

General Assembly 2018: Moderator's Address by the Revd Nigel Uden

Friday 6 July 2018

Prayer

Open our hearts and minds, Holy One,
that they are not dull to the wondrous things of your law;
the more wondrous things of your goodness;
the most wondrous, of your love;
Unstop our ears, that they hear
the ceaseless music of your mercies,
the harmonies of your truth,
your still small voice;
through Jesus Christ, Amen. ¹

I Greeting

For the past six months my voice has been playing up: singing was impossible and speaking was husky. Indeed, one if you said to me, 'No you're not Nigel; the Nigel Uden I know doesn't have a sexy voice.' So saying less and singing nothing, I have done more listening, and realised how crucial it is. Listening. This will be a weekend of many words, but few as crucial as 'listening', so, as something of an oxymoron, listening is what I'm going to speak about.

Before I begin, though, Derek and I greet you in the name of Jesus Christ, by whom we are reconciled to God and to one another. There's little more worth listening to than that. It is a real privilege to be amongst you in this role, and also to have our families and friends here. A special thank you to them all for travelling to be with us, not least Wendy and Cliff from Belgium, and Allan, Jenny and Martin, from South Africa.

If the Bible's approach to our names is anything to go by, you are going to fare rather better with Derek as moderator than you are with me. In Biblical Hebrew, *de'rek* means 'road', 'journey' or 'way', which, given our *Walking the Way* theme, has rather more potential for success than does *ouden*, the nearest word to which in New Testament Greek means 'no-one' or 'nothing'. So, I invite you now to sit back and listen to Nigel No-one saying next to nothing.

II Preamble

Assembly's theme was inevitable: *Walking the Way, living the life of Jesus today*. This current initiative of the United Reformed Church is about renewing our emphasis upon being disciples of Jesus Christ, learning by following, and by embracing what it calls the 'holy habits' of the Christian's life. Given the suggestion that the plural of 'disciple' is 'church', ² it holds out a prospect of building-up the United Reformed Church for whatever future God offers and asks. It is not a programme, an instruction, or a blue-print. It's a commitment that we make shaped each of us by our own situation; it is resources we can use as we wish; and it is an opportunity to be caught by a vision of the church for today.

III Listening since 2016

Soon after I was elected, I set about a wide range of conversations, in order to hear about the United Reformed Church today. Mike Colechin's picture on the screens is suggestive of what it is like – and thank you Mike for your photographic artistry and theological insight – Mike says, 'we face a journey of many choices ... but these are ancient paths that have been trodden by many who have gone before, ... creating the landscape we now see'

¹ after Eric Milner-White - 1954, 1967, 1994 *My God, My Glory: aspirations, acts and prayers on the desire for God* London: Triangle page 189

² Roberts, Andrew 2016 *Holy Habits* Malcolm Downes Publishing p 33, referencing Alison Morgan 2015 *The Plural of Disciple is Church* Wells: Resource

To understand that landscape and those who tread its paths today, I set out to listen. To listen to

- people in urban and in rural settings,
- younger people and older ones,
- people in local churches, in synods and in Church House,
- URC people and ecumenical partners.

I've spoken with

- UK people and representatives of the world church,
- those in long-established churches and others in pioneering contexts,
- members of thriving fellowships and those where everything is a struggle,
- with people at the heart of the URC and those on its edge,
- representatives of GEAR and of Free to Believe,
- with social entrepreneurs and professors of theology.
- an Edinburgh street dweller and a Sicilian refugee from Iraq.

They've helped me hear

- what energises them and what scares them,
- what helps them feel heartened and what feeds disillusion.

I've heard of how the rural church emerged from the Foot and Mouth crisis with credit because it listened to farmers and of the importance of the urban church hanging in there.

I've heard from those who fear the unconditional love of God is too often compromised by a church life which risks becoming transactional – 'we'll do this for you if you meet these criteria'.

I've heard how younger generations are not so much anti church as asking: 'what's it to do with me?', fearing they are less the missing generation and more the forgotten,³ yearning for a truly inter-generational church.

I've heard how some are proud of the URC because we do church differently, and how others long for a new freedom within its structures and a new understanding of its ministry.

I've heard how ecumenism as we've known it is passé and yet how much better we can do things together than when we persist alone.

