

FOCUS ON FAITH

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MISUNDERSTOOD

For all of us communication (verbal and written) is essential – yet for many of us it can cause difficulties and even disasters. In my role – just like many other people involved in the teaching, political, medical, media and business arenas and virtually everywhere else – the potential for being misheard, misunderstood or even misquoted, is a constant reality and one of life's perpetual hazards.

Anyone who has the task of attempting to explain concepts and principles in a way that enables people to understand has their work cut out – especially if serious or bad news is involved.

Robert McCloskey, was an official in the US State Department, and often a spokesman at briefings with White House correspondents. McCloskey is credited with the following remarkable, thought-provoking analysis of what happens when a 'misunderstanding' occurs.

There can be a great difference between 'listening' and 'hearing'

*"I know that you **believe** that you understood what you **think** I said, but I am not sure you **realise** that what you heard is not what I meant."*

And then there's that fantastic 'Two Ronnies' sketch about the fork handles (four candles) and hose (letters 'O's). Who can forget that graphic illustration of saying one thing and hearing another?

What we say and how we say it is critical but so is what we hear and the way we hear it. There can be a great difference between 'listening' and 'hearing'. How many times have we been in situations where we've heard the same words as someone else and yet come away with a completely different understanding of what was said or conveyed? Many of us not only have selective hearing but also selective retention and selective amnesia!

Often we hear what we want to hear and colour what is said through our perceptions, backgrounds, the culture that we live in or even our aspirations.

For example, most of us don't like to be corrected because correction equates to us having either made a mistake or of having insufficient experience of a particular aspect. Rather than thinking about the positive benefits and seeing correction as means of development we tend to see it negatively as an error of judgment on our part or as a personal failure of some kind, even as a form of discipline on occasions.

In the Bible the Old Testament book of Job has a very appropriate verse in this context: ***"For the ear tests words as the tongue tastes food."***

When we eat something we notice not just the taste but also the texture and smell of the item we're consuming. When the tart juice of a lemon hits our tongue we immediately sense it on our palettes whereas honey gives a different (much more pleasant in my view) sensation. Yet when honey and lemon are combined they can be an effective remedy for a sore throat and so do us good.

And it's the same with words. Sharp words may be damaging but so can those that initially appear pleasant, for example in the case of unwarranted or superficial, insincere flattery. The need to be discerning and to understand the context as well as motive behind what is being said is essential.

Of course we can be the perpetrators or the recipients of harsh words. Many of us have been damaged by words '*spoken over us*' by family members or others such as teachers or even close friends. No doubt most of us have all given out our fair share as well. It may have been '*in the heat of the moment*' and we may have regretted saying it immediately, but once said those words can never be taken back. The Apostle James wisely commented in the Bible that, ***"No-one can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison"***.

What's the answer? Perhaps we should take on board the prayer request of the Psalmist who said, ***"May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer."*** Before we say or write something let's make a conscious choice to consider what we want to say and the reason we want to say it as well as the likely impact it will have on those who receive it.

Then maybe we won't be misheard or misunderstood and have less pieces to pick up afterwards.

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