3 minutes a day in silence, or quiet if it’s impossible to achieve absolute silence, in order to rest our ears and recalibrate them so that we can hear quiet again. Of course, those of us who practise meditation are familiar with spending time in silence and realise its benefits. Another exercise he suggests is called The Mixer, and I like this one because it helps one to cope with noisy settings. What you do is identify how many different channels of sound you can hear in different situations such as a coffee shop, or conversely in a beautiful place like a river bank. This is similar to something else I used to do with the children I worked with. I would ask them to listen and tell me what they could hear – the clock, people outside, birds singing. This type of exercise improves the quality of your listening.

One exercise that was new to me was the suggestion that we should enjoy mundane noises. He played a recording of his washing machine and likened it to the timing of a waltz. I'm not so sure about that, but think about the lovely sound of a steam train! And since learning about this exercise, I am beginning to appreciate the sound of the boiler at home because, even though it’s not particularly musical, it does suggest warmth!

What I found most useful in these exercises was based on an acronym RASA, which is apparently a Sanskrit word meaning juice or essence. This is applied to situations where you’re listening to another person. R is for Receive i.e. pay attention. A is Appreciate – by going mmm or saying OK. S is Summarise – so... and A is Ask, ask questions to check you’ve understood.

Treasure stresses that every human being needs to listen consciously in order to live fully and be spiritually connected, and he comments that every spiritual path has listening and contemplation at its heart. I agree with him when he says that we should teach children in school the skill of listening. And of course one of the best ways to teach children is by example. On Facebook someone posted this piece by Catherine M Wallace (2001): “Listen earnestly to anything your children want to tell you, no matter what. If you don’t listen eagerly to the little stuff when they are little, they won’t tell you the big stuff when they are big, because to them all of it has always been big stuff”

So active listening is important in our relationship with others and in our spiritual life. As Dee Boyle says in our second reading, by listening to the voice within we can change the way we look at things, and make a difference to the lives of those around us. Listening can also help us to cope with all the noise. Remember the Prayer for the Hurried, the Undisciplined, and the Disorganised, which asks: ‘help us understand that the still, small voice comes to us not only in the solemn setting of the sanctuary but in the hustle and bustle of our lives’.

In the second prayer by Barbara Pescan we heard
O, how we must listen
to hear the wanting within the word
O, listen to hear the meaning
in the soul of what is said.

I’m going to finish with the words of Richard Gilbert at the end of his article:

“Listening then, has a spiritual dimension. It suggests that I am not the centre of the cosmos, but rather one source of words among others. It implies that I have no monopoly on wisdom, that true wisdom may be found in listening.

Listen! Listen to what others have to say,
There is wisdom in all you meet.
Listen to the sounds of nature,
It speaks and sings and makes music
For those who pay attention.
Listen; listen to the impulses of your spirit
Take time to hear your inner yearnings,
That still small voice drowned in the raucous shout.
Listen! This is a noisy world.
Perhaps, now, we will listen."

Amen

Jane Russell, August 2016