

You don't realise it, but most of the time, most other people are not really listening to you. I know it. Every time I get up to preach. But you may not. People may look like you have their undivided attention, but in fact that's just a cunning illusion. It might look like they're hard at work flying the plane, but in reality the auto-pilot is running and the crew are back in business class fast asleep.

Try for example to buy a stamp from the Post Office to send a parcel to Taiwan.

'Is that address in the Bangkok region or elsewhere?'

'It's nowhere near Bangkok, it's in Taiwan.'

'Yes, you want to send a parcel to Thailand.'

'No, Taiwan, it's about as far from Thailand as we are now from Russia.'

Or less exotically, why not take the name of the post office where all those years ago the above exchange took place: Barkingside. Unless you've lived there you won't realised that for everyone outside about a 3 mile radius, the place has a silent 'side'; that is, when you say Barkingside they hear 'Barking'. Trust me. Whenever I'm asked where my previous parish was, the answer is inevitably greeted with something approaching pity. "Oh. What did you do to be sent to Barking?"

No Barkings... Oh forget it. You don't work in the Post Office do you? .

Nothing wrong with Barking. It's just for some reason people don't realise that it's a much more desirable locale than, say, Knightsbridge. Fewer tourists for a start.

Away from geography and there are some personal names that are a curse in the age of the telephone. Smith, yes, highly telephonic. Johnson. No problem, as long as you make it clear you're not related to that Boris bloke. Fenby? There are limitless ways in which that name can be misheard, an infinite number of variant misspellings that can be made. Senby. Fendy. Sembly... on and on and on

Unless you actually have a last name like mine where each letter can be easily confused over the phone you would be unlikely to realise quite how many ways a simple five letter surname can be misheard. And mine's an old English name. Even if they never have to interact with the Home Office, who knows what joys await those with a name that was first spoken in Igbo or Tamil?

Listening is an art, a craft and a skill: it takes a lot of effort and some practice to do it properly. Which we rarely do. Don't believe me? How many times have you been unable to recall somebody's name scant moments after they've told you what it is? Most of the time when we are hearing we are not listening: we are thinking about something else or planning what we are going to say in response or hearing what we want to hear. Hardly surprising then that we habitually mishear. And misread. And misunderstand. It's all pretty much of a muchness. You present it, and we 'miss' it.

Which brings me to Mr Marcus Gelby. I am probably quite safe in assuming that nobody here is a close personal friend of said gentleman, as he lives in some small town in one of those vast midwest states of the US, and it would be a bit far to come from there to evensong at St Mary's.

So, though we are not personal friends of Mr Gelby there are two things we can, I think say with certainty about him. The first is that he is not likely to be, any day soon, a supporter of equal marriage. We know this because Mr Gelby has tattooed on his arm, no less, the verse from Leviticus 18 which reads:

*You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination*

Permanently inked on his arm. Nice guy. This particular body decoration was proudly displayed when he was interviewed on TV defending two of his friends who had been arrested for beating a man almost to death because they thought he was gay. So, we can confidently say, Mr M Gelby: no friend of equal marriage.

The second thing we can definitely say about Marcus Gelby is that he hasn't actually read the book of Leviticus to the end, as he doesn't seem to have read the next chapter, where verse 28 reads

*You shall not... tattoo any marks upon you: I am the Lord*

Now we might think that anyone who had a verse from a book of the Bible which forbids tattooing tattooed on their arm was a few sandwiches short of a picnic. That may well be the case. He almost certainly voted for Donald Trump which never counts as a sign of smartness. But it's also entirely possible that the owner of the said tattoo was just doing what humans do: not paying attention and so mishearing what the good book had to say. We all do it. All the time. Just usually in a less crass, less permanent way.

I'm not going to make any argument about that particular verse of scripture here and now, though of course there is much arguing to be done. But I do want us to fully 100% undivided attention listen to what Jesus has to say.

He said:

*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*

Well you can't get much clearer than that. This is not a request. It's not a point for consideration or passing to a committee or a subject for facilitated conversations or a future teaching document. It's a commandment. Do this. Now. That's an order. Love one another.

So, that love, with which Jesus has loved us and now demands we copy, what does that love look like?

Well one of the central things we can say is that that love is unconditional. So much of the Old covenant, so much of the religion of Israel was conditional. Do this and God will love you. Do that, and God won't love you. The Old covenant was conditional. But not the love of Jesus.

When Jesus sat down to eat with sinners, that act said quite clearly 'these people you call sinners; these people are ok'. It wasn't 'these people are ok as long as they promise not to do it again'. Just: these people are ok.

Unconditional

When the self-righteous religious brought the woman caught in adultery to Jesus, he refused to condemn her. Refused. Unconditional. And *then* he told her to sin no more. His refusal to condemn her was not dependent upon her promising to be good from now on. It was unconditional.

And that is how we love as Jesus has loved us. Because not one of us, not one single one of us here tonight has never sinned. And still Jesus has loved us. Not one single one of us here tonight has never sinned; and Jesus has refused to condemn us.

If we are to be his disciples, that is how we must also be.

Sad to say, so often it seems that we who call ourselves Christians have misheard Jesus' commandment. We've been thinking about something else. We thought he was talking to somebody else. We were thinking what we were going to say. We were listening but we heard what we wanted to hear.

*Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*

It sounds so easy doesn't it? Love always does. But it's not.

'Love one another' is a hard commandment. It's a really, really demanding commandment.

If we love as Jesus loved we may well end up losing ourselves to that love, we may end up at the Cross.

But if we are not at least consciously trying to leave behind the bickering, the recriminations, the finger-pointing and name calling, the jealousies and grievances, the cold-shoulders and the cliques, the condemnation and the judging... How then can we be imitating that love? We may as well pack up and go home now.

*Love one another.*

It's a hard call. Hard as nails. But we can do it.