



LEARNING THROUGH LISTENING + ETHNICITY AND INCLUSION

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SCOTT'S NOTES

I'm not naturally a good listener... But I'm learning that listening is not only one of the most dignifying gifts you can give another person, it's also a key way that the Holy Spirit works to teach you and transform you in Christ. Change in our lives is less a product of truth learnt (like listening to a sermon) than truth encountered and experienced.

So, what am I learning, from listening? Let me offer a few personal insights related to our 'Extending the Table' theme.

One of the things Life Care and especially Community Connect gives me the opportunity to do is to grow as a listener of stories. Our team, under Lorena's wonderful leadership, is learning that skill - and we get lots of opportunity to practice. To sit with someone, be present, be curious. The vast majority of these people are from non-English speaking backgrounds. Many are newish to Australia. Many are isolated. Some are quite desperate... And for those who I have connected with in recent times, I think what I have encountered and learnt so far are three big challenges people face:

The first challenge is getting to Australia.

It's extremely hard to get here unless your economic worth is sufficiently high to the nation. It is very complex to navigate the process of residency and incredibly expensive. And if you have come from a country that persecutes you for your faith or is an economic basket case or a warzone, you generally aren't selling your home there: you are walking away with nothing and arriving with nothing. And when you get here, until you can gain the right residency status, you

have very limited access to most of the benefits available to residents and citizens. You are in limbo that can last years. Imagine, for example, discovering you have a health condition while you are in limbo. Imagine falling pregnant while you are in limbo. Imagine not being able to get paid work while you are in limbo. What jobs will you do, what compromise will you make, to afford healthcare or to fill your stomach?

And all the while, you are grieving the mother or father or sister or brother you left behind and may never see again...

The second challenge is settling or getting established in Australia.

Housing is scarce and expensive. Employment is so difficult. Your qualifications mean very little. I have one friend at Community Connect who has 20 years of experience in a highly-respected profession but, here in Australia, his qualifications are not transferrable and so it is meaningless. You are back at the bottom and you don't know the system. You have no contacts, no friends to help guide you through, and those you do have may be just as confused as you are.

Language can be a huge barrier also. You maybe have basic English but you feel very self-conscious about it. You constantly apologise for your lack of vocabulary and you feel frustrated you can't adequately express yourself in this new language; which makes you feel shrunken and isolated, like you can't really be known or build friendships - and you certainly don't feel like anyone wants to genuinely be your friend.

You want to hold onto your religious or cultural heritage, your clothing, and your cuisine because they form your identity. But you also want to fit in... So, in the end, you don't settle into Australia but into a monocultural subset of it; and this sub-culture can be very hard to move beyond. While it may be more comfortable, it's also limiting your ability to overcome the third challenge...

The third challenge is belonging in Australia.

Ultimately it's hard to really belong in Australia where it feels like you are home and treated as though this is your home. First-generation find it immensely difficult. The next generation, a bit easier; but they live with the real tension of family expectations, pulled between their parent's culture and their adopted culture. And even if you've managed to integrate yourself, you still have an Asian face or a Middle-Eastern face, and so you still experience discrimination and bigotry. I've got mates more 'ocker' than me who were born here, but because of their facial shape and skin tone they still experience racist slurs. I overheard a group of people at the shops at Illawong the other day having a deliberately loud conversation about Asians and Middle Eastern people that was frankly embarrassing...

Now, those three challenges I could have read in a book; but, like I said, I think the Holy

Spirit has been working in me, through listening. Stories in Life Care have enabled the Holy Spirit to give me a much more personal understanding of how hard the journey is, and there is a big difference between reading a news article and sitting with a lady in tears who wants to go back to the country she fled because it's too hard to make a start here.

The journey is a hard one and if you've lived here several generations and you speak English fluently, or did your higher education here, are established in a career, or have a good superannuation nest egg, or have friends, or health cover, or you just know how to get things done: you have immense privilege and power. So, we need to think biblically about what we do with whatever power we have. I think about three principles that seem to be central in the Gospel narrative:

1. God is totally for the alien and stranger (the vulnerable)

Zechariah 7:10 says, "*Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor. Do not plot evil against each other.*" One of the major themes of the Bible in Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Zechariah and, of course, Jesus-on-repeat is care and concern for the 'quartet of the vulnerable people': the widow, fatherless, foreigner, and poor. If we ignore this, you are not just missing a side issue – the care of the poor and the vulnerable regardless of race is *core business* for God. You don't have to look far to find these people. You may be these people. You may see these people on your commute, down at the shops, and through Life Care they are coming to us and our response to them says much about much.

Did you see the the Nadesalingam family get off the plane in Biloela the other day? How inspiring was that community's relentless effort to bring them home, to welcome them home, and now to provide them a house and a new life! That's the Kingdom on display!

Jesus said it this way: "*For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.*" (Matthew 25:35-36)

2. Let's remember, that we are aliens and strangers in the culture.

1 Peter 2:9-12 says, "*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession. Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*"

As the people of God, we are foreigners and exiles... Our challenge is remembering that we are not meant to blend in and bow down to the same culture. If we have blended in, perhaps we need to consider which culture really rules in our lives – this world or the

Kingdom? We are all asylum seekers in a Kingdom not of this world. We have nothing to bring of ourselves, no qualifications, no merit, and we have been welcomed in by the King.

3. We are called to unity in our diversity.

Galatians 3:26-28 says, "*So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*"

People often view Christianity as conservative but the Early Church wrote the book on equality and diversity. The Early Church was a radical blend of people who don't go together and what binds them together is their unity in Christ. There may be many disputable matters - but WHO unites us is far greater.

So,

1. God is for the stranger, the alien, the refugee.
2. If you are in Christ, you also are citizens of another world coming and thus you are strangers too.
3. It's in our spiritual DNA to be a community of great diversity and great unity. Lose either one and we lose something very precious.

Prayer:

- Choosing to listen, to examine ourselves and our biases, confessing our own neglect of the alien and stranger, that we won't be the person who looks past or through people.
- Help us to embrace others, to extend our lives, to cherish diversity in each other, and to pursue unity.
- Help us to see think and feel according to the will and way of God in all of our parts of our life.