

“Listen ... and live.” (Isaiah 55:3)

Good morning from all of us at Ampleforth. You are very welcome to our first Home Retreat. My name is Fr Kevin. The theme for today’s retreat is “Listen and live,” which is a very appropriate place to start as “listen” is the first word of the Rule of Saint Benedict. Our life is meant to be, first of all, a listening life. Every morning at Matins we sing: “O that today you would listen to his voice, harden not your heart.” (Psalm 94) In the words of Psalm 85; “I will hear what the Lord has to say, a voice that speaks peace.”

There’s a beautiful book written by the Anglican priest Michael Mayne entitled: “*This Sunrise of Wonder*”. He wrote it as a gift to his grandchildren - wanting to share with them all that had inspired him in life, nature, relationships, literature, music and art. He did so in the hope that they might live with their eyes and ears and hearts open to the wonder and beauty waiting to be found in life.

There is something very powerful about *choosing* to listen and to look; that choice allows life to begin to reveal itself in its full depth and richness.

I have a medal of Saint Benedict where he has his finger to his lips, going; “*Ssssh! Quiet down. Listen...*” God, life, have something to say to you, to show you, if you are willing to pause for a moment, to slow down your headlong rush into the future, your restless quest for the next thing – just to be present and listen. We think of Elijah who does not hear the voice of the Lord in the earthquake, wind or fire. It’s only after these things have quietened down that he is able to hear him in the gentle breeze, or as some translations put it, in the “sound of silence”.

We think of Mary “pondering these things and treasuring them in her heart” (*even those that pierce her heart*). It is this treasuring in her heart, this listening to her life, that is the source of her wisdom and compassion, her gentleness and peace. She is an *everyday contemplative* – as a daughter, a wife, a mother, listening to life and to God, receiving the events of her life deep within her, letting them unfold in their full richness in the attentive quietness of her heart - like rain slowly sinking into the earth, nourishing the deep roots of life.

Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, who many years ago gave a series of very popular talks on BBC radio, once told the story of an elderly lady who came to him asking his advice about prayer. She explained that for 14 years she had been praying ‘the Jesus Prayer’ almost continually but it hadn’t worked. “If you’re doing all the talking”, he said, “you’re not giving God a chance to speak.” “What will I do then?” she asked. He advised her to go to her room after breakfast, put it right, and then ‘light a little lamp before the ikon you have, and first of all take stock of your room. Just sit, look round and try to see where you live because I am sure it’s been a long time since you’ve really seen your room. And then take out your knitting and for fifteen minutes knit before the face of God, but I forbid you to say one word of prayer. You just knit, and try to enjoy the peace of your room.’ She didn’t think it was very pious advice, but she took it.

Later she came back to him, saying: ‘It works. After breakfast I got everything ready, made sure there was nothing that would worry me, and then I settled into my armchair and thought, “Oh how nice, I have fifteen minutes in which I can do nothing without feeling guilty!” And I looked around and *for the first time in years* I thought, “Oh, what a nice room I live in.”’ Then she said, ‘I felt so quiet because the room was so peaceful. There was a clock ticking but it didn’t disturb the silence. It’s ticking just underlined the fact that everything was so

still, and after a while I remembered that I must knit before the face of God, so I began to knit. And I became more and more aware of the silence. ‘The needles hit the armrest of my chair, the clock was ticking peacefully, there was nothing to bother about, I had no need of straining myself. Then I perceived that this silence was not simply an absence of noise, but that the silence had substance. It was not an absence of something but a presence of something. The silence had a density, a richness, and it began to pervade me. The silence *around* began to come and meet the silence *in* me. ‘All of a sudden I perceived that the silence was a presence. At the heart of the silence there was Him who is all stillness, all peace, all poise.’ She had found the way!: “Be still and know that I am God.” (Psalm 46:10)

We are often absent from so much of our lives. We’re too busy, too distracted, in too much of a rush, too eager to move on to the next thing, too anxious to achieve what we feel we need to achieve, to just stop and appreciate the present and to taste its richness. And it is enough, more than enough!

Thomas Merton puts it like this:

“We already have everything, but we don’t know it and we don’t experience it. All we need is to experience what we already possess. The trouble is, we aren’t taking time to do so.”
“So what to do you?” he says: “You start where you are and *you deepen what you already have.*”

In the famous book, “The Little Prince”, by Antoine de Saint Exupery, one day the little prince says: “The people where you live cultivate five thousand roses in one garden... and they do not find what they seek! And yet what they seek can be found in a single rose or a drop of water.”

William Wordsworth in one of his poems says:
“To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.”¹

There is so much richness already in our lives if only we stopped and listened and looked.

I remember an exercise we did many years ago on a counselling course where we each had to sit opposite another participant and for two minutes look steadily into their eyes, without talking, moving or looking away. Two minutes is a long time..! The temptation to look away, to distract attention, is immense. It is incredibly intimate – to really see another person and be seen by them. You are struck by the sheer reality and mystery of another human being. They are a whole world, a whole mysterious universe in themselves.

