

This is the part of the liturgy during which someone gives a homily. Fine and good, but I'm going to let you in on a secret. The *real* homily isn't the one that I'm giving now; it's what you've brought with you. I'm giving a homily because liturgical law says someone from among the clergy serving at a Sunday Mass *has* to give one unless there's a "grave reason" for not doing so. The fact that on any given Sunday we clergy might not have anything to say isn't considered a grave-enough reason to omit it, so on those occasions when I don't have anything to say I have to say it anyway. You've probably already discovered that, though.

But be of good cheer. It isn't what I think the Lord is saying to me that's important. What's important is what the Lord is saying to you. That's your homily. That should come as good news, particularly if you don't like what I have to say — not that that ever happens.

As is often the case with good news, though, there's a catch. The catch is that you won't know what the Lord is saying to you unless you listen. And there are a variety of ways to listen.

Prayer, for one. We usually think of prayer as us talking to God. We tell Him what we want, we tell Him what we think we need, both of which must surely make Him laugh sometimes. Often we do all the talking, and so, gentleman that He is, He doesn't interrupt and as a result He can't get a word in edgewise.

It's important that we talk to God — honestly — in prayer. But that's only part of the prayer equation. Listening is the other part, and in many ways that's even more important. God already knows what we need from Him, but we're usually a lot less clear about what God needs from us. And we're probably not going to find out unless we let Him do some — or most — of the talking. We do that by simply resting in His presence and being silent, silence being the language in which He'll speak to us. Being silent is a way to open ourselves to His guidance; it's how we're likely to hear His voice.

Here's another good way of listening to God: Scripture. That's what Scripture is (or at least that's what it's intended to be): listening to God. Scripture is an encounter, a dialog with

God. We're not supposed to read or hear Scripture like we're taking medicine from a spoon. We're supposed to hear it for what it is — the start of a conversation. It's not unlike human relationships. If I want to get to know you, if I want to find out who you are and what you really want from me, the only way I'm likely to do it is to listen — really *listen* — to you.

That's why listening to me isn't the homily. Listening to God is the homily. After all, when you think about it, why would you want to say, "Hey Phil! What's God got to say today?" Why not ask Him yourself? He'll tell you, but — and here's that catch again — I suspect He isn't thrilled if we ask and then don't bother listening to His answer. Most of us don't like it when someone asks us a question and then proceeds to answer it themselves, usually at tedious length, and I bet God doesn't like it very much, either. For example, when I was first out of college I worked as an auditor and night manager of a major hotel just across the Potomac from D.C. Guests would often come down to the front desk and ask how to get to someplace in D.C. the next morning. When I'd give them directions, occasionally one of them would say, "That's not how to get there," to which I was always tempted to respond (and sometimes did), "Okay, go *your way*, then" and I bet God feels like telling us the same thing sometimes. Their response ranked right up there with a question we'd sometimes get during the winter. "If it snows, will the subway be open?" "That depends on how much snow they get in the subway," we were tempted to reply.

In just a few days, we'll begin the season of Lent, which is a season of listening. The traditional Lenten practices of prayer, fasting and almsgiving are disciplines that help us to concentrate on what God has to say to each of us individually. They're practices to help us learn to listen.

So, too, is the practice of giving up something for Lent. Giving up something for Lent is a way of shutting out at least some of the noise that distracts us and makes it difficult to hear what God has to say. It's probably true that God sometimes shouts, but most of the time He

seems to speak pretty quietly, and if we surround ourselves with too much noise, too many distractions, it can be very hard to hear Him.

Sometimes during Lent, instead of giving something up, we'll take something on — a new devotion, or a new practice of charity, say. New devotions train our spiritual ears to listen in a different way, something like downloading a new communications app to give others different ways to communicate with us. A new practice of charity does the same thing because it helps us recognize that God also speaks to people whom we don't ordinarily notice. He speaks to the forgotten or marginalized every bit as much as He does to the rich or the powerful, and in turning our attention to those on the margins, we cock our ear to hear what the Lord wishes to say to and through them — to *us*, not just to them.

In Lent, then, we try either to slow down a little and get rid of at least some of the clamor that usually surrounds us or to pick up the pace a little so that we take in more of what God has to say. You might say that during Lent we're asking God to help us write our homilies, the ones we'll be bringing to Mass throughout the year.

If we're consistent and intentional in prayer, fasting, almsgiving and our other Lenten practices — that is, if we pursue them mindfully and deliberately, and not just go through the Lenten observances by rote — we're likely to discover something interesting and important. We're likely to discover that much of the clamorous noise in our lives doesn't come from other people, outside events, unanticipated or unwanted circumstances, or other external factors. Most of our noise comes from us; we generate our own noise. We raise our own individual dins and then complain we can't hear. We can't even hear ourselves much of the time, let alone God. Our internal, silent noise is always the worst.

Sometimes it can get so bad that we find we can't hear God any longer, or what's worse, we begin to mistake the static or noise that's either blared in our direction or that we manage to conjure up by ourselves for God's own voice. Sometimes we even prefer the static and the

noise, because listening to God — really, *really* listening to Him — isn't always comfortable. He might have something to say that we don't particularly want to hear. He might tell us that He wants us to change, for example. Or He might tell us to stop doing something we're doing or start doing something we aren't doing. You just never know. He might even ask, as the Lord does in today's Gospel, "Why do you notice the splinter in your brother's eye, but do not perceive the wooden beam in your own? ... Remove the wooden beam from your eye first."<sup>1</sup> But it's so much fun pointing out someone else's faults!

When during Lent, a season to rededicate ourselves to listening to the Lord with all our heart, all our mind, and all our soul, if we hear something in prayer that challenges us, Christ isn't isn't saying it to us for the sake of condemning us, making us feel guilty, or flunking us in life. He's doing it to help you become a better you, and to help me become a better me. He's doing it to help us become more fully the people He created us to be.

So, if during Lent we hear something we don't want to hear, we shouldn't despair. We should be of good cheer. All is not lost; far from it, for as the Psalmist assures us, "The Lord is kind and merciful."<sup>2</sup>

Where we're often inclined to judge and to condemn, the Lord "pardons all [our] sins."<sup>3</sup>

Where we can sometimes be cruel or indifferent, the Lord "crowns [us] with kindness and compassion."<sup>4</sup>

Where we might refuse to let go of our grievances, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has [the Lord] put our transgressions from us."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Lk 6:41-42 (NAB)

<sup>2</sup> Ps 103

<sup>3</sup> Ps 103:3 (NAB)

<sup>4</sup> Ps 103:4 (NAB)

<sup>5</sup> Ps 103:12 (NAB)

The Lenten season we'll begin in a few days is a time to discern what gets in the way of our being better disciples. It's a time to remember that before sin becomes sin, it's a state of mind, a state of heart, that we then express in sinful acts.

During our season of Lent, our season of listening, we may well hear about the "beams" in the eyes of our soul. All of us have some. I could probably construct an entire subdivision with my "beams". Rejoice and be glad that the Lord points them out! Because then we can do something about them, not by making a project of healing ourselves during Lent, but, instead, by opening ourselves so that Christ can heal us.

In addition to being a season of listening, Lent is a season of decision. What do I value — I mean *really* value, as opposed to what I may say I value? To whom, or to what, do I choose to listen? How does my own noise, or someone else's in which I've chosen to join, get in the way of my ability to hear God?

I don't know about you, but I've got a long way to go, so that should keep me busy at least until Easter and for much longer than that, I'm sure.

Okay. There. That was my homily. Maybe I had something to say, and if I didn't, well at least I said it anyway.

But as I told you, it isn't my homily that's important. It's yours.