

St Peter's Church, Dorchester, Sunday 1st March 2026, i.e. Lent 2. Preached at their 0900 and 1030 Holy Communion services. Page references are to *Rhetorical Listening*, by Krista Ratcliffe (2005).

Genesis 12:1-4a

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Lent is a good time for owning up to bad habits. In that spirit, perhaps this is a good time for me to share that I enjoy eavesdropping. I have what you might call a professional interest in my fellow human beings: I think people are fascinating, and I take what I hope is an appropriate degree of satisfaction in learning about people's quirks. I justify that to myself by saying that understanding people helps me to love them better. And there are few things that are quite as revealing of a person's quirks as the way they talk when they don't know that you're listening.

Maybe you have a clear picture of what eavesdropping looks like; but my picture was challenged recently. An author I was reading defines it positively: she says that eavesdropping is the choice “to stand outside...in an uncomfortable spot...on the border of knowing and not knowing...granting others the inside position...[and] listening [in order] to learn” [p. 105]. Far from being a bad habit, she argues that eavesdropping is simply another kind of listening, and something you can use for good. Eavesdropping gives us a new perspective that we would never arrive at on our own. Reading things that were written for other people is basically the only way we can learn about history, for example. And the author of my book says that you can also eavesdrop on yourself: you just have to imagine what it's like to stand outside and listen-in on how you normally talk. The results can be revealing.

I mention my fondness for eavesdropping because it seems to me that very often when we read the Bible we are overhearing a conversation that is not directly addressed to us. For the next couple of months, if we keep our ears open, we will overhear lots of those sorts of conversations in Church. Last week it was Jesus talking with the devil in the wilderness – quite fun to be a fly on the wall in that conversation! Next week we've got Jesus with the Samaritan woman in John chapter four. And in Holy Week we overhear Jesus talking with the disciples in the Upper Room; praying alone in the garden of Gethsemane; talking with Mary Magdalene at the tomb, and with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus... The list goes on. In each case, there's a conversation happening, and we haven't been invited; but we are given a chance to listen-in and learn what we can.

That's especially true today. The story in John chapter three already has a furtive feel to it. We're told that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, perhaps because he's afraid of who might overhear him. [3:2; compare John 19:38-39.] And for a while it seems as if we are eavesdropping. But then things get a bit more interesting. When you're listening-in to a conversation between two strangers you can't expect to understand everything that they're saying. But it becomes clear pretty soon that Nicodemus doesn't really understand what Jesus is saying either: maybe he feels that he's stumbled into someone else's conversation too.

There's something else here that's strange. You can't tell from our English translation, but in the original Greek it isn't clear who the audience really is. In verse seven Jesus says,

Do not be astonished that I said to you [singular], “You [plural] must be born from above.”

That sounds pretty straightforward. What you can't hear in the English is that halfway through that statement Jesus stops talking to one person and starts talking to several people, perhaps lots of people. “*You all* must be born from above”: the “you” is plural. He does the same thing again in verses eleven and twelve, where every one of the “you”s, apart from the first one, is plural. At the beginning of our reading Jesus was addressing Nicodemus on his own; but perhaps after a while he starts treating Nicodemus as a representative of his whole community, someone carrying a message. That's a possibility. But it might also be that – at some point in this story – Jesus has “broken the fourth wall”, as they say in theatre: perhaps he has started talking to us.

The idea that Jesus has turned away from the person in front of him and started talking to us shouldn't be that strange, really. There are other places in John's Gospel where we are spoken to as the audience. At the end of chapter twenty it says,

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. [20:30-31]

As I said a few minutes ago, this sort of thing is happening all the time when we read the Bible. It may have been written for someone else; but it wasn't *just* written for someone else. We are not just eavesdropping; God knows we are part of the conversation.

When we read sacred literature we intuitively embody the best parts of eavesdropping. We are, after

all, trying to learn by listening to someone else's priorities. We are foreigners to Scripture: when we read it we stand outside our normal areas of expertise and control. Often we put our own comfort to one side: Scripture is notoriously strange and difficult to interpret, but it doesn't stop us trying.

As a person who speaks publicly quite a lot, it's helpful for me to try and overhear myself. If I'm doing my job well, I will ask myself: what is it like to be a newcomer here, or an outsider? I've heard lots of people say that the Church is one of the few organisations that exist for the sake of people who are not members; rhetorical eavesdropping is a tactic that helps me do that job.

But of course it isn't just my job: it's the job of everyone who calls themselves a Christian. We all have a duty to imagine ourselves standing outside of the door, listening-in. Because God didn't just send his Son to save the few, the people who were already in on the conversation. Out of love, he sent his Son that the world might be saved through him [John 3:16].

And you, O Lord, have mercy on us. Thanks be to God.