

INTRO: At the January 2014 ACTA conference held at Leeds Trinity University, John Sullivan of Hope University talked about the crucial ways dialogue depends on how we speak and how we listen to one another in the Church.

SPEAKING AND LISTENING IN THE CHURCH

I want to share with you some reflections on this topic of speaking and listening in the Church - in the hope that they stimulate you to express your own voice in the following discussions. I will focus on four issues:

1. Why we often speak wrongly
2. Speaking for the Gospel
3. Why we need to be heard and to speak
4. How we should speak.

And, throughout, I hope to emphasise the intimate connection between listening and speaking.

1. Speaking wrongly

Why do we sometimes (perhaps even often) speak wrongly, inappropriately, in the wrong tone of voice, or misdirect our comments, or miss the mark in what we try to say?

There are many reasons. Here are some.

First, we fail to understand what others are saying and as a consequence we misrepresent or distort their position. This may be unintentional on our part. It may even not be culpable. But if we have been lazy in our assumptions, or over-quick to jump to conclusions, or not taken the trouble to check out whether or not we have got their position right, then we are at fault. I always think that if we want to argue against the position of a person or of a group, we should be able to state their case in such a way and with sufficient strength of force and with accuracy, so that they would say: yes, you have got me right; that is where I am coming from; that is what I am for; that is what I am against.

Second, if we feel threatened in some way, that our interests are vulnerable to being ignored or swept away, or that our achievements are not respected, or that our experience is discounted, or that something precious to us is being treated lightly or mocked, then we might slip into bluster, anger, assertiveness, aggression – ostensibly in defence of what seems endangered. But we need to be careful here. Our sense of vulnerability or outrage – and therefore of prickliness in response – may easily be out of proportion and maybe even quite unwarranted. If we feel threatened and insecure, this may say more about us than about the person or people we experience as presenting the threat or insult. A key principle here for me is ‘roots down, walls down.’ That is, if we are steady in our beliefs, if we have deep foundations, if we are securely rooted, then we do not need to be defensive, we can be open to arguments, differences, alternative perspectives. I should ask: why do I find this threatening? Is it really a threat? Is it intended to be a threat? Plus: are they responding to what they experience as threatening in me? It is remarkable how hard some people find it to acknowledge that they

might come across as threatening to others; we too often assume that threats come from others, not from ourselves.

Third, all this is compounded in matters religious. Here one often finds – and this covers all the major religions – that when people get prickly in their speaking about religion, they seem to think they have a mandate to be aggressive because their cause is sacred, they are being God’s warriors, the truth of our salvation is at stake. When we are faced with a plague, whether literally or metaphorically, if we are to eradicate the disease, desperate measures are called for. In the midst of a holy war, the usual niceties and civilities might have to be dispensed with, if the weapons and wiles of the enemy are to be defeated. Truth – as we see it – must be established before love can reign. Too much is at stake to allow the feelings of opponents to deflect us from pursuing the rightness of our cause. The almightiness of God, the severity of God, the divine nature of the church, the beauty of tradition, the weasel words of the tempter, the dreadful possibility of damnation, the holiness of God’s word in scripture, the blessed role of God’s ministers, the tendency to over-identify with the institution, and to rely excessively on it as our protector – all this can lead us to so prioritise the ends that we can become blind to how the means adopted to advance and advocate those ends often obscure and distort and inoculate people against those ends. In the drive to protect the sacred and the truth from contamination, we use firm methods and robust language. We assume a level of certainty that is simply not given to us in this dispensation. We attribute bad faith in those who adopt a different position. If one of the French kings called Louis once said *l’etat, c’est moi* (or was that Charles de Gaulle), then some church leaders over the centuries have sometimes conveyed, even if they have not actually said it, I am the church; I stand for the Gospel; I represent the church; I speak for the Gospel; when I am attacked, the church is attacked; when I am defended, the church is defended; when my word is questioned, the very Gospel is called into question. But of course, we are not as white as we make out and our opponents are not as black as we depict them; in reality, we are all grey, to varying degrees and in various shades.

