



issue 28

..... walking through treacle

church. Theirs was a bit more understanding, but mine pronounced he was destined for hell.

The cracks were beginning to show. The Pentecostal attitude towards homosexuality was brutal, and unloving. It had to be 'dealt with'. They should stay together, the Pastor said (though I hadn't asked!), with no thought to the dreadful situation that would leave my daughter in for the rest of her life. The depression got worse. I asked if those who committed suicide would lose their salvation. The longest pause I have ever heard told me all I needed to know. I was consigned to hell if I chose to end it all.

By now, the Pastor and his assistant had been to the States and taken on board the theology of Rick Warren (of Saddleback Church, Ca.) and his 'Purpose-driven Life'. I hated it. I saw it as a marketing strategy of bland, bite-sized 'beliefs' masquerading as Christian faith. When they moved on to teaching us to become a 'contagious Christian', making friends in order to convert them, I left. I was seen as in rebellion. But I could not swallow the assertion that God has our life planned, and we are, whatever our circumstances, just where he wants us to be. Really? And this applies to abused and tortured children as well? That didn't sound like a loving God who asks us to call him Abba, Father. I began to think the whole Christian thing was a hoax.

Still feeling I needed a Christian community, I moved to an Independent Evangelical church I had heard good things about. But it's not a community, just a collection of individuals and cliques. Dogma spouts from the pulpit every week. There is no place for questions. Everyone

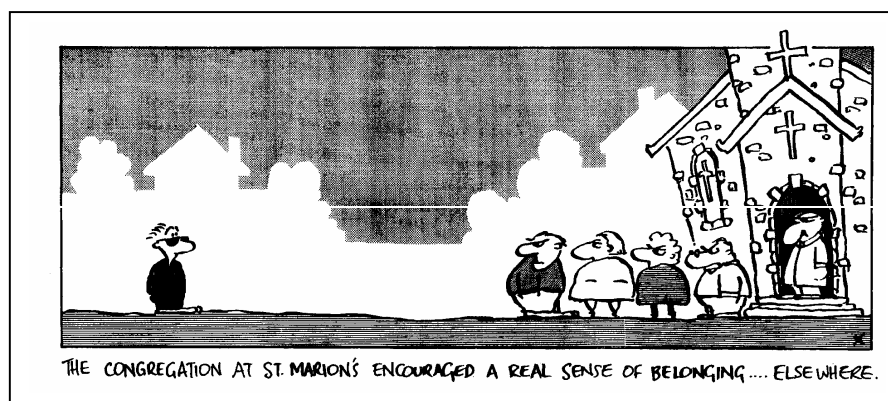
outside the evangelical churches will go to hell unless we get them to 'make a commitment to Jesus'. But I can't believe salvation is just a question of saying the 'Sinners' prayer' and that's it. We are told to 'work out our salvation with fear and trembling' (Phil 2:12). Surely salvation and our Christian life should be a journey through mystery and love?

I'm told if I can't find God then I am turning my back on him. We must all fall in love with Jesus, and have a relationship with him. I can't love – every person I have ever loved either died or went away from me (and that includes my beloved dog!) I find it hard to 'have relationships'. I will have to take anti-depressant medication for the rest of my life, and life feels like walking through treacle.

I believe in God. He came and fetched me 16 years ago. But I can't find him again; he doesn't speak to me any more. The remains of the fundamentalist Christian teaching I first received tell me I am guilty of rejecting God. But I have found a Christian web site where Christians of all shades of doctrine 'meet', and I am gradually, and very painfully realising there really is a life beyond evangelicalism. It's a struggle. I feel alone. I'm 70 this year, and I keep thinking 'is this all there is to life – aren't I supposed to be joyful and victorious?'

I don't want to be here any longer.

'Maggie'



The Power of Listening

“Let them tell their own story – they may not have heard it before¹.”

Until we are heard we cannot hear! This is especially true for people hurt and disoriented in their faith. People for who church and faith have become filled with doubt, questions and confusion. Supporting someone in these upheavals of faith and church participation begins with a genuine commitment to try and understand their position and their feelings. We cannot underestimate the power of such listening as a helpful even healing role in people’s faith journeys. When listening is non-judgemental and accepting it provides the context in which pains, abuses, questions, confusion, doubt, and heartache can be verbalised and most importantly heard.

In trying to companion and support church leavers the power and significance of listening has been highlighted for me. Again and again through groups for people struggling with faith questions and people’s experience of spiritual direction the power of non-judgemental listening has been emphasised. Listening is a powerful tool. It is perhaps the greatest tool we have to support people in difficult places of faith, evangelism and orienting church to the needs and concerns of real people. It is a tool that is too easily under rated. People want and need to be heard but they want to be heard in particular ways. What are the qualities of such listening?

Non-judgemental Listening – It is crucially important that the listening be non-judgemental. The majority of people struggling with church and faith have significant questions or hurts about church, the bible, prayer and God and they need to talk about these. The listening they require is non-defensive. The kind of listening that does not try to defend the church, the bible or even defend God. Each gathering of a Spirited Exchanges group begins with a short introduction in which some ground rules are explained. One of these is that ‘we let God defend God’. In other words we are not going to present alternative viewpoints, quote scripture or attempt to refute any of the things people might say. On the contrary people are encouraged to verbalise what they feel and believe. If they are angry let them talk about their anger. If they are hurt let them describe that hurt

and what it has done to them. If they have questions and doubts we let them put those ‘out there’ so they themselves and others can see them objectively.

