



A THOUGHT FOR THE WEEKEND

26th May 2023

"Does he who made the ear not hear?"

Psalm 94:9

Last weekend I mentioned John Greenleaf Whittier, a nineteenth century Quaker poet. I have friends who are 'Quakers' (The Society of Friends) perhaps you have too. Their worship practice is to remain silent; then one or another can speak, read, pray or sing as they feel led.

A member of the Friends was once asked what they did if someone at their meeting was on their feet too often and saying too much. The answer came, *"We take them aside and give them a good listening to."*, -an interesting spin on the 'good *talking to*' we might give someone if they were out of order!

We all need a listener at times, a trusted, sympathetic, discreet, non-judgemental friend who offers what counsellors call 'unconditional positive regard'. Confiding in a listener is a risk, but *"if you don't have someone to tell everything you risk telling everyone something"*. Being a listener too is a responsibility, and for safeguarding reasons, of course, a listener may need to say, "If what you tell me is of serious concern I will need to take it further." -or words to that effect. To be either speaker or listener, then, is a risk and a responsibility, -and a privilege.

That Quaker story suggests that often what is needed is just to be heard. Listening and asking the right questions can help to lift a person's inner load and facilitate them in 'thinking aloud' towards a way forward; but it needs courage for the speaker, and patience -at least- from the listener.

Psalm 94:9 asks the rhetorical question, *"Does he who made the ear not hear?"* Our Father God is, of course, the supreme listener. Maybe, like me, you often talk (=pray!) aloud to him at length and depth when alone, perhaps walking or driving. The fact that God is -as the Anglican Collect says- *"always more ready to hear than we to pray"* does not mean he agrees to all I may say or ask; rather, as C S Lewis said of prayer, *"It doesn't change God. It changes me."* That is the key.

Jesus listened to people and said things to 'draw them out'. Think of his words to Nicodemus (John 3) or the woman at the well (John 4). If we are to follow his example (1 Corinthians 11:1), and that of our Father God (Psalm 34:15), then we must be good listeners: patient, discreet, trustworthy, attentive, loving. Good listeners don't say "I understand", when they cannot; they don't interrupt with a story from their own experience which 'tops' what they are being told; that will stifle the one who has plucked up the courage to share.

After Job's misfortunes, his three friends came and sat with him for seven days, saying nothing (2:13), and then he poured out his heart to them (Ch. 3). Only when they began to speak -with their own agendas and misplaced understanding- did they get it wrong (42:7)!

So my weekend thought: For whom can I -or you- be that listening ear? Or do we need a 'good *listening to*' ourselves? Who is a trusted *confidante*?