I've heard from those who lament a better yesterday when pews were full, and from those who believe there's a brighter tomorrow in being small, and fleet of foot.

And from an elderly Waldensian pastor in a Sicilian migrant centre, I've heard that our primary task is to find contemporary ways of speaking about the eternal grace of God in Jesus Christ.

This listening has been at once both sobering because the realities are hard, and encouraging because there are so many who really care about what as the URC we might do in order 'walk the way' authentically, effectively today.

And when I have asked, 'what do you require of people who have been put into positions like this one?', it has frequently been: 'listen'.

Listen: listen to the world, listen to the church, listen for God.

³ United Reformed Church 2018 Reports to General Assembly: 20-40 Task Group - Appendix 5 of Report of Mission Council page 27

IV Listening now

a Listening to the world

Listening to the world isn't especially hard; its voices clamour for attention. Jesus gives us a cue, unfailingly attentive to those he met in the world. We find him in dialogue

with those at the top - the rich young ruler who asked him about eternal life,⁴

and with those ground down – asking a blind beggar, 'What do you want me to do for you?'⁵

Wanting to hear the world

- we listen to those in power, like politicians – locally, nationally, globally;
- we listen to victims of our inhumanity to each other – like MeToo and Windrush, Grenfell and Aleppo;
- we listen to those with cutting edge ideas like Artificial Intelligence and gene therapy;
- we listen to those who set us an example, like the National Health Service and Christian Aid.

And having listened we engage – the Church of Christ exchanging ideas with the world to which he came, all of us feeling after abundant life.

b Listening to the church

Listening to other parts of the church and to other communities of faith hasn't always been the Church's strength. If only 'they' thought like 'us'! That said, we do not invite our ecumenical, international and interfaith guests here today to satisfy some kind of tokenism. Friends, even as we welcome and thank you, we want to listen as you push out the boundaries of our vision, share your cultures' interpretations of the Gospel, and inspire us to radically prophetic and determinedly pastoral ministry.

c Listening for God

Listening to the world and to the church is most rewarding, of course, when by doing so, we are intent upon listening for God, too. We listen to one another

- so that hearing the ideas of philosophy and politics, of economics and science we might recognise that the world and all that is in it belongs to the Lord;⁶
- so that hearing the insight of other faith communities we might enlarge our understanding of God;
- so that hearing the cry of poor, oppressed or abused people we might hear the challenge of God's love for all;
- so that hearing the witness of the arts we might discover God through language more eloquent than words;
- so that looking beyond ourselves we don't make God in our own image.

Listen.

d Our vocation

Let it be said, many *are* listening. My conversation partners, to whom I say a sincere thank you, were astute listeners, and perhaps you share my appreciation of what a careful listener our General Secretary is, and nourishing a culture of listening at Church House. But the few who work in Tavistock Place cannot do the listening for us. It is the vocation of the whole church to be a listening people.

Listen.

V Listening and obedience

It's common knowledge that the vows of monks and nuns include obedience. Coming from the Latin *obedire*, obedience can also mean 'listen' and when Augustinian friars take their vows this link between listening and obedience is stressed.

⁴ Luke 18.18-23

⁵ Mark 10.51

⁶ Psalm 24.1

More often than not, listening to which we add the willingness to obey doesn't leave us where it found us – any more than it left young Samuel at Shiloh,⁷ or Mary in Nazareth⁸ or Jesus in Gethsemane.⁹ Listening has consequences. Moreover, being listened to is also challenging. We can complain when we're ignored, but as soon as we start being heard there's an obedience that's required: the obedience that accepts responsibility for being part not just of identifying problems but also of striving for solutions.

VI The Prologue to the Fourth Gospel¹⁰

For our Bible reading, we heard from the prologue to the Fourth Gospel. Originally it had an audience of what Lesslie Newbigin characterises as 'Jews, Greeks, sophisticated students of religion and illiterate slaves'? How does it help us with listening today? These verses tell of Jesus' connection with God. Skilled at communication and wanting to make links with the various philosophical strands that are 'already there in the minds of his readers',¹¹ the writer speaks of 'the Word'. Now, if you hear the words of Nigel Uden, you get the very essence of me: how I think, what I believe, what I stand for, what makes me laugh, what cry, who I am. In something like the same way, Jesus is God's Word, in that Jesus reveals the essence of who God is. 'The Word was with God and the Word was God,'¹² or as Gerard Sloyan puts it, he is 'in the deepest recesses of the Godhead, ... the innermost reaches of the deity'.¹³ Which is why CK Barrett says, 'The deeds and words of Jesus are the deeds and words of God.'¹⁴ This begins to point us toward the Trinity, that pivotal notion that God reveals Godself as Father, Son and Spirit. When the Bible speaks of such a three-dimensional picture of God we read accounts of communication – including listening – between Father, Son and Spirit. For example,

