

# Opening ears and hearts

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**... impress on us how the presence of the Holy Spirit causes our hearing and understanding to be infinitely improved**

BY ELLEN PYE

Every now and again, I ask myself why so much of my life was spent moving from one country to another. Born in England of Dutch parents, I lived in Denmark, Holland and Norway during my childhood, with lots of exposure to English on the way, then high school back in Holland. After some years in various places in Southern Africa and finally Canada, the trek now seems to have come to a halt. En route, I had to learn Norwegian, French, German, English, Latin and Greek. What was the point of that, seeing I never had much call to do something useful with those languages in the end? Lately, it has dawned on me that the multilingual experience in itself has taught me something.

I was two years old when the family moved to Denmark, so I started to talk both in Dutch and in Danish, the latter for use 'outside,' and Dutch always the home language, except when the home help came

into the room, at which we would all switch into Danish, in mid-sentence if necessary, so she would not feel excluded. Each subsequent move to yet another country and language meant more switching, with Dutch at home the constant.

Trying to do the switching by going from a word in one language to the corresponding word in the other just didn't work; I now realise that, instead, I would go from words in the one language, to what they stood for, forming an image of that in my mind, the next step being to reformulate that in the other language. This is probably why I still seem to think 'in pictures' rather than words.

Over the years, I've come to realise that this is pretty much what good translators do, to translate the sense rather than the individual words. You also have to learn both languages reasonably well to prevent things getting lost in translation. It helps to know

something about the culture and world view that a language is an expression of, and to recognize that intonation plays an important part in communication. For myself, I know that I have not been able to lose the rather emphatic tone that is characteristic of Dutch in the way I express myself in English, even though my vocabulary and syntax in what is now my almost-first language, English, is reasonably correct much of the time. To the listener, this colors what I say with an unintended hue. I, in turn, find it confusing to have destructive words addressed to me in the very, very polite and sweet tone of voice that tends to characterise spoken English.

In order to feel at home in the wider world, it is helpful to know other languages, even if our mother tongue remains the one in which we express ourselves the most clearly and fully. Often, our understanding of a foreign language is a little better than our

ability to express ourselves in it, except when it comes to idiomatic usage and metaphors. These can be minefields of potentially disastrous misunderstandings, unless we keep that in mind and try to find out what the other speaker may have meant when something sounds outrageous or makes no sense. If I really try to be in meaningful communication with someone, I need to put in the effort to translate her/his foreign language into my own, as truthfully as possible, without making any assumptions beforehand; instead of translating word into word, I need to proceed from the words in that language, to what they are meant to convey, to how I would say that in my own.

Much is made in some quarters of 'speaking in tongues,' referring to a crucial event described in the New Testament (Acts 2), when the Holy Spirit filled the followers of Jesus in the midst of an assembled multilingual crowd and they spoke in languages other than their own. While it does mention this speaking taking place, much more emphasis is placed on the fact that each person present heard the followers of Jesus speak in the very language the hearer was born to, this being stated three times to make sure that the reader doesn't miss the point. Personally, I would like that passage to be printed in neon lights, to impress on us how the presence of the Holy Spirit causes our hearing and understanding to be infinitely improved; people become willing to translate, willing to listen with love for what they can receive as a gift in what is

said, rather than, driven by 'ego,' sifting it for something to find fault with, to deny and to condemn, often distorting what was said in the process.

Where might that distortion come from? I think that in the course of our lives we hear certain words and expressions used in contexts that have painful connotations for us, having been said by people who hurt us or we saw hurting others or in a threatening or insulting tone of voice. When we hear them again, or anything that resembles them, even years later, those negative feelings are instantly reawakened and we recoil in fear and pain. The overtones and undertones generated by those earlier experiences ring out and turn words that are now being spoken harmoniously into grating dissonance, and so we stop our ears in dismay and sometimes angry rejection. Yet, if we stand still in that which is pure, until we see ourselves (and our defences against memories of past experiences). All that will be hushed and gone, and we will be able to hear what the other is really saying. (This is a very free interpretation of George Fox's Epistle XXII.) We will have given the Holy Spirit the opportunity to turn us into willing translators also.

We need to be constantly aware that our ears can and will deceive us. I'll never forget overhearing two Friends discussing some spoken ministry that had been given during the Meeting for Worship we'd just come out of, and being thoroughly puzzled by the fact that

I had heard something quite different. There is no knowing who had heard aright!

Religions, faiths, are like meta-languages, each one in its own way trying to express what cannot be captured in words and yet having to use words to do so. The outcome is often garbled and highly flawed in many places, because human beings make mistakes in translating the ineffable into words, even when they try and do so in the Spirit of Love and Truth. Plenty will be lost in translation, even when it comes to fully understanding our own faith, which to me is the ultimate task of a human life. When we then try to listen to those of other faiths, or those who interpret our own differently, we really are back in that minefield of potentially disastrous misunderstandings, unless we come in the Spirit that gives everything forth, willing to translate, to hear with love, having turned down the volume of our own undertones and overtones, the static that deforms.

One of the Taize chants sings: "Where there is Love, there God is." St. Francis gave us a variation on that theme: "Where there is Love, there is neither fear nor a lack of understanding." May God be in our hearts and understanding and purify our ears. ☞

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