Fourth, a lack of self-knowledge can disguise from us our real motives for what we say, when we speak, to whom, and in what tone of voice. We are rarely entirely rational; nor are we entirely pure. I can think of some cases of people – here I am thinking of priests, schoolteachers and also of professors – where a sense of being by-passed, of betrayal, of one’s gifts not being properly appreciated, of not fitting in in the institution in the way one had very good reason to expect a little earlier in one’s career – lead them to adopt positions that are fuelled (it seems to me, with all my own limitations and blind spots) as much by resentment as by reason. They present arguments and evidence that is coloured by, that derives its animating spirit from, thwarted ambition. Of course, this does not prove that they are necessarily wrong. But it behoves us all to seek help in our faltering steps towards self-knowledge, to assist us in guarding against resentment, bitterness or thwarted ambition skewing the way we read situations, interpret positions and present our own case.

2. Speaking for the Gospel

Is our speaking reaching others? Is it engaging them, inspiring, challenging and empowering them? Perhaps all the other relevant verbs relating to our speech – like to comfort, console, heal, warn, admonish, teach, guide, affirm, encourage, to coach, train, mentor and to bless – can be tucked under or included within these big four, all-encompassing verbs: to engage, inspire, challenge and empower.

In my work, over many years, with parents, teachers, chaplains, youth ministers and others on aspects of mission into practice I have often referred to what I call the verbs that put flesh on evangelisation. What are these verbs for evangelisation? Here is the list I have often shared: be present, pay attention, listen, wait, welcome, invite, be hospitable, share, bless, give, forgive, reconcile, heal, celebrate, encourage, be vulnerable, pray. Insofar as a parent can say to him or herself, yes, this is what I am doing with my children, then, even if they lack the proper words for explaining church teaching, I tell them that they are doing God's work in preparing the ground for the Gospel to be heard. The same applies to teachers, chaplains and youth ministers – and to parishioners more generally.

This is not an argument for not presenting the Scriptures clearly, nor for neglecting Church teaching. It is simply ensuring that the foundation for speaking about such matters is underpinned by an incarnational living out of what they imply and what they require of us. Plus, the beauty of these verbs for evangelisation is that one does not have to be confident or fluent in the official language of the Church, one does not need mastery of doctrinal language; they open the door to being Christ-like in a this-worldly way. In fact, it seems to me that uncertainty in matters of faith, while sometimes it can be disabling, can often be an advantage in any serious exchange of listening and speaking. If such uncertainty prompts us to be reticent, reserved, not to jump in too soon, if it helps us to be patient, to wait – this can allow other voices to surface and other perspectives to be brought to light.

But if I had to reduce my long list of fourteen verbs for evangelisation – fourteen is also the number of letters in the word evangelisation – I might give as a shorter list just four (like the four Gospels); these being engage, inspire, challenge and empower.

In thinking about communication in the Church and speaking for the Gospel, I have found helpful a book by George Dennis O'Brien, a book called Finding the Voice of the Church. Let me share with you a few sentences from that book to give you the flavour of its message. 'If the actor speaks in the wrong voice as lover, villain, hero, or clown, the play is ruined. So with the Christian voice ... spoken in the wrong voice – dictatorial, didactic, distant, or demeaning – the message fails. ... a presumptive tone, an over-assurance of attitude, which fails as the vehicle of faith. ... A mismatch of medium and message can be fatal. Speaking the faith in the wrong voice obscures the Church. The spirit of the Council of Trent, the voice of Trent, was anathema sit: the voice of condemnation.' In contrast, he points out that 'The listening voice for soul-therapy must be a forgiving voice.' Both verbs are crucial here, forgiving, but also listening. O'Brien reminds us that 'The key to preaching the Gospel is not first defined by how one speaks but how one listens.' It is useful here to remember O'Brien's wise insight that

'No one is finally outside the Church and no Christian is fully inside – at least "inside" as a personal assured achievement and possession. Christians are never wholly inside the truth; others are never wholly outside the truth. The conclusion is that Christian preaching to the outside has to begin with deep listening.'