- both at his Baptism and at the Transfiguration, Jesus, the Spirit upon him like a dove, hears, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him';¹⁵
- then later Jesus prays to the Father;¹⁶
- Paul tells of how the Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.¹⁷
- And then in that Gethsemane garden we learn of Jesus speaking to his Father, whilst also ready also to listen: 'if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.'¹⁸

Rublev's Icon of the Trinity has them at table. It is as if they are in conversation. Might the Scriptures be pointing us toward the obligation of both listening and being listened to? Reflecting on the icon in his eponymous poem, *Rublev*, Rowan Williams says: 'But we shall sit and speak around one table, share one food, one earth.'¹⁹

Listen.

As the passage unfolds, we learn that The Word became flesh and lived among us,²⁰ or 'took up residence in our midst'.²¹ Is that God listening as much a speaking? Many, we read, neither knew nor accepted him, as if they didn't listen or obey. Others did, though, and we're told they became children of God. And such remains the choice that we make today. Some listen for God, and others don't. We don't have to be judgemental about those who don't, that's

⁷ I Samuel 2 and 3

⁸ Luke 1.26-56

⁹ Matthew 26.36-46

¹⁰ I am grateful to John Bradbury and Tan Yak-hwee, discussion partners in this section.

¹¹ Newbigin, Lesslie 1982 *The Light has come: an exposition of the Fourth Gospel* Edinburgh: The Handel Press pages 1f

¹² John 1.1

¹³ Sloyan, Gerard 2009 *John – an Interpretation* Commentary Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press page 13

¹⁴ Barrett, C. K. 1955, 1978 *The Gospel according to St John: an introduction with commentary and notes on the Greek text* 2nd edition London SPCK page 156

¹⁵ Matthew 3.17, cf Matthew 12.18; 17.5; Mark 9.7; Luke 9.35

¹⁶ John 17

¹⁷ Romans 8.26

¹⁸ Matthew 26.39

¹⁹ Williams, Rowan 2002 *The Poems of Rowan Williams* Oxford: The Perpetua Press page 35

²⁰ John 1.14

²¹ Barrett, page 165

God's business. Rather, because listening-for-God is a hallmark of being God's children, of walking the way, our task is to attend to the quality of our own listening, and to make possible the listening of anyone else who will, which, surely, is evangelism.

Listen.

How, then, as children of God, might our listening be encouraged? And how might it be a purposeful listening which doesn't simply interest us, but also bears fruit? Here are five suggestions.

VII How to listen

a Walking the Way

First, *Walking the Way* has listening at its heart and many of the 'holy habits' are about listening: Biblical teaching, fellowship, eating together, praying, giving, offering service.²² Pondering *Walking the Way*, I have found myself on the Emmaus road, where the risen Christ drew alongside two of his mystified followers. If that wasn't a place of purposeful listening, nowhere is. The holy habits are shared that first Easter evening and gradually the disconsolate pair's commitment to the living Christ is stirred and cultivated, as listening to the stranger he becomes a teacher, then a friend and ultimately is recognised to be their Saviour. If our vocation is to be a listening people, *Walking the Way* offers us a valuable resource.

b Accompaniment

Secondly, we listen through accompanying. Many of you know accompaniment is central to my self-understanding, and to my view of mission and ministry. In my dreams I own a beautiful grand piano, and spend my life playing it. But not as a soloist. When my 1970s peers, some of whom are here, liked the Bay City Rollers and bopped along prayerfully to *God Save Rock and Roll*, my hero was Gerald Moore, the accompanist who exemplifies that listening which enables the soloist to shine. Never did he obtrude – he even entitled his autobiography *Am I too loud?*²³ He knew his role required the most acute listening, and so it is for us. We belong together; we are in covenant with God and with each other. But we only cohere as we accompany one another through life, listening to one another's melodies, each of us adding richness to the harmony. The point about accompanying is that it is never about me; it is always about us. And that's the Body of Christ. Whatever our tomorrows hold, we will discern them by accompanying one another in committed listening, and ensuring that none of us are too loud.