Face-value Listening – Each person’s story has to be taken on face value. At times comments are made about church leaderships or bible passages or failed prayer that appear ‘over the top’, exaggerated, only half the story or simply untrue. At such times the kind of listening that is required is a listening that accepts that this is the truth as it is experienced by this person right now. It is their truth and whether or not others might agree it is the truth they are acting out of. It is true - at least in its consequences. Therefore we need to take their perspective and experiences at face value. In the long run more is gained through this approach than through trying to alter people’s perception of the truth.

Provisional Listening – The corollary to face-value listening is provisional listening. It means accepting that this is the person’s viewpoint, feelings or understanding at this point in time. They may well, and probably will, change with time. The freedom of provisional listening allows, even invites people, to verbalise alternative viewpoints, contested feelings, experiences and thoughts that may lead to contrary conclusions.

Listening for what isn’t said – Carefully watching body language and noticing emotions as well as arguments, pauses as well as words are essential to the listening art. Probing an emotion and acknowledging a feeling may open up deeper understandings for speaker and listener.

Long-term Listening – people’s faith questions are not resolved quickly, their pain is not healed instantly and their confusion does not clear in the first conversation. Therefore the kind of listening that is required is long term. Long-term listening is both hugely daunting and very life giving. It is hugely daunting because it reminds us that to really be a companion for this person then a substantial amount of time is required. It is life-giving because it reminds us that no matter how dark, angry or confused the person may be when we meet them and no matter how inadequate our responses may also be one conversation never provides ‘the answer’. Each conversation is simply part of a long journey of many conversations.

Incarnational Listening – It is significant who listens. One of the reasons spiritual direction and discussion group's work is that there is someone listening who represents the Christian faith, and /or the church. As people raise their doubts, anxieties, past hurts and abuses they are being listened to by someone who represents, at least to some degree, the organisation, the faith, even the and attacking. The following quote is taken from someone who has gone on a hugely difficult and grief filled journey of faith:

'Even more valuable to me over this time was being able to talk with someone about all of it. Not just the big questions about God but also the horror and sense of abandonment that was the cause of it all. A person I trusted and came to highly respect, and who freely gave me their time on a regular basis. This church figure gave me the freedom to say what I needed to say without judging and without trying to provide all the answers. Without suggesting I needed to return to church in order to find what I was looking for, they provided options and caused me to think about things in new and different ways.'

Book Review

'Chance to Dance...Risking a Spiritually Mature Life'

By W. Robert McClelland. CBP Press, St Louis, Missouri; 1986

I'm a fan for books that break new ground. The back cover of this one reads: "*The central theme of this book is that institutionalised religion, a good and necessary scaffold in the early building of the spiritual life, needs to be dismantled during mid-life for the sake of the spiritual life it was intended to serve.*"

This dismantling calls forth the resistance of religions authorities. It requires of us a courage to risk anxiety and the uncertainty of birthing a spiritually mature life. The biblical perspectives opened here, the author believes, offer such courage and permission to risk the journey. We are called to risk living the miracle we call life."

It probably helps to know that McClelland, minister, teacher, writer, has himself been through a mid-life

Notice the person listening was a "church figure". This person's position as a person of faith and a 'church figure' added a quality to the listening. The fact that the person didn't suggest they needed to return to church is important. The fact that the person who said it was a 'church figure' increased significantly the power of the comment.

Painful listening – Finally the listener must really hear the pain of the other person. Their role is simply to absorb the others pain. Not minimising it, but sympathetically; if possible empathetically sharing in their pain and confusion. This is the kind of listening that hears the cry of the other person, takes on something of their pain and offers that pain in prayer to God.

Researching and listening to church leavers and people in the darkest of faith's journeys over the last ten years has led me to believe that listening, of the type described here, is the most powerful tool in our tool box. A tool that opens up space for the Spirit of God to work in both our lives.

Alan Jamieson

¹ Larsen Ron, (1999) Gay Christians and Spiritual Direction. www.sgm.org.nz Page 5.

'burn out' and speaks from experience – and experience is for him an important ingredient in working out a worthwhile theology (let's drink to that).

There's a new take on a lot of familiar things: miracles (essentially intrusions – not necessarily supernatural; restlessness ('a sign of God's presence'); life in the 'Kingdom' (more often than not its 'crazy'); perfection ('my perfection is to be measured by the potential of *my* being. I am to be who *I* am. Jesus is calling me to be me, ad no one else'); sin, conscience, etc (Clearly the Pharisee is not a bad guy lurking behind a handlebar moustache. But the Pharisee is so focussed on being good that he misses the scenery and the natives along the way. His trouble is that he has an overdeveloped conscience and has trouble getting close to people.')

Fresh, thoughtful and entertaining. Great stuff.

Murray Jansen

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