

got around to saying. If I understand I respond appropriately. If I don't respond appropriately, the patient says 'You don't understand', and storms off in a rage. This is what psychiatric listening is really about: it is the outward and visible signs of quite a special and important way of getting on with people, an attitude in which people can talk about what is hurtful and be sure that they are going to be understood.

Finally, a word of warning. I have said that listening is an active and perceiving process. How can you make sure that you perceive correctly, that you haven't misunderstood? The answer to that is quite simple: if your response has been appropriate you get a further answer from the patient; there is a lessening of tension—even temporarily, a slight clearing of a fog, a volunteering of information, or even an angry repudiation; yet you get something. The time when you must be really worried is when a well-trained patient assents politely to everything you have to say and nothing else happens; that is when your third ear needs syringing.

LISTENING FROM THE THEOLOGICAL POINT OF VIEW

Rt Rev E. R. Wickham (*Lord Bishop of Middleton*)

I wish to speak about listening from a theological point of view and I would think that this is not the easiest of tasks, simply because our professions in this conference are very different. *Listening*, or as it is more often put in the Bible, *hearing*, like the word *seeing* is a deeply loaded biblical and religious word: these words are used in the Bible with such a depth of metaphor that to *see* is to speak about *seeing* things, and to *hear* is to talk about *seeing* things, in a markedly different kind of way than when we use the words in a casual way. I think this deeply metaphorical understanding of listening is one that is relevant to all human beings and all professions, and particularly to my own profession. To *listen*, to *hear*, is simply not a matter of mere aural capacity, a merely physiological matter: that has been implicitly recognized by all the speakers in this symposium. In the biblical understanding of God (and a great debate is taking place on this subject in the contemporary Church, so important that it has

overspilled the edges of the Church) there is no 'direct communication' with Him; there is rather what one school of theologians calls an 'indirect communication'. It has been said that all 'direct communication' in relation to God or direct apprehension of God is idolatrous; the biblical doctrine of God is of a *deus absconditus*, a God who conceals himself but who confronts men through what the great theologian Martin Luther, called 'veils' and 'masks', *simulacra Dei*. This is not just an academic piece of theology, but assertion that if you accept this profoundly biblical understanding of the nature of God, that He confronts men, and makes demands on men through veils and masks, then you must accept that God speaks to men through all the events and happenings of secular and historical life, through the poor, through people and so on. The good Samaritan responds to God by responding to the situation in which he encounters the demand for love; and it is always a demand which seeks to elicit the response of 'love'. But the demand for love comes to us through secular media, and the response called for is always that of love. Now to me, this is to speak theologically about listening, because it means that inevitably from a religious point of view we need to be sensitive to the 'word' that is addressed to us. The word, the demand upon us, may often be inarticulate—but our capacity to hear is a measure of our general and social sensitivity. There is a social as well as a personal aspect to this. The 'good society' is a poor and weak phrase to describe the kind of world in which men listen to one another in this kind of way, meeting the ultimate demands made upon them through their so doing. This is a profoundly biblical way of speaking about God and human response to Him; if more people understood that demands upon them in this way are the *demands* of God, the concept of God would be more intelligible to more people.

Listening requires silence

The second thing I would like to say is this: Listening requires silence, which is very important for clergy; you hear nothing if you do all the talking. How many people must leave us—clergy or doctors—with many things unsaid because during the 15 minutes or 20 minutes which have passed there was no gap in the conversation; yet not all the things had been said. I think that listening requires setting people at ease, the encouraging word, or the encouraging drink that you give somebody! I am very conscious of the fact that so often we do not listen and the true words are not spoken simply because people are not at ease. It is a simple fact that there is nothing like a drink or two to induce honesty, frankness, revelation and mutual response to one another, to overcome inhibition! To listen requires ease of relationship and it also requires concentration. It means listening to what is 'between the lines',