c Effective Councils

Thirdly, none of this is to suggest that listening is an undemanding option. Never is that truer than when churches are conciliar – governed by committees, synods and assemblies, which is all about the quality listening of rigorous debate. The lazy way of conciliar government is Groupthink; because we like, trust or don't want to upset the leadership, we pass their proposals with too little scrutiny.²⁴ That is not exercising the responsible listening that conciliar leadership requires. If we are listening carefully, questions will arise, and we should ask them; points of difference will occur, and we should raise them; contrasting principles will become apparent and we should thrash them out. Conciliar government is not about the many agreeing with the few because they feel they should. It is about the many reaching a mutually acceptable position because they've listened perceptively and been persuaded. Lesley Charlton once observed that 'we are so busy being nice that we don't know how to be loving.'²⁵ A renaissance of the United Reformed Church will not arise if we don't take the responsibility that conciliar government demands of us. This is not a time for Groupthink's nice hiding from hard debate.

²² Roberts, pages 117ff

²³ Moore, Gerald 1962 *Am I too loud? Memoirs of an accompanist* London: Hamish Hamilton

²⁴ Janis, Irving, 1972, 1982 *Groupthink: psychological studies of policy decisions and fiascoes* Boston: Houghton Mifflin

²⁵ Lesley Charlton, unpublished MSc dissertation, 2005

d Change

Fourthly, I want to reiterate that listening doesn't leave us where it found us, because listening is the most potent agent of change. Where listening's lacking, there will often be no vision, no persuasion, no consensus, no united way forward. But listen, and great change is possible ... maybe inevitable. The story is told of two servants of this Assembly who didn't always agree. In one debate they disagreed at the start and at the end. But so carefully had they listened to each other, that in the course of the meeting each had changed his mind. That is the power of listening. It was listening that enabled us to navigate the oceans of debate occasioned by human sexuality, until we came to a broad harbour of mixed opinion where we could set anchor. As we continue charting the URC's future, it is only listening that will take us down fresh avenues, and into ways of being the Church that are as new and renewing for our day as were the Reformation and the Evangelical Revival for theirs.

e Be worth listening to

And lastly, our challenge is to be worth listening to. One minister stressed how wrongly we assume that both within and outwith the Church people don't want strong meat, just comforting milk.²⁶ Another man lamented the paucity of theological debate in the church. Urging us, in all our diversity, to listen insightfully to one another, he looks for depth more than growth, in young people and church members, as well as in ministers. A hoped-for consequence would be the emergence of a prophetic voice, which confidently interrogates the social, political, scientific, economic and ethical issues of our day so credibly that we are listened to. This does not require us to be big. Indeed, as others suggest, prophets often arise not from the centre, the establishment, but from the edge. As David Cornick suggests, we need to explore remnant theology, whereby being small is not a problem, but our vocation. Traci Blackmon, from America's United Church of Christ, goes so far as to say that 'big number and big resources are antithetical to the Gospel. Maybe' she says, 'God is calling us to remnant status, where God is the hero of the story, not our good works.'²⁷ And that's what's worth listening to. After all, Bishop Michael Curry got a hearing, referencing Martin Luther King, Teilhard de Chardin and spirituals, but, above all, the nature – the durable nature - of God's love in Christ.²⁸ And that's the real point of determined listening: it makes us worth listening to because we speak not of ourselves, but of the God revealed in Jesus Christ, who lived that we might know love, and died that we might live.

VIII Conclusion

In the name of God –

who spoke and all was made,
who was Word made flesh,
and who is with us, heeding and hearing –

listen to one another in the Assembly and afterwards, listen to the world and listen to God. My hunch is that it's the defining quality of walking the way, of living the life of Jesus today, and enabling others to do so, too.

So be it, and to God alone be the glory, Amen

Nigel Uden
6 July 2018

²⁶ I Corinthians 3.2; Hebrews 5.11-14

²⁷ From the writer's notes, during a consultation between URC and United Church of Christ, London, 12th September 2017

²⁸ The Wedding of Prince Henry of Wales and Ms Megan Markle 13th May 2018, St George's Chapel Windsor