

Sermon Archive 502

Sunday 15 September, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflections on the Sense of Hearing

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Introduction: Kupe's listening while he travels

There's a story. I don't know whether it's a true one, but I like it. It's the story of Kupe sailing across the ocean from Hawaiki, wind in his sails, splash of salt on the bow, sun on his back. He's chasing a giant octopus that's been messing up his fishing at home - and such is his drive to catch it that the journey's become long. There's no sign of land before him, but gradually (at first faintly in the distance) there's this sound. He sails a bit further; the sound gets louder. Then just on the horizon there's a long white cloud. So plentiful in the trees of the land shrouded in the long white cloud were the birds, that their song was heard well before the land was seen. Kupe discovered these islands, drawn by the sound of bird song. Listen people; it's the sound of the land. Kupe's listening while he travels.

On the evening after I first inspected my house in Papanui, working out whether I was interested in buying, I returned. Mid-evening I stood on the footpath outside, just to listen. I was listening for loud, pounding stereos from the neighbours. I was listening for shouts or "I don't know", anything that might be an alarm bell. But it was quiet. The quietness made me think "I could make my home here". Kupe's listening while he travels.

Working late at night in the minister's study of St Stephen's Uniting Church in central Sydney, there was the sound of the air-conditioning units that abounded. Road sweeping machines (sometimes with reversing beepers), a low rumble of the underground trains on the Central lines every time they passed under the church towards Circular Quay. The not rare sounds of sirens in the streets. The ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. And that wondering "what am I doing here so late". Is that wondering (each time louder) a sound? Or just a feeling within the sounds of the city? Kupe's listening while he travels.

It's my first time back in the family home in Howick since I left for Dunedin. I'm back in my old bedroom, and it seems so small. It never used to seem small at all. On my way back from the bathroom in the middle of the night, a floorboard squeaks - O God, I know that sound. An unremarkable sound that I

hardly ever noticed (over twenty-two years never noticed), until I'm back there and step on the squeaky floorboard. At the sound, I know exactly where I am, and strangely, suddenly it's not small anymore. It's just the size that it always was. An unnoticed, quiet, late-at-night sound often heard but never heard. I am at home. Kupe's listening while he travels.

Where are we? Listen!

Music for Reflection

First Reading: 1 Samuel 3: 1-10

First Reflection: Samuel listens

Samuel is not yet the scary long-beard loon that strikes fear into kings and despots. At this time, he's still a child - a longed-for miracle baby really, dedicated by a believing mother to serve in a temple. His hearing's good. Even though he's been sleeping, he hears when the old priest calls him. "Here I am, for you called me", he says.

Going back to bed, maybe it was a dream. I thought I heard something. It comes again, his own name spoken? Going back to bed.

The third time, a wise old priest realises that although he is hearing, Samuel is not listening. He's not understanding what he hears.

It's a delicate, tender little story about those of us who can hear, being called instead to listen. And maybe it's a story for us who hear words, but who, if we listened, could hear love. A story for us who hear noises, but who if we listened, could hear pain. A story for us who hear outrageous claims, but who if we listened could hear truth - or what the opposite of truth is. Do not only hear, God says. Listen! Samuel listens.

Some years ago, as I came to terms with the fact that a relationship had died, I had two friends come, one at a time, to be with me. One was a dear old priest, who wanted me to know that everything would be OK. It wasn't as bad as I thought it was. There was bound to be at least one silver lining (maybe even a golden one). As he propounded his theories on love down the drain, at a pace more typical of monologue, rather than dialogue, I became frustrated, then quickly angry.

The second friend sat in a chair, saying hardly anything at all. He had no theory to offer me. He just listened. He was almost silent, as he just listened. He helped my tears come, by making me feel like I had been heard. Samuel listens.

Nex door a dog barks, not so often as to be bothersome. I sometimes hear him. I don't think he's saying "I believe in God the Father almighty". Maybe though I am hearing creation voicing heaven's praise - a canine Alleluia. See, Samuel listens.

Sometimes I hear people talking in languages I do not understand. To *my* ear it sounds like babbling. Sometimes I wonder whether it couldn't actually be done in English. Maybe what I am actually hearing, though, is not babble, but good friends sharing life and encouragement in a world that sometimes is hostile. Maybe what I am hearing is love. Samuel listens.

Sometimes I hear the phrase "I love you". Samuel listens.

Sometimes I hear music. God knows what the purpose of music is (hope it's more commercially relevant than the arts that have been pushed to the back of the curriculum in favour of maths and technology). Sometimes music moves me - don't know why sounds (waves through the air) should move the human heart. Samuel listens.

Hymn: Blessèd Jesus, at your word

Second Reading: Acts 28: 23-28

Second Reflection: Let those with ears hear

I don't know. They went to the trouble of arranging a time to go and see him. They got off their couches (as it were), and went to his place. They gave a whole day to being present while he spoke. But then they wouldn't listen to what he was saying. I mean, why bother?

Well, actually some listened, and found it convincing. But then they got sucked into endless arguments with others who didn't. It seems it was one of those environments where more energy went into grand-standing than anything else. Have you ever heard that poor forlorn voice now and then that asks Parliament why it insists on working adversarially - only to be told that the model requires it? We have to fight; the contest of ideas requires it - as if ideas can't meet other ideas and make babies that are more beautiful than their parents!

And outside of parliamentary debating chambers, it's not hard to find examples of people who have heard certain things, but pretend they haven't. You're drinking too much. The children are missing you. Lay down, O weary one, lay down your head upon my breast. Haven't heard you, and please don't speak again. We learn, with Paul, that one of the ways the world can

avoid listening is to pretend not to have heard.

Paul observed that it's a long-standing thing as well. Seven hundred years earlier, Isaiah had found the same thing - and had come up with the words that Paul quoted. "People who look, but do not see. People who hear, but do not understand. Dull hearts, shut eyes, ears blocked." Woe is them! Woe also is **us**, as we try to work out how to work with refusals to hear.

Maybe we should speak more loudly. Maybe we could furnish our speaking with gifts of beads, blankets and muskets. Or maybe, here's a thought, we could set it to music and sing it to them. Or coin that perfect little phrase that might go viral: "these people are weird". Or I suppose we could bomb them, so we won't need to speak to them again.

Paul chooses none of those strategies. He follows his Master who said "if people won't listen, find someone else to talk to. And as you go, shake the dust from your feet." Indeed, in like manner, Paul says "Let it be known to you, then, that this salvation of God has been sent to the gentiles; they will listen."

For the sake of the world, we seek a "listening heart". And as Jesus often finished off his parables, "let those with ears hear".

Hymn: Lamp of our feet, whereby we trace

Epilogue

Kupe hears his new home before he sees it. From the rumble of trains below the church, to squeaky floorboards outside the bedroom, to familiar voices that bring us comfort, we listen as we travel. Kupe listens.

From words that are spoken, but not quite heard, and from tears that fall when we have found a voice, to hearing our world aright, and the cultivation of the quietness we need to make that work, Samuel listens, **we** learn to listen.

And from the frustration of living in a noisy world, where sometimes people just refuse to listen, and we need to say "let those with ears hear", the church prays to God that new ways of speaking and listening might come.

We might explore some of this in our prayers. But for now, we keep a moment of quiet.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.