skill in understanding the halting phrase—the significance of the points at which phrases become most halting—detecting the unspoken, and I think it requires a degree of self-giving to the other and of sympathy and understanding even when the objectivity of the relationship has to be guarded, as I imagine is the case in a doctor-patient relationship and in the pastoral relationship of the priest. I think there is a tension between the objectivity of the professional relationship, and the sympathy that must nevertheless be an essential part of it. I think a tension has to be held here. I read these days a good deal about ‘non-directed’ case work, but I am not wholly convinced that one has to be so antiseptic and clinical, so wary of self-giving, if people are to come wholly to an understanding of what is good for them. Self-giving sympathy is an essential part of listening. I like that wonderful phrase of Martin Buber, who speaks about ‘affirming our common humanity in alien places’. This is a very good phrase in a society that is increasingly atomized; the ‘lonely crowd’ which has become a characteristic condition of our lives and in which we need to affirm our common humanity. For most mortals a surgery is an alien place, even if it does have a plush carpet and a captivating receptionist and the most *avant-garde* American magazines. Listening is, if I may use a religious term ‘a charismatic gift’ which calls for very great sensitivity and understanding, otherwise ‘hearing we do not hear’ and ‘seeing we do not see,’ to quote Isaiah and our Lord. How true this is. You can see and be as blind as a bat; you can *hear*, and *listen* to nothing. I think this sensitivity is important.

The sociologically-attuned ear

I would like to finish on what I call having a sociologically-attuned ear. What I have said so far has been very largely in terms of the personal relationship and the pastoral relationship of priest to people (although the preaching office of the church and the word that is then spoken and heard is not a private word but a public word). I want therefore to finish with a word on what I have called a sociologically-attuned ear, which can understand the social context, the realities of a world in which a particular word may be spoken. This is very important for my own profession, which traditionally thinks in very personalized terms about relationships. The pastoral relationship, by definition, is a personal and individual relationship although, of course, taking other people into account. One of the weaknesses of the Church’s word, spoken to the world, is that it is often too personal and needs to be more sociologically toned. One must see that men can be diseased in all kinds of ways through sociological factors, that ‘seeing’ lends itself to a profound sociological mode of definition. There is also a sociology of wholeness

with which the Christian Church concerned with society—with the organization of the world—should be profoundly concerned. I could give so many illustrations of this from my own work in past years in this city of Sheffield, where I spent many years working as a priest, in relation to the largest of steel companies here in the Don Valley in South Yorkshire. I am a Bishop in Manchester now, but I think I know Sheffield like the back of my hand, and not only steel workers but managers of steel works too. Certainly in the industrial situation a sociologically-attuned ear belongs to man's social health and also to his personal wholeness and health. How many labour disputes, how many industrial problems are bound up with lack of social sensitivity to the way men behave and to their general way of thinking? These, in relation to individual persons, may well take them to the doctor with gastric ulcer, rashes or psychosomatic disease, all of which can be induced or aggravated by what happens in industrial life. All of this I include under being sociologically-attuned. I do not think you can understand young people today unless you have some kind of social filaments that relate to the modern world in which they are. We are faced for example, with the problems of over-emphasis of sexuality and of illegitimacy, which are problems for social workers, for families, doctors, and clergy. If you put this problem into a sociological context, considering the antiseptic and impersonal society we live in for example, we can see the problem in a new way. I heard a very good phrase in a broadcast talk some time ago in which a speaker said: 'In a world of steel and concrete, sex is the only green thing'. I think this says a great deal about our society. In a world that is perhaps sterile, planned, mobile, without roots, without 'greenness', without depth, rather brittle, there is the natural search of human beings for their identity, for relationship to the other, to establish a relationship even though, alas, it is so often not deep. All of these illustrate what I call—being sociologically-attuned, and I believe that this is a very important part of 'listening.' In fact I am now suspicious of listening that lacks the sociological element. I believe the clergy and no doubt lawyers, judges and doctors need this dimension to 'listening' and 'seeing'.