

Centre for Ecclesial Ethics

Symposium May 2022

Listening

for a vigilant and vulnerable Church

– *exploring an ecclesial ethics of listening* –



What happens to me, to us and our Church when we attentively listen? What are the ecclesial blind spots that hinder our listening and stop us from noticing? Which ecclesial imaginaries influence our visions or distort our listening? What does it mean to enter into each others stories in a climate of polarisation? What does it mean for the Church to enact transformation as a result of attentive listening? What official or professional roles

in the Church can impair their holder's capacity to listen? These are just a few of the questions that emerged from our exploration of an ecclesial ethics of listening, that was the focus of the first symposium of the *Centre for Ecclesial Ethics* in Cambridge on 20th May 2022. Twenty scholars and practitioners, bishops and priests from across the UK, Ireland and the US gathered in the Lash Library at the Margaret Beaufort Institute to reflect upon the ecclesiological and ethical implications of attentive listening for a vigilant and vulnerable Church. What followed was a challenging and inspiring dialogue that was enriched and shaped by expert and moving insights into the significance of vulnerability and vigilance, collective and variegated listening and moral and spiritual imagination for an ecclesial ethics of listening.

Our proceedings opened with an introduction from the Director of the CEE, [Dr Liam Hayes](#), in which he reflected upon the need within our world and our Church for a personal and structural embrace of attentive listening for both human and ecclesial flourishing and a faithful discipleship,. Following our attentive listening to the account of the man born blind from John's gospel, which we would pick up once again towards the end of the symposium, Dr Clare Watkins concluded our introductions with an insightful ecclesial mapping of the potential that listening carries for the Church not only in its personal expression, but also importantly through our participation in collective listening as Church that posed questions regarding how such listening might find expression in our structures and practices.

For a symposium whose focus was the practice of listening, it was imperative that we opened our deliberations with an immersion in the very practice that we were seeking to promote – thus the principle morning session was dedicated to a collective attentive listening to the narrative voices of those who accompany women and men whose experience and voice is too often neglected and unheard, quietened or marginalised in the life and praxis of our Church. Each speaker had been invited to reflect upon the impact of the practice of listening for both themselves and those they accompanied, specifically attending to the question 'what happens to us when we listen?'

Dr Catherine Sexton opened the session with her reflection on listening within her role with the *Boundary Breaking* project that is examining the ecclesial-cultural implications of the sex abuse crisis within the Catholic Church; Dr Vincent Manning reflected on his role of accompanying women and men living with HIV through Catholics for AIDS prevention and support, whilst Professor Tina Beattie reflected upon her listening with and to the diverse experiences and voices of women. Fr Sean Connolly reflected on the fruits of listening 'one-to-one' with Catholics in two contrasting parishes through the method of broad-based organising and Dr Claire Jenkins shared her experience of listening with young trans people. Kamara Katama, a sixth form chaplain in South London shared her reflection upon her listening with and accompaniment of vulnerable young adults whilst Dr Sue Price drew our morning to a close with her insight into listening and non-verbal communication with young children.

Each of these profound and moving reflections afforded all participants the opportunity not only to begin to reflect upon the ecclesial and ethical implications of listening, but perhaps more significantly to ponder upon what was happening for them in this process of deep and attentive listening during this time – reflections that would find space in the papers from our afternoon session.

The second session of the symposium consisted of three short papers given by Drs Anna Abram, Gemma Simmonds and Professor Pat Hannon in which each presenter

through their own perspective and discipline reflected upon what happens for them and the church when we listen, with reference to our listening to the narrative voices in the morning and their wider experience and insight. The potential for the significant relationship between moral imagination and attentive listening was creatively opened up for us in the first paper in which [Dr Anna Abram](#) proposed that a 'deliberate use of moral imagination can get us moving from the staleness of certain types of images we carry with us individually and collectively' and that it was a concept which could be useful for examining how we listen 'to, with and as', for 'moral imagination has something to do with a deliberate search for what's not obvious, even what is not said or clear, visible, or is pushed to peripheries' and 'moral imagination can help us to articulate shifts and movements that take place in the process of attentive listening.'

[Dr Gemma Simmonds](#) teased out the challenges and opportunities for the church that the relationship between the font of spirituality and listening unveiled. Gemma reflected that as with languages so in spiritual direction we are trained to listen 'not only for what people say but for what they actually mean' and with reference to Ignatius 'how can we ever find intimate understanding of ourselves, let alone another, if we do not listen.'

With reference to the almost complete collapse today of the listening sacrament – reconciliation – Gemma reflected that if we could unpack the sacraments as 'embodied signs that truly do make real what they signify, this would challenge us not only to listen but to enact and embody what we are listening to. It would therefore require from both the ministers and the receivers of the sacraments to understand the profound mutuality of change and conversion that is required on both sides, just as the rules of religious life require change and conversion.'

[Professor Pat Hannon](#) unveiled the not insignificant impediments that arise as obstacles to an embrace of attentive listening through certain ecclesial dispositions and conventions, and personal and structural prejudice. Through two real life cases in which 'deliberate and intentional listening led to a change of mind' Pat illustrated what happens when someone learns to listen and when your dialogue partner is an institution' that is often functionally deaf. Pat concluded by reflecting that 'conventions of the Church at whatever level, important and even necessary as in context they may be, can take hold of one's mind in a way that blocks access to a larger more complex world, the real world, that deafens one to other discourses, blinds one to ways of seeing that are shaped by a different experience of what it is to be a human being.'

In the third session of our symposium [Professor Jim Keenan](#) addressed the ecclesial and ethical implications of listening and began to map out what an ecclesial ethics of listening might mean and include for a vigilant and vulnerable church. Jim reflected that 'by emphasizing voice in its texture and timbre, we can report on listening in a much more embodied relationality that I think furthers the importance of listening itself... we see how scripture upholds how listening is a constitutive part of discipleship. In fact, I think we can say that one cannot be a disciple, if one cannot listen...[and] through looking at the capacity for vulnerability and the practice of recognition [we can see] more expansively the normative tasks found within an ecclesial ethics of listening.' Like the man born blind Jim observes '*we are blessed because though we do not see him, we hear his voice and follow him. The call to discipleship is one that we hear personally and collectively, it is a call in which we are found by Christ and invited to vulnerably recognize him. We are called then to listen first so as to confess and promote the ministry of Jesus.*'

The remarkably rich dialogue and reflection that our symposium framed, served by a deep attentive listening to the diverse experience and wisdom of each participant and their companions, has opened up for the *Centre for Ecclesial Ethics* a pathway to future research and outreach. It is a dialogue that has suggested that the pathway to a personal and structural embrace of an *ecclesial ethics of attentive listening* is marked and sustained by a freely chosen and voluntary vulnerability rather than domination, humility rather than entitlement, simplicity rather than excess on our journey towards a renewed and different church that is attentive to both the summons of the gospel and human fragility.

I am most grateful for the presence, time, wisdom and consideration that each of our participants generously contributed to such a joyful symposium. Thank you.

Dr Liam Hayes

Director, Centre for Ecclesial Ethics

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The following papers are also available to download here:

- [Dr Liam Hayes Introduction](#)
- [Dr Anna Abram short paper](#)
- [Professor Pat Hannon short paper](#)
- [Professor Jim Keenan paper](#)
- [Sr Gemma Simmonds paper](#)

Scripture Reading: John 9

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.' They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.'

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.' Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.'

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.' His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.' He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshipped him. Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.'