To really look at life is such a powerful act. Most of the time we glide past each other, not really encountering each other or seeing each other. We do the same with life, with nature, with God. What a gift we would give ourselves if we took a little time to stop, to look and to listen. There is so much already there. No need to go shopping or go on the internet – it’s already there waiting to be seen and heard and appreciated.

In the prophet Isaiah it says:

“Why spend money on what is not bread,

¹ William Wordsworth, “Song at the Feast of Brougham Castle”

your wages on what fails to satisfy?

Listen, listen to me,

and you will have good things to eat, and rich food to enjoy. Pay attention, come to me; listen, and your soul will live.”

(Isaiah 55:1-3)

That is my invitation to you today. To let go for a while the headlong rush into the future, the tyranny of so many preoccupations, to relinquish for a moment the quest for the next thing, to silence your own voice for a moment to hear what Another has to say, and to see and enjoy what is already there – to treasure the wonder and miracle of life. It is there waiting patiently for you to come home.

We are already children of God, we already have everything, so we start where we are and deepen what we already have.”

Some suggestions:

1. Like that elderly lady light a candle in a quiet room. Sit, look around the room, and just rest there, nothing to do, nothing to worry about, no agenda. Just let yourself rest there.
2. Or if you are able to go outside into nature. Just sit or walk slowly, feel the breeze, look at the colours, hear the sounds of birds and leaves, look at the sky. Just notice – no need to do anything except take time to really look around and take it in.
3. Throughout the day, if you are with others, take the time to *really* look at them, to really see them as they are in all their mystery and richness.
4. Or perhaps sit down and remember all the people you are grateful for in your life – past or present. The people who enrich your life now or the people who have made you who you are today; whose love, support, kindness, company... has enabled you to be you today. Perhaps name them and say a prayer for them.
5. Is there anything in your life you want to treasure – certain memories, relationships, places, events? Take some time to remember them.
6. Take a favourite scripture piece and take time to read it slowly, to let yourself really hear it. *(I have included the text of Psalm 139 in the printed version of this talk if you would like to use it.)*

May God bless you this day.

Glory be...

SOME TEXTS

Psalm 139

- ¹O LORD, you search me and you know me.
²You yourself know my resting and my rising;
you discern my thoughts from afar.
³You mark when I walk or lie down;
you know all my ways through and through.
- ⁴Before ever a word is on my tongue,
you know it, O LORD, through and through.
⁵Behind and before, you besiege me,
your hand ever laid upon me.
⁶Too wonderful for me, this knowledge;
too high, beyond my reach.
- ⁷O where can I go from your spirit,
or where can I flee from your face?
⁸If I climb the heavens, you are there.
If I lie in the grave, you are there.
- ⁹If I take the wings of the dawn
or dwell at the sea's furthest end,
¹⁰even there your hand would lead me;
your right hand would hold me fast.
- ¹¹If I say, "Let the darkness hide me
and the light around me be night,"
¹²even darkness is not dark to you,
the night shall be as bright as day,
and darkness the same as the light.
- ¹³For it was you who formed my inmost being,
knit me together in my mother's womb.
¹⁴I thank you who wonderfully made me;
how wonderful are your works,
which my soul knows well!
- ¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being fashioned in secret
and moulded in the depths of the earth.
- ¹⁶Your eyes saw me yet unformed;
and all days are recorded in your book,
formed before one of them came into being.
- ¹⁷To me how precious your thoughts, O God;
how great is the sum of them!
¹⁸If I count them, they are more than the sand;
at the end I am still with you.

Speak Lord

In the silence of the stars,
In the quiet of the hills,
In the heaving of the sea,
Speak, Lord.

In the stillness of this room,
In the calming of my mind,
In the longing of my heart,
Speak, Lord.

In the voice of a friend,
In the chatter of a child,
In the words of a stranger,
Speak, Lord.

In the opening of a book,
In the looking at a flower,
In the listening to music,
Speak, Lord.
For your servant listens.
(*David Adam*)

Enzo Bianchi On Silence

We grow in the spiritual life to the extent that we descend into the depths of listening. Listening means not only confessing that another is present, but making space in ourselves for this presence to the point that we become the dwelling place of the Other.

The spiritual and ascetic tradition has always seen silence as essential to an authentic spiritual and prayer life. Through silence we awaken to the experience of the indwelling of God, because the God we seek by following the risen Christ in faith is a God who is not outside of us, but who dwells within us. In the fourth Gospel Jesus says, ‘Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them’ (John 14.23). Silence is a language of love, of depth, of being present to another. In the experience of love, it is a language that is often much more eloquent, intense and communicative than a word. Today, unfortunately, silence is rare. It is what most is missing in a world in which we are deafened by noise, bombarded by visual and auditory messages, and bereft of – at times almost exiled from – our interiority.

Mauro Lepori on Listening

“For St. Benedict, without listening there is no silence. Benedictine and monastic silence in general is never a closing oneself off inside oneself, but an act of relation, in fact a “taciturnitas”(being reticent in conversation), that is a renouncing of one’s own turn to speak in order to listen to the other. Silence is born out of the humility that recognises that the word of the other is more important than one’s own.”