3. Why we need to be heard and to speak

St Matthew tells us 'For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks' (12:34). Or, we put our whole self into our speaking. And this will be a mixture of both the good and the bad that is in us. 'On the day of judgment you will have to give an account for every careless word you utter; for by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned' (12: 36-7). This warning from St Matthew might make us reluctant to speak at all, but that would be wrong. Not bringing out what is in us to say might make us safe from some mistakes but it won't be healthy in the long run. For as the Gospel of Thomas says: 'If you bring forth

what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.'

Your voice matters. When you speak you reach out to others; you express who you are; and when you speak about your faith you make the Word, God's Word, come alive for others in a special way, in a way that others cannot express – because you are a unique manifestation of God. Others need to hear your voice, whether they are your loved ones, your friends, your family, or whether they are people with whom you work, or pray with, or relax with, or with whom you disagree, perhaps on serious matters, and very deeply disagree with. The Church urgently needs your voice; without it, it will be less inclusively catholic and Catholic. The moral theologian James Keenan aptly says: 'If we were to live by an Ethics of the Word in the church, we would need to recognize that the only way the church can be alive and grow is if it allows us to respect the members' voices and lets them speak. Our church cannot grow if we silence, interrupt, deride, misrepresent, or exclude another's voice.' Offering your voice and hearing others into speech – these are two of the most important gifts we can give to the world and to the Church; they require courage, patience, humility and a willingness to be vulnerable. Your reception of the Word of God and the words of others contributes to a distinct configuration and an original expression of our faith – in a unique dance between tradition, situation, conversation partner and yourself. Your reception of and response to God's Word and the words of others won't be complete; it won't be perfect; but it is needed and it does make a real difference. Thus, all of us need to speak and listen to one another in the Church. Furthermore, I do not simply mean those who are comfortable with the Church, those who feel committed to it; those who are in good standing, but all of us, because, as Ormond Rush points out: 'If their perspective is sought, the inactive, the lapsed, the disaffected, and the marginalized may bring to the discourse of faith questions from the margins which are for the good of the church.'

I am dismayed to say that I have noticed many very negative changes in the wider Church in recent years. It seems to me that the wonderful insights of the Second Vatican Council have often been in danger of being side-lined, downgraded, overturned and reversed. There has been disgraceful corruption, toadying up to authority, dictatorship, censorship, a refusal to address pastoral realities, a refusal to listen to the people of God and how the Holy Spirit speaks to them and through them. The way the new translation of the missal was introduced without real consultation is only one of many examples. I am worried to note how often the emphasis is put by some Church leaders on how Catholics should be distinct and stress their special identity, when what is needed is that they should be faithful to the Gospel (and often such fidelity does not need a big label stuck on it). It often seems as if the Vatican constitutes a major obstacle to the effective communication of the Gospel, despite the obvious good that is also done by some of its organizations.

The connections between the hopes and fears, the joys and sorrows, of daily life, on the one hand, and, on the other hand the gestures and language of the liturgy and the teaching of holy scripture need to be brought out in as many concrete ways as possible. This requires as many people as possible having some degree of involvement in preparing for the liturgy, in reflecting on the scriptures, and in the process raising the issues of daily life, sharing their concerns and the perspectives. The voices of as many categories of people as possible need to be surfaced in the church, so that people can identify with the experiences being shared and with the diverse faith perspectives actually held. This will inevitably be messy, untidy, not smooth, clean, safe or polished (but then life is not smooth, tidy, simple, or unambiguous). We have to work extremely hard to become a listening Church. It will take years to overcome the excessive stress on promulgation from on high, telling people what to think. We have ask people what God is saying to them in their experience, help them to listen to their experience (where God is at work all the time), give them the confidence to speak out of their experience,

provide hospitable spaces for sharing both life and faith. In the typical congregation there is massive experience of life and an inchoate and unarticulated wisdom waiting to be drawn

upon. However, moving from where we are - with very long traditions of passivity and one-way transmission, from above to below – will be very hard indeed. People will resist taking on more responsibility. Of course, if they did take on more responsibility, they would soon want to have more say in the major decisions, and that would be extremely uncomfortable for those in authority. If we applied to the church what we know from ordinary life about what makes some people credible, and what ensures that leaders are made accountable, rather than self-serving, then a very different pattern of hierarchy would develop and there would be a chance for the emergence of a church that understood authority properly – authority in service of facilitating growth in our discipleship.

