

**“IS ANYBODY LISTENING?”**

*Psalm 55*

I was reminiscing a couple of weeks ago about someone that many of you will remember from the congregation here – and a powerful force in Churches Together in Lichfield as well – the late, great Eunice Connon. After the conversation, I remembered an exchange I’d had with her that I may have spoken about to some of you before (if I have, please forgive me). She and I were part of a conversation with some other ministers about the difficulty of trying to say something fresh about Christmas each year. It gets increasingly difficult saying something new about the same small collection of stories, finding a different angle on the Christmas story from the gospels. There are only so many ways of saying “Let’s get to the heart of this festival.” And as we were musing on that Eunice piped up and said (I think without any malice – and probably on behalf of all of you here this morning!), “You don’t actually think anyone remembers what you say, do you, Ian?”

I suppose I don’t really, but all preachers have at least some hope that what they say will remain in someone’s mind a bit beyond the cup of coffee at the end of the service. Over the years, I’ve done quite a bit of work with those who are training to become preachers and so I read quite a lot about preaching from all kinds of different viewpoints. In some stuff I was looking at, I came across some research (and I have no idea how – or, indeed, whether – these conclusions were reached scientifically) which said that at any one time only one third of the congregation is actually listening to the preacher.

The writer made some other points as well – for example, people often say “That gave us a lot to think about”, but they never actually do think about it. When there is a call to put something into practice, the listeners never will unless there is some opportunity for actually demonstrating that commitment with an action (such as going to the front). And the third quarter of the talk is the least well remembered because that’s when the listeners’ minds are wandering the furthest. How do people know when it’s the third quarter? You’d need to know the estimated length beforehand, wouldn’t you?

Now, discouraging as all that might be to the preacher, it’s not really that surprising, is it? We’re only human, and humans have a terrific propensity for forgetting things and for switching off in conversation. It’s not only sermons that we do it in. Next time you listen to a news bulletin on the radio, try to remember five minutes later what the various items were and what the main points were. You’re unlikely to get it right unless you’ve taken notes.

Fortunately for us, God’s not like that – and he’s listening to millions of people all at once. But he hears, he listens, he responds. Listen to these words from *Psalm 55*. **(Read Psalm)** David is pouring out his

woes to God. He feels under threat. He has been betrayed by a friend, someone he thought he could trust (vv12-14). Where can he turn? What's the point of praying?

Maybe you've been in a similar position. Perhaps not betrayed by a friend, but really in the pits somehow or other. As we've been praying this morning you may well have been asking yourself what the point of it all is. Why bother?

*(This is the third quarter about to begin, folks, so now's the time for your furthest mental wanderings.)*

Well, David was at the end of his tether. He was really down on his luck. He'd rather just be lifted out of the situation and taken away somewhere completely different (vv6-8). But he knows that there is someone who is listening to him. He pleads with God in the opening words of this song – *“Listen to my prayer, O God, do not ignore my plea; hear me and answer me.”*

He does so, though, from a position of faith and trust. Look what he writes in vv16,17. He **knows** that God listens. God never fails to hear us. In *Romans 8*, Paul writes that even when we don't know what to pray ourselves, God's Holy Spirit takes our deepest groanings as prayers. So eager is God to listen and to respond that he looks deep within our souls and knows what we would have prayed if we could have done.

*(Just coming into the last quarter now, so can you refocus your attention, please?)*

That's why David writes as he does towards the end of this Psalm. *“Cast your cares on the Lord and he will sustain you.”* That's often hard to accept, isn't it? Especially when we're right in the middle of all the hassles and when even those whom we considered our friends don't seem to want to know. But it's true. God does listen. He does care. He does answer. He's not like some distracted and distant member of the audience whose thoughts are drifting off to what they're missing on the television or how they're going to explain the lack of homework tomorrow or what the rugby score is.

God listens to our prayers – if we didn't, deep down, believe that, then there wouldn't even bother praying: there would be no point to it. He not only listens, but answers – and if we had time this morning I'm sure we could all say something about how we have experienced that in the past. So remember that. If you've just drifted back into what I'm saying because my voice quality and body language suggest that we're nearly finished, that's the bit to hang on to – God hears our prayers and he answers them. So pray with confidence and say with David, *“But as for me, I trust in you.”*