

SPEAK LORD, YOUR SERVANT IS LISTENING. BUT ARE WE?

On 15th August 1989, the American educator, author, businessman and speaker – Stephen Covey, published one of the Most Influential Business Management and Self-Help Books of all times that has changed businesses, world politics and individuals – **‘The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People’**. The book is so influential that over 20 million copies had been sold in 2012; the thoughts contained therein are so powerful that in 1994, President Bill Clinton, invited Covey to meet him and coach him on how to integrate the ideas therein into his presidency. According to Stephen Covey, the 5th Habit of all Highly Effective People is – Seeking first to understand, then to be understood. Under this, he **listed the 5 Levels of Listening: Ignoring Listening, Pretending Listening, Selective Listening, Attentive Listening and Empathetic Listening**. According to Covey, “Empathetic Listening is the highest level of listening and one that requires the greatest amount of mental and emotional energy. When we empathetically listen, we immerse ourselves in understanding how the other person is thinking and feeling. We actively push our own perspective out of our mind and heart and instead try to walk with them, see as they see and feel as they feel.” When Pope Francis was elected Pope in 2013, he discovered to his surprise that although the Church was good at enacting laws and enforcing them, pronouncing dogmas, and enshrining them, the one thing the Church was not good at was empathetic listening. Through his interactions with women, young people, people with special needs, migrants, and those on the margins of society, Pope Francis discovered that they had been trying so hard to get the Church to listen to them without much luck. Hence, in 2021, Pope Francis convoked the Synod on Synodality, which one aim in mind – **To journey together in one act of Empathetic Listening**. Pope Francis summarised this in the Preparatory Document of the Synod thus: **“The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth.”** To enable us to do this properly, Pope Francis asked us to have an open mind and heart and to have no prejudices. Yes, empathetic listening is not about listening to respond to what we have heard, but a listening that transforms. It is this empathetic listening that leads to the transformation that we encounter in our Sunday readings of this week.

In the First Reading from the first book of Samuel Chapter 3, we encounter Samuel who was a novice under Eli and had no knowledge of God at the time. It is important to give Samuel some credit for hearing the voice of God in the first place. If Samuel was living in our contemporary society, his peers might have mocked him for living in the sanctuary and serving an old man when he could have been doing lots of meaningful things with his life. He might as well have been distracted by all his social media platforms of Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Instragram, Snapchat, TikTok or his Play Station. On the contrary, Samuel had his ears sharpened and when he heard a voice calling him, he went to Eli who discerned the Lord was asking for him and advised him to listen. The Hebrew word used there for listening is *Shawmah* meaning to hear with attention or interest, to listen diligently, to give heed and to obey. It is this same diligent listening that we encounter in today’s Gospel pericope of John Chapter 1. While John the Baptist was with his own disciples, they were not fiddling with their iPhones, iPads,

MacBooks, Samsung products or trolling people on social media; they were attentive to him and his words. When he pointed at Jesus and said - “Look, there is the Lamb of God”; his disciples knew they had to encounter Jesus to be sure He was what worth the hype. After spending time with Jesus and empathetically listening to Him, they knew they could not keep that to themselves alone. When Andrew told Peter – We have found the Messiah, he was not repeating a mantra he must have learnt from a guru, he was simply stating the fact. The Greek word used there for found is *Heurisko* which means to find/discover something/someone after searching for them. Yes, every Jewish person had been searching for the Messiah who would liberate them and inaugurate God’s reign on earth, what a joy to have found Him through listening empathetically to John the Baptist.

My friends, when was the last time we listened empathetically to anyone? This is not listening to answer or give them solutions to their problems but listening to see as they see and to feel as they feel. We live in a world where we are either rushing around to get things done hence, we do not have time to listen to other people. On the other hand, our attention span is so little that we cannot be bothered with long chats; hence, we cut people off while they are speaking to us because we have all the solutions to their problems. Secondly, we all have our prejudices of people and situations; when we encounter people, we look at their physical appearance and immediately form an opinion of them in our minds. As such, when such people approach us, we do not listen empathetically to them to see as they see and to feel as they feel. Imagine how many personal, professional, financial, spiritual, and pastoral relationships, would have been saved today if only we listened empathetically to others. As a Church and parish community, we must listen out to those voices calling for us to change our ways of doing things especially the various people we exclude knowingly or unknowingly in our gatherings. We need to listen empathetically to them, discern their situations with them and arrive at a spirit-led and hope-filled decision with them. As Pope Francis reminds us – **Ideas are discussed, reality is discerned.**

In 2022, the English Football Legend – Rio Ferdinand, gave an interview on the one thing that causes rows between him and his wife – Kate. According to Rio, when Kate discussed her problems with him, he always ended up telling her how she could resolve the situations and Kate was not happy with that. For Kate, all she wanted was for her husband to listen to her and be able to see things as she saw them and to feel things as she felt them. This is the Empathetic Listening that Stephen Covey talked about in his book above and the same Empathetic Listening that St Paul is calling on all of us to imbibe in today’s Second Reading from 1 Corinthians Chapter 6. One thing is certain, this Empathetic Listening is transformative of us and all those around us as we witnessed with Samuel and the disciples of John the Baptist. Let us listen empathetically to others, see things as they see them and feel things as they feel them. We can do this!!!

Fr Johnpromise Umeozuru

Homily for the 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year B (14/01/2024)