I have been stressing here aspects of communication – asking questions, hearing diverse voices, surfacing local wisdom, encouraging gifts, sharing responsibility – not on advocating particular strategies. This is because I am sure that if the climate for communication was healthy, there would be very many practical suggestions brought to light from the people to draw others in and to reach out more effectively. Of course, working ecumenically would be a vital dimension of this, since Christian disunity and holding onto our particular ‘take’ on the faith often obscures the Gospel for outsiders and contradicts its central messages. But that is another story.

Learning to listen is one of our deepest callings and it is integral to the quality of our discipleship. If we wish to be heard, we must learn to listen. Not listening is sinful – it is to close ourselves off from others and so to cut ourselves off from God. Of course, we must discriminate between truth and falsehood, we must discern which voices are of God. But we must be very careful about refusing to listen. There will nearly always be a penalty to pay for not listening.

4. How we should speak

The key to speaking with the tongue of a disciple is to have one’s ears opened by God in Christ through the power of the Spirit. ‘Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry’ St James tells us (1:19). He also warns us of the huge power of the tongue, comparing it to a bridle of a horse or to the rudder of a ship or to a fire (3: 2 – 6).

Let me briefly refer to five qualities or features of speaking about matters of faith, whether to people who consider themselves to be outside the Church or to people who consider themselves to be inside the Church.

The five essential qualities required to ensure religious speech in public is appropriate, by which I mean combining commitment to the requirements of the faith tradition with commitment to the common good, are conviction, clarity, courage, humility and compassion. The first three of these can be stated very briefly. First, conviction: religious believers must speak the truth as they see it, with integrity, meaning what they say, so that it resonates from them as reflecting genuine commitment. Second, clarity: they must make every effort to communicate effectively, in ways that make their message accessible to outsiders, wherever possible. Third, courage: they must be willing to be vulnerable to criticism, unpopularity and resentment in conveying their views. Commitment will often be costly. Being willing to pay the price is a sign of seriousness and a constitutive part of the witness to the truth as they perceive it.

Fourth, humility: they must be willing to acknowledge that they might be wrong; they must be ready to recognize the sincerity of their opponents; they must be aware that we all fall short of our ideals. The tone adopted must be respectful of others and not presume that our side has a

monopoly on integrity, concern for truth or morality. Humility also entails that we be willing to learn from and to be corrected by others. Part of this humility will be shown in the way that there is no attempt to secure protection, privilege or rely on special pleading in defence of one's cause.

Fifth, compassion: religious believers must be sensitive to the burdens that might be imposed on others if their views were to prevail; they should accord due weight to the interests and concerns of others; they should willingly give others space to change their minds and time to appreciate religious arguments, showing patience and restraint. They should avoid any sign of triumphalism or of taking pleasure in the setbacks and defeats of those they disagree with. They should endeavour to include outsiders from their tradition in processes of decision-making that affects others, wherever possible maximizing participation in the goods that are being pursued.

This fivefold combination of qualities - conviction, clarity, courage, humility and compassion - should ensure that religious believers, when drawing upon their faith in public, do so in ways that show a willingness to listen to the experience and insights of others. They should also exhibit an earnest desire to engage in dialogue, an informed, self-aware and critical rationality, respect for their conversation partners as well as for truth, together with commitment both to their own particular community and to the common good in a democracy.'

Last of all, let me repeat something I admit I find myself saying frequently: what we need for effective communication in and for the Church is not a bigger megaphone but a better hearing aid.

Thank you for listening so patiently to me.

John Sullivan